

**THE FEDERAL TRUST**

Enlightening the Debate on Good Government

**European Ideas  
Hungarian Realities**

**István Hegedûs**

**European Essay No.1**

## A Definition of Federalism

Federalism is defined as “a system of government in which central and regional authorities are linked in an interdependent political relationship, in which powers and functions are distributed to achieve a substantial degree of autonomy and integrity in the regional units. In theory, a federal system seeks to maintain a balance such that neither level of government becomes sufficiently dominant to dictate the decision of the other, unlike in a unitary system, in which the central authorities hold primacy to the extent even of redesigning or abolishing regional and local units of government at will.”

(New Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought)

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# European Ideas

# Hungarian Realities

István Hegedûs

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## SUMMARY

After the collapse of Communism there were high expectations in Hungary of a return to the West through swift membership of the European Union. However, the slower than expected accession process has dampened enthusiasm for the EU. Instead of this change being marked by a shift towards euroscepticism the Hungarian outlook has been characterised instead by a mood of 'europessimism'.

This situation has, according to the author, been exacerbated by a lack of understanding of the European Union on the part of the media and other opinion formers, which in turn could impair Hungarian-EU relations. A further indication of this was the sudden wilting in the initial enthusiasm for Nato membership at the time of Hungary's role as a base in the war over Kosovo.

István Hegedûs in '*European Ideas - Hungarian Realities*' gives a Hungarian perspective on his country's future role in the EU. Examining the media reaction to European events and its shaping of public opinion, as well as the Hungarian government's response to European integration, he asks whether the people of Hungary are really ready for EU membership.

## About the Author

István Hegedûs is Vice Chairman of the European Society of Hungary in Budapest and former Vice Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Hungarian Parliament. This essay is adapted from a presentation made to the European Sociological Association in Amsterdam in August 1999

# European Ideas — Hungarian Realities

István Hegedûs

At first sight everyone would say that relations between Hungary and the European Union are at present excellent, balanced and encouraging. From the Hungarian perspective, one might add that during the recent history of the nation there has always been a general orientation towards the ‘West’ among Hungarians. Previously silent, this has now become more open. In November 1997, eighty-five percent of the population voted in favour of Hungarian Nato membership in a referendum. Today, most of its citizens firmly support the idea of Hungary’s accession to the European Union. According to a new opinion poll of the research institute TÁRKI (quoted by the biggest Hungarian daily *Népszabadság*, 14 August 1999) 68 percent of the population is in favour and only 14 percent is against the objective. All parliamentary parties seem to be agreed on supporting this project, including István Csurka’s radical right-wing group, the Hungarian Truth and Life Party (MIÉP), which unsuccessfully fought against our Nato membership two years ago.

However, closer examination reveals another set of sentiments shaping the traditionally positive public attitudes to the European Union. The purpose of this essay is to consider the ‘dark side’ of the Hungarian way of thinking, in particular the relevant attitudes of the political and media elite towards the European Union. Within these elites there is a dominant perspective that corresponds to the views of the average member of the public, and which can be termed ‘europessimism’. Most Hungarians interpret information and news about the accession process or about internal EU affairs through this special lens. This essay seeks to examine the trend of europessimism and will also ask to what extent Hungarian public opinion, led by the opinion formers in politics and the media, is really ready for EU membership.

It might not be easy to understand or to feel the difference between the diffuse dissatisfaction of europessimism and the firm political positions of euroscepticism. Europessimism is not especially hostile to the political unification of Europe. Europessimism does not criticise the democratic deficit of the common institutions and it does not demand greater accountability and transparency. Europessimism simply represents the fear of a relatively small and less developed nation concerning its own future as a new member in a club of larger and more developed countries. In this club, older member states have already learnt the rules of the game, whilst as a candidate to EU membership Hungary cannot be sure whether the politicians of these countries are engaging with us honestly or whether all their promises are merely lip service. Europessimism is not a well-articulated ideology and does not have clear points of view on supranationalism, intergovernmentalism or subsidiarity. Europessimism represents only the uncertain world views of an outsider.

### **Three characteristics of europessimism**

The major characteristics of the typical Hungarian attitude towards the European Union can be summarised in the following way.

Firstly, very few politicians or leading journalists have a good understanding of the history of European integration and the European ideas of the Founding Fathers (*Monnet 1978, Marjolin 1991*). There is little knowledge about the ongoing debates on the future of the European Union or about the development over the last fifteen years towards an ever closer (political) union. The first serious steps towards a common foreign and security policy (*Gasteyger 1996, Cameron 1998, Regelsberger/Jopp 1998*), the very new concept of a European defence identity, have had no real impact on Hungarian decision-makers.

There is a link between this ignorance and the Hungarian interpretation of our recent European history during the nineties.

Early hopes and expectations of rapid Hungarian membership of the European Union since the fall of communism have gradually been transformed into impatience and irritation. This psychological process is called, falsely, disillusionment. Falsely, because the changing mood of the population, illustrated by people starting to say: 'they will not accept us as a member', has not been the result of any particular information. It has shown a new and growing mistrust as well as a fast circulation of new stereotypes. The institutional and decision-making reforms of the European Union, the Maastricht Treaty and the deepening of integration, the enlargement of the Union with the accession of three new members in 1995, the introduction of the single currency, the debates on the necessary waves of eastern expansion, the Amsterdam Treaty and the negotiations on the Common Agricultural Policy and budget reform seem to be only excuses for a conscious slowdown in the enlargement process.

Since the European Union 'finally' began negotiations with Hungary in 1998 on the political, economic and legal conditions of its accession, the usual europessimistic statements on the 'street' have concentrated on the question of timing: 'no real chance before 2010', people say. And that is even if negotiations proceed in accordance with the decisions of the European Councils of Madrid in 1995 and of Luxembourg in 1997. By the middle of 1999, the screening of the Hungarian legal system was practically finished and eight chapters (out of thirty-one) had already been temporarily closed. In June, the Hungarian government accepted a national programme, which included the timetable of the necessary legislative steps, the implementation of the new rules together with a redistribution of budgetary resources. According to the plans of the Hungarian negotiating team half the dossiers might also be temporarily closed whilst another eight chapters should be opened by the Helsinki summit at the end of this year. Nevertheless, the truly 'substantial' negotiations will start only if all position papers are presented to the current Chair of the Council and if the European Union is ready to grasp the full range of topics related to our accession (*Györkös 1999*).

Meanwhile, in the open political debates of government and

opposition in the Hungarian parliament, as well as in the news media, there is one aspect of the negotiations which is always raised: 'How many derogations should Hungary ask for?' This is in itself a typically unanswerable question.

Secondly, the European Union and its institutions have been considered by elite groups in Hungary almost entirely in terms of new territory for economic co-operation among the member states. Most Hungarians have not taken on board very seriously the rhetoric of the representatives of the EU, which emphasises the political dimension of a united Europe and the European solidarity of the member states. At home, politicians speak less and less about Hungary's historical perspectives, its European identity, or its common values with the traditionally democratic community of the West. As this earlier emotional approach faded, it was not replaced by a more sophisticated intellectual analysis. Today, the argument of the political parties which are still in favour of our future membership focuses on the positive economic and financial trade-offs and the potential transfers from the European Union to Hungary. There is a growing popularity of so-called cost-benefit analyses (*Inotai 1997*). Here, 'advantages' and 'disadvantages' are weighed up almost mechanically against each other — fortunately, net gains for the national economy are more important than the loss of national sovereignty (which is often supposed to be a negative consequence of necessary integration).

Thirdly, there is a general view among Hungarian opinion formers and the public that the European Union is just a framework for hard bargaining. Here, in the political arena of the member states, representatives of the fifteen countries struggle with each other, fiercely protecting their own national interests. In this approach, European economic negotiations are a zero-sum game with strong winners and weak losers under the dominance of the big nations. There is little knowledge of the decision-making processes of the European institutions (*Kende 1995*). Basic information is missing about the climate, the informal rules and the usual way of coalition

building among the member states in the Council of Ministers (*Hayes-Renshaw/H. Wallace, 1997*). In the europessimistic interpretation of the EU the unmasking of the egoistic national interests of the member states plays along well with the popular perception of the rough centralisation and bureaucracy of the European Commission and the arrogance of the ‘Lords in Brussels’ towards the candidate countries.

### **Illustration of europessimistic views**

Although the Hungarian press provides many examples of europessimistic views and some illustrations follow below, I do not want to blame journalists or the media elite generally when talking about the media coverage of European news in Hungary. Their interpretation does not derive from a conscious, conspiring anti-European logic but instead it simply reflects the average level of elite and public knowledge (*Schudson 1995*) on European issues in Hungary. In contrast to domestic politics, the media might have a bigger, more influential role in forming public opinion about European ideas and everyday EU processes in a non-member state, where citizens have neither any alternative source of information, nor any personal experience on which to base their judgements. This is an important difference - even if, in the member states, the media often interpret European events from a national perspective (*Hodess 1998*), and no strong ‘pan-European’ network yet exists (*Hjarvard 1993*).

In order to demonstrate Hungarian insensitivity to European ideas, we can compare the reactions of *The Guardian* with the point of view of *Magyar Nemzet*, a conservative Hungarian daily. The headline of the British newspaper on 26 October 1998, ‘Blair puts the UK into the heart of Europe’, summarised its analysis. *The Guardian* claimed that at the Pörtlach summit, Prime Minister Blair committed Great Britain to deeper integration with the European Union in order to decrease the fears of marginalisation of his country, which had decided not to join Economic and Monetary

Union. The same day, the Hungarian newspaper did not grasp the significance of the British initiative at all. 'There was a tension due to Tony Blair's security policy recommendations. The issue was pushed into the background after hard debates.' This statement simply constituted a total misunderstanding; the shift in the European policy of Britain under the Labour government had contributed significantly to the development of institutional construction and the implementation of new European defence identity. The importance of Blair's new pro-European concept became even more evident after the declaration of the French and British leaders at their St-Malo summit in December 1998.

Returning to the Pörschach summit, it was noticeable that Hungarian newspapers were unable to cope with the problems of an informal meeting, where no decisions were made, but where the heads of governments had time to discuss strategic ideas and new visions about the future of Europe. 'There was no surprise in the general declaration', the participants 'could not agree upon more now than before', as *Magyar Nemzet* (26 October 1998) formulated its verdict. Moreover, its headline did not sound enthusiastic: 'European tax on the horizon'. In its editorial, the newspaper did not have a philosophical approach to European taxation of European citizens nor did it deal with the harmonisation of national taxes or how taxes should fit into the logic of the single market. *Magyar Nemzet* linked this topic simply and directly with the new scandal inside the European Commission, forgetting that the suspicion of some irregular spending has nothing to do with the sources of income on the other side of the European budget.

'Each member state is anxious for the safety of its money, so it is still a question as to who will be ready to pay for the the new members to catch up' observed the reliable Hungarian daily, *Népszabadság* (12 December 1998) in a typically europessimistic analysis. In the newspapers it is possible to observe a European Union which is impotent in decision-making and suffering from harsh conflicts between its member states. 'Everyone sings his or her own song',

France and Germany ‘returned blow for blow’, Chirac ‘declared his position in an authoritative tone’, whilst ‘Great Britain stares the other fourteen member states down’. These clichéd pieces of reportage belonged to the jargon of the report about the Petersberg summit of February 1999 in another important daily, *Magyar Hírlap* (27 February 1999). ‘All participants lived in different worlds, which separated them from each other’, *Népszabadság* concluded (27 February 1999). According to the title of its article on the negotiations of the agriculture ministers on their reform package on the same day, the meeting was ‘an awkward failure in Brussels’. A more optimistic opinion might be cited from the pro-government, right-wing daily, *Napi Magyarország* (6 March 1999): ‘We should give another chance to the European Union so that it will grow up to its task.’ This soft moral warning, just like the former declarations, shows journalists’ impatience, their lack of comprehension and lack of analytical skills regarding complex decision-making processes and economic-political debates among the member states.

Some days after the important breakthrough at the Berlin summit, *Népszabadság* declared (29 March 1999) that instead of a ‘big rumble of mountains’ the result was a ‘silent squeaking of mice’. In fact at this European Council the participants agreed on budget reform, in particular over agricultural policy, and they made a quick decision about Romano Prodi’s candidacy for the presidency of the European Commission. It is hard to imagine what sort of comment would have been published in the daily if the European politicians had not agreed. Although the Hungarian media reported the final decisions on Agenda 2000 which had important consequences for our accession, there was no clear line and no sophisticated explanation about the significance of the agreement which meant in fact that resources would be strictly identified in the budget for the costs of enlargement as early as 2002. Representatives of the Hungarian government welcomed the good news. But a general feeling of this being a success or a victory did not spread over the country; such sentiments would not fit into the europessimistic mentality of either the elite or the wider public.

The weaknesses of Hungarian journalism and the dominant europessimistic attitudes often lead to a single issue being repeated time and time again. Recently, this issue has been the timing of Hungary's accession. Even if the enlargement process is not on the political agenda of a meeting of the Fifteen, the media usually tries to find some connection to its major question: 'When will the European Union let us in?'. Journalists easily confuse the cautious statements of top politicians about the whole eastern enlargement process with the special situation of Hungary, further disappointing the expectations of the general public. Foreign Minister János Martonyi even complained about the narrow approach of the press in an interview, saying 'I was a little bit surprised when a part of the Hungarian media interpreted the last summit in Austria as if enlargement had been pushed into the background, although this issue had not been on the agenda at all' (*Magyar Nemzet*, 7 November 1998).

However, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has emphasised the importance of the timing of accession on many occasions. He called it a 'little bit humiliating', when politicians of the member states speak about enlargement and throw new and different dates into the air. 'Accession is the minimum that we should get', Orbán said to the Austrian weekly *Format* (23 November 1998). The Prime Minister also played on national sentiments in his speech at the forum of *The Economist* in Budapest (*Magyar Hírlap* and *Népszabadság*, 2 December 1998). He called it 'stunning' that whilst the impact of decisions made by the European Union could be felt in Hungary the next day, the exact date of joining the EU had yet to be announced. Orbán also claimed that 'it is disarming and damaging, if our citizens have to believe that there are no substantial issues to be negotiated with the EU and the accession process entails only one-sided adaptation'. Confusing important deliberations on the implementation of the 'acquis communautaire' with the legal and institutional structures of the European Union, Orbán failed to mention that only EU membership would bring the opportunity for Hungary to influence the future shape of European integration. Yet

a few days later the Prime Minister did say that the Hungarian government ‘understood’ that the EU did not want to give a firm date for the next enlargement before it had completed its own internal reforms. For that reason Hungary considers the year 2002 as a deadline (*Népszabadság*, 14 December 1998). In addition, Martonyi concluded at a press conference that the EU would be in a position to talk about the timing at the EU summit in December 1999 (*Népszabadság*, 16 December 1998).

Politicians from the candidate countries often exert pressure on EU decision-makers by making such statements. But style and rhetoric matter; they might not only have a counterproductive effect on the final timing of enlargement, but could also result in an increase in anti-western stereotypes in domestic politics. In the Hungarian press Orbán has often been criticised by journalists because of his verbal aggressiveness, which shows a misperception of the real power relations between the European Union and Hungary. There was, however, no reaction concerning the Prime Minister’s political messages, which have perhaps shifted recently from pro-European views through uncomprehending europessimism into more desperate euroscepticism - a development which needs a longer explanation and another essay.

Of course, there is also criticism of European ideas and practice in the media and political circles of the member states. However, the language of the Hungarian mainstream media goes beyond the standard analytical-sceptical wording of its Western counterparts. One of the consequences of the Hungarian journalists’ cultural filter is to shift in the content and in the messages of the original European stories, often presented in a style close to the manner of brutal tabloids. The europessimistic interpretation transforms the European internal dialogue into antagonistic national-political conflicts.

According to the prevailing media approach, the consequence of the Schengen Agreement, for instance, is simply a new financial burden, that of Hungary having to strengthen its eastern borders. It is ironic that in a former communist country, European citizenship

could not become symbolic of free movement of people. On the contrary, Schengen is becoming an ugly word. The Europeanisation of Hungarian borders might mean that visas would be required from citizens of many neighbouring states, including those 'foreigners' who belong to Hungarian minorities. The Hungarian political and media elite often exaggerates this real, and hopefully transitional, problem, by speaking about a new 'Iron Curtain'. On the other hand, there is little attention to the future economic opportunities of the would-be European-Hungarian citizens in a large single market or about the choices for students in an open European higher education system.

The country is not able yet to look beyond its own project of accession. There is, even in the quality press, no sophisticated intellectual or political debate about the future of Europe, about the Europe which fundamentally Hungary wants to join.

### **The reasons for europessimism and the example of Kosovo**

From a broader perspective, four components might explain the dominance of the europessimistic mentality: the first factor is pragmatism, the second is the Marxist tradition, the third is provincialism, and the fourth is past experience.

Pragmatism became the general attitude of Hungarians during the soft dictatorship of the Kádár-regime. Since the turbulent years of political transition many Hungarians have lost their enthusiasm for big, common objectives and have returned to individualistic life strategies. For a significant number of citizens the market economy has given good opportunities for personal success and achievement. This adjustment to the order of our new era, however, means that most of the people cannot be mobilised by old or new collective ideas. They are very reluctant to believe in any grand blueprint, such as the concept of a united Europe.

Marxist tradition, as it was practised for forty years, has heavily strengthened the anti-idealistic thinking of Hungarian citizens. There is a widely shared conviction among the people that it is only pure economic interests and crude power relations which drive and control internal and external political events. The force of this world view might be even stronger in the fields of international affairs, where the motivation of foreign actors seems to be hidden to a greater extent from the eyes of the Hungarian public.

The lack of any idealism and the Marxist legacy had important effects on opinion formation in the case of the Kosovo crisis, which also highlighted the remaining factor mentioned above, that of provincialism. Those intellectuals in Hungary who believed in Nato decision-makers' moral commitment to human and minority rights were dismissed during the air campaign as naive idealists *and* hawks. There was frustration and a sense of impotence because of a war so close to our borders, while many Hungarians thought that we had nothing to do with ethnic Albanians living so far away from our country.

This reaction occurred mostly as a consequence of the shortcomings of the political campaign in the referendum one and a half years before the Nato action, as members of the political elite spoke only about the security of a Hungary guaranteed by rich and well-armed western allies and did not mention the mission of a new Nato in the post Cold War world; they did not perhaps even believe in that concept. National consent of the political parties was created on just one issue. According to their agreement, the ground troops of the Alliance would not have been allowed to begin their manoeuvres from Hungarian territory against Yugoslavia. This thoroughly provincial reaction of the political elite was formulated just one month after Hungary became a new member of Nato in March 1999.

As a newcomer to the Alliance, the Hungarian government and its opposition supported the air strikes. But the Socialists, the former ruling party, when realising the deep shock of the people, proclaimed

a new position during the critical days of the crisis, saying that warplanes should not use Hungarian airports before flying over Yugoslavia. Regrettably the Hungarian prime minister did not try to explain to the citizens what the objectives of the international democratic community during the air strikes were and did not visit the camps of the Kosovar Albanians - unlike so many of his counterparts who did. Meanwhile, in the Hungarian media, in contrast to CNN or Sky News, which are widely available on cable in Hungary, the consequences of the bombing of Belgrade were the first item in the news (pictures often uncritically taken over from the state-censored Yugoslav television); then, secondly came cautious declarations of Hungarian parliamentary parties; Jamie Shea's press conferences came third (often with satirical comments on the failures of the campaign); and finally, only fourthly in the sequence, could the audience see reports on the situation of the refugees.

In Hungary, a typical opinion was to blame the lack of determination of the western countries to intervene in the Balkans during the first half of the nineties. In fact, this hesitation, even if understandable, was a historical mistake. But as soon as the United States and its European partners decided to act in favour of a national minority, most of our citizens felt threatened by the prospects of the country becoming involved in dangerous international events. The Nato action did not receive a positive assessment in this respect either, even though there are more than two million Hungarians living in neighbouring states. Since the collapse of the Warsaw Pact, as a new member of Nato and a candidate to the European Union, Hungary, step by step, might still develop a new, more responsible attitude to political affairs beyond its own borders. But the traditional representation of our history as tragic loss has also made it hard for the people to believe in the victory of higher aspirations.

### **The consequences of europessimism**

What are the possible consequences of the provincialism, pragmatism, Marxist legacy and past experience outlined above in the context of relations with the European Union? The danger is

that europessimism might mislead the representatives of Hungary as a member state, especially if the political and media elites misunderstand the nature of consultations, deliberations and the decision-making processes inside the European Union. Instead of an adaptation to a dynamic, loose and unique European institutional system with formal and informal procedures and to a two-level (national and supranational) game of pursuing interests, new concepts, ideas and methods in heterogeneous policy areas (*Torreblanca 1998*), Hungary might only participate as a weak player in the bargaining processes of economic arbitration.

Intolerant europessimism might also prevent Hungarians from accepting evidence of different mechanisms in a new world, where old statements, such as the fatalistic ‘bigger fish eat smaller fish’, have lost their relevance. In addition, europessimism could make it difficult to change the narrow economic and national focus of European issues in Hungary, to assimilate current political and intellectual ideas in the member states about the future development of the European Union or the new role of Europe in global affairs. Europessimism might make it harder to understand the significant differences in the political culture of the Union compared to Hungarian political practice. With the help of simplistic messages, such as ‘there is corruption everywhere’, the Hungarian media risks imposing on the public a false sense of defeatism at the prospect of another corrupt bureaucracy. While the European Commission stepped down after an investigation by the European Parliament, most Hungarian office-holders under attack or investigation are not willing to give up their positions.

Europessimism, naturally, is not only a purely Hungarian symptom of the complicated adaptation process in the wake of communist rule. As the Pole Aleksander Smolar reminded us recently, ten years ago it was the reunification of Europe that was on the agenda, not the eastern extension of western integration (*Népszava*, 28 July 1999). ‘For us from the East, after the crumbling of the Iron Curtain, Europe came to symbolise not only a promise, but also a latent

neurosis... We become timid before the image of a severe Europe, that keeps subjecting us to exams. Integration seems a utopia, a distant ideal, an endless run... We are afraid that the price for being assimilated by the 'center' is our autonomy, our originality, the salt and pepper of our nations. Joining the European Community looks — to some people — like gaining a new boss, allowing ourselves to be 'manipulated' by the International Monetary Fund, by certain 'transnational', 'federalist', 'neo-protestant' mafias. With such a psychology - similar to that of a man at a fair who fears he is being cheated — it is no wonder that we move clumsily, unconvincingly, provincially', wrote Andrei Plesu two years ago, prior to becoming the current foreign minister of Romania (*Plesu 1997*). Although the Romanian communist regime created a society more closed to western influence than the 'softer' Hungarian one-party system of the seventies and eighties, and Plesu seems to speak more about a traditional, well-known fear of economic and cultural imperialism, the present similar uncertain attitudes are comparable. Common elements in the debate about accession into the new democracies might show that the often postulated cultural-historical-religious dividing lines (*Dunay 1995*) between these nations are not so wide at all.

If europessimism remains the dominant attitude among Hungarians after joining the EU, citizens might look at Brussels with increasing suspicion. Populism could grow and the EU might be blamed as a scapegoat for domestic problems. As William Wallace put it: 'Two-level games are hard to play; harder for smaller players, with less resources at their disposal and a domestic public sensitive to the possibility of betrayal by leaders seduced by cosmopolitan society and the patronage of great powers' (*W. Wallace, 1998*).

### **When accession comes**

Before that, and as promised by the political parties, there should be a referendum about Hungary's accession to the European Union. Today, we have no serious political and lobby groups which openly

attack this programme. Even believers in cost-benefit analysis do not want to, and probably cannot change the ongoing process towards full membership. Given the europessimistic attitudes of the political and media elite, however, Hungary might vote a strange, general, lukewarm, boring 'yes, but' with a similarly unenthusiastic campaign. As a result there could be just lukewarm subsequent support - but also only lukewarm opposition - to European integration.

Fashionable cost-benefit calculations could show misleading analytical results to the public. The representatives of this approach often forget the general tendencies of the modern world economy, including the fact that Hungary is embedded in the global economy. Adjustment to the effects of external markets and to the consequences of the European economic and legal framework is inevitable. Inflexible cost-benefit analyses might confuse, for example, the individual interests of farmers who work inefficiently with old technology with the needs for reforms in the agricultural sector. Similarly, it would be a mistake to explain possible changes in social stratification and in income relations exclusively in terms of accession to the EU. Speculation in terms of future winners and losers in society make it almost impossible to grasp Hungary's plan to join the European Union as a positive-sum game.

Perhaps there is a convincing intellectual argument against rigid calculations. There is an analogy with the political regime change in Hungary ten years ago. Even if people think that there are 'victims' of the big economic transformation and the political rearrangement, could anyone question in a political 'salon', after finishing a pseudo cost-benefit analysis, the correctness of the demolition of the one-party dictatorship and the introduction of a democratic parliamentary system along with a market economy? Certainly not, since any references to fundamental human rights, which have become a basic assumption of society since their recognition during the political transition period would give an adequate and satisfactory reply to such a question. In Hungary you can also point to improving macro figures for the economy and to increased supply in the market as a

consequence of stronger (international) competition.

Although the last decade has brought a drop in living standards for many sections of society, this painful transformation had to happen in order to liquidate the structurally inefficient economic legacy of the communist past. In future years Hungary will undergo faster economic development and is counting on significant transfers from the budget of the European Union. So, this time, instead of distasteful cost-benefit analyses, a reformulated question would express the real challenge to the country. Could entry into the European Union cost so much for us, could membership shake our economy so deeply that we should rather give up the historical opportunity to join the European democratic community and a highly developed economy? Since we do not expect recession but rather sustainable growth as a consequence of accession, this answer cannot be in doubt either.

The road to the European Union looks smooth enough for Hungary. But today the europessimistic attitudes of the elite groups and the public have coincided. This conjuncture has real risks: a defensive, shortsighted perception of the role of Hungary inside the EU and a narrow economic approach might deceive society about the essence of membership of the European Union. As the Kosovo experience showed in relation to Hungary's fresh Nato membership, it might cause another shock if the country thinks it is jumping on an old European locomotive, which many Hungarians still think is in use on this continent.

On the other hand, it is possible that europessimism will dissolve after our accession in 2003-2004 through a fast learning-process. Hungary's pragmatic western orientation might help: there is no culturally-historically 'determined' resistance against the Europeanisation of the nation. Hungarian and European identities could get on well together in the future. There might develop a polarisation of pro-European and eurosceptical political and intellectual blocks similar to that in the EU countries. Anyhow, today's europessimistic Hungarians will have to realise in a relatively

short run - as new European citizens - that the European train received a high-speed engine many years ago.

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