

European interview

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« There is an extraordinarily strong pro-European voice in Hungary »

Interview with Katalin Cseh, MEP (RE, HU)

At the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, you volunteered to help the hospital services. Why did you choose to do this?

At the time I was working at home in Budapest, waiting for the European Parliament to resume its usual activities. The hospital system was already operating beyond capacity and, as a doctor, I felt compelled to volunteer to join the healthcare staff. In such times of distress, everyone has to close ranks and help their country, especially politicians, who very often ask their fellow citizens to make sacrifices. As an elected official, I had to take responsibility. That is why I worked for a few months in the emergency department of the Budapest hospital.

Has this experience been useful to you in your work as an MEP?

It's very interesting to have to face issues head-on that are being debated at the political level. For a long time, we have wondered whether Europe should do more in the field of healthcare. And the governments that criticise the European Union for not doing enough in response to the pandemic are, in many cases, the most reluctant to give it more competence in this area. But the lack of coordination between Member States, the shortfalls in our healthcare systems – all of this increases inequality and reduces the opportunities for Europeans to receive proper care. I was also struck by the difficulties in supplying medicines and medical equipment. Many of my colleagues did not have the necessary protective equipment, because we do not produce these things in Europe. So, it was there, in the hospital, that I measured the impact of the policies we are implementing. And that is why I am campaigning for a stronger Europe, which

takes better care of its citizens' health and is better equipped for future challenges.

Do you think that Europeans will be better prepared for any future health crises?

It will really depend on our ability to learn from this pandemic. When countries take care of critically ill patients from another Member State, these are very good examples of solidarity. But, more often than not, this is not part of a systemic process. Due to a lack of coordination, the RescEU strategic reserve, set up in response to the Covid-19 crisis, has on more than one occasion, been short of emergency medical equipment, medicines and ventilators. RescEU is an excellent initiative, and I welcome the stocks that have been built up, but such a reserve must be part of our future capabilities. We also need to strengthen the European Union's presence in certain strategic industries and to be more autonomous regarding our essential needs. It is dangerous that we are also dependent on the rest of the world; if something happens with China or the United States, we Europeans will suffer because we are unable to produce enough medicines to meet our needs.

Do you think Member States are preparing well for the arrival of Covid-19 vaccines? Will the Commission's recent proposals, in particular for a new pharmaceutical strategy, contribute to building a European Health Union?

Joining forces to purchase vaccines is already a major step forward. Imagine a world where smaller, less developed Member States like mine are forced to fend for themselves – without the European Union (which is the world's largest market) at the negotiating table, pooling their forces to buy hundreds of millions of doses of vaccine. Whether

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all Member States are prepared for the distribution and administration phases is a more difficult question. There are huge inequalities in terms of health infrastructure - I'm thinking, for example, of very demanding cold chains to keep vaccines at extremely low temperatures. The Commission has made some proposals to use its (unfortunately limited) capacity to help Member States. But this shows once again why we need to continue working to strengthen the Union's healthcare capacity.

You were first elected to the European Parliament in 2019, on the list of the Momentum Movement, the centrist party you co-founded in 2017. Why did you choose a European mandate?

Working for the European Union has always been my dream. I believe that in the 21st century we need a stronger Europe, we need more coordination, we need more tolerance. Unfortunately, the Hungarian government is going in the opposite direction. It wants to weaken Europe and harm our historic transatlantic relations, it is being fiercely open with countries that are strategic rivals of Europe, such as Russia and China. And anything V. Orban does against the Union can do real damage to the future of European integration. I wanted to become an MEP to show that not all Hungarians are like their Prime Minister. There is an extraordinarily strong pro-European voice in my country, which believes that Europe is the natural way for Hungary. I also wanted to promote ideas within the Union that are close to my heart and that can only be implemented at this level: more cohesion and solidarity, more transfers for those living in poverty. Finally, I wanted to participate in the fight against climate change and for better human rights for all.

When you first spoke in Strasbourg, you said that Europe must remain «united, prosperous and secure». Do you think it is possible to achieve these goals?

We must, first and foremost, work for a Europe that creates more wealth and more opportunities for every citizen. Europe must also be more powerful, on the international stage as well as within its borders, it must have more self-confidence, it must make better use of its powers,

in terms of trade, monetary policy and financing. We need to strengthen the Union to be able to protect all our citizens. Some countries like mine are working for a weaker Europe that is not a player on the world stage. I believe, on the contrary, that it is in our fundamental interest to join forces and fight for prosperity, power, and security.

In your view, the «status quo» is not enough. What changes do you see as priorities?

We really need to rethink how the Union works and find the most effective way to do this. I sincerely hope that the Conference on the Future of Europe will help to create a Union that is more in tune with future challenges. Let me give you some examples. Unanimity in the Council is an obstacle to the adoption of certain fundamental reforms. Look at all the legislative proposals that are shelved for years because a few States block their adoption: this is political blackmail! When it comes to foreign policy, if Europe is not able to speak with one voice, its power on the international stage is diminished. This has to change. Another thing that seems necessary to my mind is to give more power to the citizens and, therefore, to strengthen the European Parliament, which is the only directly elected body. The European Parliament must be given the right of legislative initiative; it should also have the possibility, through the *Spitzenkandidaten* process or some other mechanism, of directly electing the President of the Commission. Finally, we need to assess whether the Union's current competences are really appropriate for the future. Health is a national competence and the current framework severely limits what it can and cannot do. But we see that pandemics have no borders!

Democracies are weakened by disinformation and fake news. What response should be given at the European level?

Platforms should be held responsible for the content published on their pages. We should move towards a safer European digital space, which is not a vehicle for disinformation. I hope that the legislation currently being drafted will provide citizens with greater protection. We also need to improve coordination between European and

national intelligence and cyber-intelligence agencies, creating a common framework within the Union in which we can better protect our democracies. Disinformation is a problem in all Member States: we certainly cannot create uniform mechanisms, but without a stronger and more powerful European umbrella under which the platforms should obey in each State, it will be very difficult to tackle it.

You once said: «the European project is what we make of it, it can strengthen Europe, or it can help the anti-European populists». What do you propose to fight populism?

Populism, and the democratic backsliding that often results from it, is a real danger for the future of the Union. This is why I have fought so hard in the European Parliament to create, in the context of the 2021-2027 budget discussions, a mechanism that for the first time will allow the Union to stop paying European funds to countries that do not respect the rule of law. This will send a truly clear message to those who might be tempted to follow V. Orban's example. We cannot continue to live in a Union in which we cannot guarantee that the rules, values and principles, which each State committed itself to when it joined, continue to be respected once these countries are members of the Union. We are far too lax in this respect! Europe is not a supermarket in which you take what interests you and reject what you don't want. The Union must be a community of values, a community of rule of law and not just a space for open financial transactions, subsidies and funding. The Union is much more than money, it is a question of values and if I insist on this, it is because populism and democratic backsliding are contagious.

Do you think the situation is worsening in the Union?

There are more and more governments in the European Union that violate European principles with impunity. Look at the Hungarian government, which is attacking the freedom of the press and institutions, which has revised the Constitution, and created a new electoral code. It is probably easier for V. Orban to

govern in this way, without free media, without checks and balances, than to be criticised on a daily basis by journalists. This is something that appeals to a number of leaders, especially in view of the economic and health crisis. It is certainly an opportunity for populism to be stronger. The disillusionment, fear and sadness of the population can fuel the vote in favour of extremes. And so I sincerely hope that the recovery plan can provide a solution. If they feel that the Union is not there for them, people will seek alternatives and those alternatives will be the extremes. So, we must ensure that the Union works, that the Union acts, that the Union protects.

We are witnessing many breaches of the rule of law in Poland and Hungary, but the Article 7 procedure is not progressing. What are the reasons for this?

It is very clear that this mechanism is not working. In my view, Article 7 was not intended to be triggered because the authors of the Treaty did not anticipate such excesses. It is a nuclear option, an extreme one, which provides for strong sanctions. But triggering it is almost impossible. This system is not supposed to be a solution for dealing with daily breaches of the rule of law. It says nothing about funding, whereas money is what everyone cares about at the end of the day. All of the autocrats and populists who strongly criticise the European Union, who promote their illiberal extremism, are very keen to continue receiving money from European funds, they build and maintain their power with this money. European funds cannot continue to finance the operations of oligarchs and populists and fuel corruption! For these reasons we have to establish a closer link between values and money, because if you are part of a community, if you benefit from that community, you have to adhere to its rules. That is why I hope that the new mechanism on the conditionality of the rule of law will be more effective than Article 7.

Climate change is the number one priority of the current legislature. How can the EU contribute to it?

These are difficult times that may lead some governments to lower their ambitions. But we must stop them from

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doing this. In recent years, Europe has really been at the forefront of the fight against climate change: the climate legislation, the Green Deal, are really ground-breaking initiatives, we have to continue on this path. Leaders must also realise that the fight against climate change is an opportunity for European industry. We have to make sure that the transition is both fair and that it helps those in need, and that it takes place in industries that can become world leaders, for example in new technologies. It will be a global reform for the next decades, and if Europe is smart, it will be able to make this transition sooner and better than anyone else. For this we need a border carbon adjustment mechanism without which our industry will suffer greatly. It is crucial to introduce this as soon as possible.

Hungary, like some other countries, is refusing to accept refugees. What is your opinion on the migration issue?

We must have a common European migration strategy. It is evident that the Heads of State and government have been pushing this issue under the carpet since 2015. We are wasting precious time, whilst we will

be in an increasingly difficult situation as pandemics grow and the impact of climate change worsens. This is a problem that countries cannot solve on their own, so we must make a joint effort to determine who can enter, work and study in the Union: this requires resolve, political will, and difficult decisions. Some Member States have vastly different points of view, but everyone has to make compromises. We must work on a solution that is acceptable to everyone. At the moment we are stuck and this is damaging our Community and our international reputation.

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