

Katalin Novak's speech at the Reception of the DC – Museum of Fine Arts, 10 January 2024

Good evening, Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen.

On behalf of my husband, Istvan and myself, I greet you all at the Museum of Fine Arts today. I could actually stop here and finish my speech and go to the reception. Why? Because first it is already meaningful and let's not underestimate the fact that the President of Hungary invites the members of the diplomatic corps accredited to Hungary. And that you also are ready to accept this invitation and you come. Second, because all the pictures are taken, so we all have pictures together. That means that we are done actually for tonight. Everybody sees that we were here. And third, because upon my experience in media and also in diplomacy, not only the content but the speed is also very important. So that means that maybe some reports are already written by now. But for those of you who haven't completed their reports yet, I also have something to say. So for those of you, I will tell something. I will speak about five topics.

First, the challenges we face globally. Second, Europe. Third, Hungary as an international and national player. Fourth, something about my personal agenda and fifth, your role. Well, I won't speak for hours, but I won't be so short as expected.

So first, let's see the global challenges we face. I think we maybe all agree that 2023 was a very difficult year, a year of anxiety. The challenges of the last year seem to prevail into the year to come. I will name ten of these challenges. First, the war conflicts. The war in Ukraine and I think in Hungary we all understand the threat of this war. Second, the war in Israel and the Gaza Strip and being the home in Central Europe to the largest Jewish community, and also having one of the largest Hungarian diaspora in Israel, we really feel compassion for the war conflict in Israel and the Gaza Strip. And there are many more war conflicts further away. Now I won't name them all, but these tensions are all very, very resounding for all of us. Second, the economic difficulties that most of our countries do face. Third, the political instability, early elections in many places. Fourth, rising tensions in societies. Fifth, the natural disasters we experienced last year. Number six is the mass illegal immigration that we experience. Seventh is the phenomenon of disinformation all around. Number eight is the massive appearance of artificial intelligence and all the difficulties and challenges it causes. Number nine is the activity of non-political stakeholders with hidden political ambitions. And last but not least, the influence of near-monopoly technology companies.

The question is how the international community, how the world's leaders handle these challenges. If we are capable of giving efficient answers, can we decrease tensions? Can we increase stability and security? I think that the year 2023 proved that many times we fail to succeed. Why? Again, coming back to the ten points. When we speak about war. Many times there seem to be interests in feeding war conflicts instead of cooling them. And also we experience wishful thinking many times. Even when the position of an international community or alliance is clear on a war situation, and it is right as such, military reality should always be well judged. If we are really interested in peace and I hope we all are, then we always have to find a way towards negotiations and peace talks. Second, when we speak about economic challenges, I now refer to the title of the novel *Sense and Sensibility*. We have to preserve common sense besides sensibility when it is about economic decisions.

When we speak about political instability, strong political leadership in itself is not a danger, but an opportunity, let's not fear it. When we speak about the tensions in society, we should listen to the vox populi. That means that when there are hundreds of thousands of people who go to the streets to protest, that's not only the expression of the freedom of speech, but also a demonstration of worry, a demonstration of rage. So we should draw the lessons when we see that happening. When we look at natural disasters all around, then we have to raise the question if we really mean to tackle the climate issue. I just bring you one example. If you look at the G20 countries in 1990 and today, their average GDP per capita is now two and a half times higher than it used to be. But the average CO2 emission increased by 62% in the same period of time. So we have to raise the question if we really mean it.

Number six was the phenomenon of illegal immigration which is also fed by the number and severity of armed conflicts. If you don't step up against massive illegal immigration in an effective manner, we will fail to protect our borders, our homeland, and we will increase insecurity.

Number seven was disinformation. We actually live in an age of disinformation. We do not have official answers to fundamental questions. Who blew up the North Stream, who destroyed the hospital in Gaza, who is behind the fake news spread on social media, how to differentiate between fake and real news. If you don't give the answer to these questions, then we are not able to tackle the phenomenon of disinformation.

With the rise of artificial intelligence, we are increasingly vulnerable. New and better regulation is needed. And last but not least, the role of near-monopoly technology companies and of formally non-political organizations with significant financial resources and a transnational agenda is on the rise. New solutions are needed to defend freedom and sovereignty. While elected leaders are under democratic oversight, global companies and non-political stakeholders with hidden political ambition lack democratic control. Even if our answers have been rather insufficient so far to these ten challenges which I named, 2024 offers a great chance, because 2024 can be a year of democracy, because 2024 is going to be a year of elections worldwide. In 76 countries, some 4 billion people, so almost half of the world's population, will be affected. Eight of the world's ten most populous countries will hold elections in 2024. I hope that everyone will be given equal chance to participate in the elections. And I hope that the outcome of the elections will be respected everywhere. The sovereign choice of the people will be accepted.

If we agree on the rules of the game, we must also accept the outcome even if we don't like it. It is our responsibility to ensure that this decade does not become the decade of fear, but that of successful cooperation. And then if we look at Europe, let's just think about the weight Europe represents now worldwide. First, from a demographic point of view, 50 years ago, one-fifth of the world's population was European, now less than one tenth is. The EU countries' share of the global population was 18% in 1970. Now it is 6%, falling to 4% by 2070. 2022 was the first year in which the number of births in the EU as a whole fell below 4 million. So it's not only my favourite topic, but I have to tell you that if we don't pay attention to the demographic decline in Europe, to the demographic challenges we face in Europe, then we commit a serious mistake.

And if we look at the economic potential, the economic power of Europe worldwide, then let's keep in mind that the economic performance of the emerging economies, so the E7 countries, China, India, Russia, Brazil, Mexico, Indonesia and Türkiye, was half of that of the G7 in 1995, about the same in 2015, but is projected to be two times over it by 2040. By 2050, six of the seven largest economies will be among today's E7 countries. Egypt, Iran, Ethiopia, Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates officially joined BRICS on 1 January. So it means that now BRICS + accounts for 45% of the world's population, 28% of global GDP, and more than 40% of global oil production. So I haven't spoken about Europe's performance, but what I said means that Europe is less and less a global player. The question is if we can change this. We now have the chance to become more successful in defining our European position and our European vision. There will also be elections in Europe. 400 million European citizens will have the opportunity to determine the direction of European politics. I would just like to draw the attention to two elements which I think will be decisive for our future. First is the question of diversity. The motto of the European Union is unity in diversity. It's a faithful expression of the uniqueness and diversity of Europe's nations. I say Europe is already diverse enough. We are not uniform. An Italian, a Swede and a Hungarian speak different languages. There is a significant difference between Polish and Portuguese history, just as the EU's Eastern and Scandinavian member states have followed very different paths of development. We have a different cultural heritage, different gastronomy, different habits. Christian culture is what we have in common. So I think that we have to preserve Europe as diverse as it is by now. And the second element is decision making. I believe in consensual decision making. Consensus is common sense. And I think that in serious bodies, in serious communities, we use the consensual decision making process. We shouldn't give that up. We should exercise the consensus-finding process and we shouldn't abuse the veto right, either. So we have to stick to consensual decision-making.

In the second half of the year, immediately after the elections, Hungary will take over the rotating presidency. In 2024, so this year, we are going to celebrate our 20th anniversary in the European Union and our 25th anniversary in NATO. Just yesterday was the day when 20 years ago I gave birth to our first child. So just yesterday, 20 years ago I became mom for the first time. That means that now we have a 20 year old also in the family. So as a mother, I know that it's very hard to believe that a 20-year-old is already a grown-up. It is very hard to believe that a 20-year-old is able to take serious decisions. It is hard to believe that a 20 year old is a sovereign person who is already wise. Sometimes I have the same feeling when we speak about Hungary in the European Union. Some tend to believe that Hungary is still not grown up. Some don't believe that a 35 year old democracy of a thousand-year-old nation is nature enough. But in the second semester of 2024, Hungary will prove again that she is capable of being a good president of the EU Council. And just as I prepared for the birthday of our oldest son, I found the diary I wrote back in those years when the kids were still little. Actually in 2011, June the 29th, when we finished the EU Presidency of Hungary in the Council. Minister Martonyi is here with us and I was privileged to work with him back then. I wrote this in my diary, I quote. "For the time being, I am not afraid of the post-presidency syndrome. I don't mind that our words will count less, that the phone won't ring constantly, that the emails won't flood in. But beyond all that, I feel mostly pride. I am proud that we have stood up for ourselves, and I am proud of the people who have fought through these years, days, weeks and months, sparing no effort, no time, and giving their best professional skills. Those who were driven primarily by

enthusiasm, who wanted to show that Hungarians can also be successful as a presidency. I was just a tiny bolt in the machine, and one without which the machine would have run smoothly. Having said that, I am proud to have been part of this story, to have learned more than I have in years, to have seen many valuable people working at their best, and to have seen the fruits of all this. I hope that the pride we feel will spread to others and that more of us in our immediate and wider communities will hold their heads high." That's what I wrote in 2011, 29 June, on the last day, in the last 24 hours, of our EU presidency. And I hope that we'll have the same feeling at the end of this year, when we'll be in the last 24 hours of our then already successful EU presidency. That is actually what I wish for all of us.

I just name two topics which will be very important for our presidency. First, I should reiterate it, demography. The demographic challenges Europe is facing right now. And second, enlargement, the enlargement process, concentrating on the Western Balkans. Because if we don't want to lose our credibility, then we have to fulfill the enlargement process of the Western Balkan countries. I spoke about the challenges we face worldwide. I spoke about Europe and now I will say something about Hungary as a national and international player. And I will just refer back to this year, some very memorable moments of this year, I mean last year, 2023. I have to bring back the beautiful memories of the Apostolic Visit of His Holiness Pope Francis to Hungary. These three days were uplifting for the whole Hungarian nation also above the borders. We could all feel united, we could feel joy. We could feel happiness and we could feel pride. So we really thank the Holy Father for paying this Apostolic Visit to Hungary and for sharing these moments with us. We also had a successfully organized World Athletics Championship. I'm sure many of you were attending the World Athletics and we could also be very proud of the good organization and the high level of the whole event. We also had the privilege to celebrate two new Hungarian Nobel Prize holders this year, Katalin Karikó and Ferenc Krausz. And then I will tell you a short story. When I had the chance to go to Tirana, to the Berlin Process, we had lunch together, but I had to leave earlier. So I said I had to leave because I have to go back to Budapest. I was asked by Edi Rama, why do you have to leave, Katalin? And I said, I'm sorry, but we are celebrating the Hungarian Nobel Prize holders. And then Charles Michel asked that, well, Hungary has a Nobel Prize? I said, no, Hungary has two Nobel Prizes, actually. And all the prime ministers and presidents were, well, seemed to be a little bit jealous and I'm telling you that was quite a good feeling. And we are very proud of our two Nobel Prize holders. Also among them, the first Hungarian woman Nobel Prize holder, Katalin Karikó. So these were all very memorable moments of the last year. And also, of course, I have to mention that the Hungarian national football team unbeatenly qualified for the Euro Cups, which is for us very important. I also raise the question sometimes, what makes Hungary attractive? That would be an easy answer to say that Hungary is a country of cheap labor. I think it's not the right answer. It's not only because of cheap labor that we are so attractive even for investments. But I think that we could reestablish the virtue and the value of work, which wasn't an easy process. We have been working on it quite hard, but now work is again, work plays again an important role in our lives. And Hungary is also a safe place. And I think that safety, security is more and more important in nowadays lives. Hungary is also one of the most investor-friendly countries and I also have to add that we try to be a family-friendly country as well. I'm sorry that this year you haven't brought your children with you, but next time, please do so. So all children are also welcome to this party as well. We are also an increasingly popular investment destination, last year, more

than 13 billion euros investment came to Hungary, a record high. In total, these investments have created 19,000 jobs. And it might make us also attractive that we Hungarians know that we are not any better than others. We value who we are and we stick to our identity, our way of life and our values. This is why we look with appreciation on those who also value their identity. We show respect and we also expect respect. Mutual respect is what we believe in. We do not view the world from top down. We are not colonialists nor do we behave like colonies. We negotiate at eye level. The Hungarian approach is Western values, Eastern respect. Hungary is a member of Western-oriented nations, Western alliance systems. But we also build and maintain pragmatic relations and cooperation with other regions of the world based on mutual respect and mutual benefits. This is dictated by the Hungarian interest. So that is basically how we see ourselves in the world.

I would also like to tell you something about my personal agenda. You might have realized that in the last over a year and a half, I tried to put an emphasis on our international relations and diplomatic work. The year 2023 was also a year of connections for me and also a year of travels. I spent - my colleagues counted it - 104 days abroad. Sorry István, I didn't want to share that with you, maybe you didn't count it so bad. But the 104 days abroad, that meant that I really had the chance to work on our international relations and thank you for substituting for me at home! And that meant that in 30 different countries, I traveled to 30 different countries, 36 times and had around 100 diplomatic programmes also in Hungary. That is not for traveling, of course. That is for building our relations. And that is because I believe in the power of diplomacy. I believe in the power of words, in the culture of respect, understanding and mutual goodwill. I also believe in the power of listening to each other. I also believe in the power of smile and I also believe in the power of personal relations. And that is also why I would like to thank you personally all for making it possible to meet the leaders of your countries. And also through you, I would like to thank your presidents, prime ministers, kings, that I had the chance to speak with them openly, that they received me with goodwill, with a warm welcome. And they were always interested in what I had to say, and they were always ready to share with me what I was interested in to hear.

Dear Ladies and Gentlemen, we are here at the Museum of Fine Arts and I would like to share with you why I came here this year. Because last year, I invited you to the House of Hungarian Music. And this year it is this beautifully renovated Museum of Fine Arts which you might all know, but you cannot see enough times. That is also because we have just right now a gorgeous exposition. That's an exhibition. That's the exhibition of Renoir, and if you haven't seen it, you still have some days to do so. Even after the reception tonight you will have the chance to look around and to see the exhibition with your own eyes. And the reason why it is personally also so important to me is because to me, Francophone relations are of the utmost importance. You might all know that, but I have to say it out loud now as well. And I think that it is important to share the beauties of the Francophone culture with the Hungarian people and this exhibition is a great example of that. And I would also like to share with you that we will continue to put a priority on our Francophone relations. So that means that upon my initiative, the Hungarian government decided to invest around 1.5 billion forints into our Hungarian-Francophone relations, friendship, in the coming years. So that is also why we are here in this beautiful venue today.

Among my personal agenda, I should mention again the topic of demography. Just as I told you, the demographic challenge is one of the greatest ones, if not the greatest one, for us all. For, let's say the so-called developed

countries of the world. And if I refer back to my example of the G20 countries, their situation in 1990, and today, then I spoke about the GDP per capita and the CO2 emission, but I have to also mention the total fertility rate, which dropped by 34% in the G20 countries in this period of time, from 2.5 in 1990 to 1.7 last year. That means that on average almost, there is one child less in families in the G20 countries. That means that we are practically giving up on our future. That means that we are becoming richer, but we are becoming more and more childless. So I think that we have to restore the value of families and we have to restore the value of childbearing and we have to support young people in their childbearing thoughts and dreams. And that is also why we experienced, we had last year here in this very building, the 5th Budapest Demographic Summit, which was also a great chance to exchange experiences on demography among all the participants. Thank you to all who participated in this event. We will have it in two years time again. And during our EU presidency, we will also have demographic events in the autumn I also initiated and created the Network of Family-friendly Presidents. At the beginning of this year, we already had a statement about the importance of family values. And I also, through you, encourage heads of state to participate in this network. This is an open network. I welcome all presidents who are ready to stand up for family values worldwide. I would also like to catch up on the issue of women leaders in the world because just right now, some days before the last female monarch abdicates, it means that formally, there will be only men sitting on royal thrones worldwide. And also if you look at the number of women leaders and also women heads of state around the world, right now the number is 17. We have 17 women heads of state around the world, and this low number has been stagnating in the last years. And we could also experience resignations, forceful resignations or by their own decision and loss of elections among women prime ministers as well. So that means that we are not many. And I think, I don't know if you agree with me or if you don't, but I think that we do need women leaders in the world. If you look at the challenges that we spoke about at the beginning, then to tackle these challenges, sometimes women can be also useful. Sometimes the tactics, the strategies of women can be also very successful. Sometimes the fact that we women don't lose the target but are sometimes not so direct in reaching them, might help. Seeking consensus, the empathy that we have might also help in these times of war, in these times of conflict and difficulties. So I think we should encourage women to go for leadership. And that is also why I invited women heads of state to Budapest this fall. So we will have the first meeting of women heads of state in Budapest in 2024. And just one very last element of my personal agenda, that is, I would say in English, Hungary moving more.

I would like to encourage the Hungarian people to move more regularly. That means that we don't practice many sports. We are very good in professional sports, we can't wait to see our good results in the Olympic Games this year and also we look forward to good results in the Euro Cups, but we would also like to see people in mass sports. So people exercising any sport even if not on a daily basis but quite regularly. So that is why I call on everybody to get moving, if possible together. So if you have any initiative in that respect, I am also ready to join them and I am there at your disposal. And last but not least, the last point I would like to raise is your personal role. Now diplomacy is very different from what it used to be just ten years ago, or some decades ago. For example, I have almost all of the heads of state's phone numbers in my phone. So we share with each other our personal numbers, our personal handy numbers. That's how we communicate with each other. We just call up each other, we just text each other on a regular basis. So that raises the question, what is your personal role?

We don't have to organize so bad if we want to speak with each other directly. We also have many times tete-a-tete meetings. So we try to speak with each other, tete-a-tete, only the two of us leaders. But still I think that in this time of disinformation, in this time of modern diplomacy, it is very crucial how you fulfill your role, how you are in the intermediate between us. Because if I raise the question, why are you here? Why did you choose Budapest if it was your choice? Why did you accept Budapest as a post if you had to accept it? Then I think that it's not in the first place because Budapest is beautiful. It's a fact, but still that's not enough. It's not because Hungary is so safe and family-friendly. That is also a positive element, but it wouldn't be enough either. That can also be a reason that you are not bored here because there are always things to report about here. So you cannot have a rest here, that's for sure. So if you are ambitious in your work, then again, Hungary is a good place because something is happening all the time in Hungary. But still I think that this wouldn't be enough for you personally. I just hope it's not enough. And I see and experience knowing you and meeting you regularly that you have more ambition than that. That you understand that you are the credible source about Hungary in your country. That what you transfer from Hungary as an information to your country, that is the credible source and that is decisive. And also you are a sensor. You know when to signal something, when not to signal something. And you know that if you try to reach out to us, if you try to speak with us, then you have the chance to be understood and maybe you will also have the chance to understand us. So that's what I encourage you to do. Please look for good cooperation with our country, look for good cooperation in Hungary, and try to make the most out of our bilateral relations.

I thank you all and I also thank your spouses for giving you support, for giving you a stable background and for making it possible to fulfill your job. And we are trying to make it also pleasant for you to work in Hungary. You can count on me in the future and I will also count on you in the future. Thank you for your listening.