

Dear friends, dear guests,

my name is István Hegedűs, I am the chairman of the Hungarian Europe Society
Let me welcome you all who joined us or will join us during this long day for participating at or just listening to this fascinating conference.

When we initiated this project called Uncertain Times, the first wave of the pandemic was just over in the summer of 2020. We had no idea what was coming next. But we knew that our lives have changed dramatically and the consequences of lock-downs, social distancing and isolation are tremendous on our human behaviour and relations. Moreover, individual liberties have been constrained, economic decline became significant and liberal democracies faced a forceful populist-authoritarian challenge worldwide – to mention just a few frustrating phenomena. Today, a fourth wave is present in Europe, however, less people die thanks to vaccination, but we still have to manage this conference online because of still existing difficulties for travelling abroad. Free movement is just partially restored. Yet, it is not evident at all, whether COVID-19 will be seen as a real game-changer in a couple of years, or we will forget the health crisis soon - just like it happened to the Spanish flu spreading all over in the world after the Great War.

When we initiated this project more than a year ago, international relations were also in deep crisis. The president of the United States did not follow any basic rules on the global stage and made almost no decisions that could have been described as reasonable and predictable – much to the irritation of his country's traditional allies. Actually, when we applied to the US embassy in Hungary for a grant, it was a positive surprise that we succeeded. (Thanks a lot for their generous support!) Then, we also applied to the German foundation, our long-standing partner, the Friedrich Naumann Stiftung für Freiheit: This time it was not a surprise that we received a grant. (We are equally grateful to them as well.)

Today, we have a new US President in office for nine months and in spite of a fundamental shift in high politics and in almost all policy areas, transatlantic relations still often show a chaotic character. This conference today and its clear focus on global politics and the international order will analyse – with the help of our invited experts – important aspects of a return to great power politics, the future of US-European alliance as well as the necessary adjustment of the European Union and its member states to a fast changing external political environment. We will discuss these issues not only from the perspective of

traditional security studies, but will bring in to the debates the new political, economic and technological trends that might influence, perhaps determine the history of the twenties of the 21st century.

When we initiated this project last year, authoritarian populism was still on its peak in Hungary. Although today we still have the same prime minister - just like Lord Voldemort, he who must not be named -, his party does not belong either to any mainstream European party and or to political group in the European Parliament, whilst Hungary and Poland are under stronger pressure from the European institutions than before especially in the matter of the rule of law. Whether such development brings a break-through in the struggle between pro-European democrats and populist-nationalists, this is more than doubtful at the moment. We will discuss the future of populism on the one side and the future of liberal democracy, on the other – again, from many aspects. I am sure that the outcome of the German elections yesterday will be analysed from this perspective as well.

Let me mention one last topic that is officially not on our agenda. The united Hungarian opposition is definitely in a much better shape than a year ago. We are just in the middle of the primaries where citizens can vote for a joint prime minister candidate against the ruling leader of the country. The turn-out is surprisingly high. TV debates have brought back an almost forgotten democratic political culture. A new optimism has been created through the new élan of the opposition leaders who competing and collaborating with each other at the same time showing their best capabilities to the public. If this process leads next year to the defeat of the person – you know, the man who must not be named –, without overestimating his political influence in Europe and globally and his ability spreading an ideological virus, but admitting that he became a hero in the eyes of radical right wing voters outside his homeland as well, the failure of populist authoritarianism in Hungary might have a broader domino effect. A permanent low tide and increasing insignificance of anti-European populist political forces – and the German election gave us hope on Sunday - would positively change the prospects of this decade that started so frightening when an unknown virus suddenly changed our everyday lives and political thinking.

With this optimistic introduction, I would like to open our conference.