“Hungary is like a man who married a nice woman and felt like he achieved everything once he became a part of her family,” said Gábor Bródi, Ambassador and Permanent Representative of the Republic of Hungary to the United Nations. “Then, this man realized that not everything was perfect, that the children are very smart but sometimes they speak a different language, and that the family finances are in big trouble.” Bródi, who spoke at the Harriman Institute on October 19, 2009 was alluding to Hungary’s accession to the European Union, its recent tensions with Slovakia over a controversial language law, and Hungary’s economic instability.

“After the fall of the Berlin Wall, it was obvious that Hungary had no other alternative but to get back to the democratic family of nations where it had previously belonged.” Bródi recalled working for the Hungarian Embassy in London during 1987-91, the time of transition in the former Communist bloc, “I was lucky enough to be present at a very important meeting between British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and Hungarian Prime Minister József Antall.” During this meeting Antall affirmed Hungary’s ambitions to join NATO. In response, “Thatcher turned pale and furious,” and then proceeded to outline the challenges and dangers of Hungarian membership. “She said that the United Kingdom would be happy to provide certain assistance to Hungary, but that Hungary should seriously reconsider its aspirations for NATO membership.

Hungary became a full NATO member in March 1999, and joined the European Union in 2004. “We are committed to having a meaningful and deep European integration, while maintaining the culture and ethnic diversity of the region,” Bródi said. “I am glad to report that Hungary was the first country in the Union to ratify the Lisbon Treaty.” The Ambassador noted that while he cannot say he is “happy” with the treaty, he is satisfied because it reflects proper institutional balance and provides a more substantial foreign policy framework.

In 2011, Hungary will take over the presidency of the Council of the European Union for six months. Bródi stated that the presidency’s priorities will come from a European, not a national framework. He emphasized that Hungary will focus on inviting new members to the Union and extending cooperation with other regions, including the western Balkans. “We know that the long-term stability of Europe is only realistic if the Balkans can stabilize.” Hungary is particularly concerned with the region’s stability because it actually borders the Western Balkans, “We face a difficult balancing act, because while we are interested in providing EU security, we also want transparent and accessible borders with our neighbors.”

Hungary also borders Slovakia, and currently the two countries are experiencing diplomatic tensions because of a Slovakian language law passed on September 1, 2009. The law imposes a heavy fine on anyone speaking a language other than Slovak in the public service sector of certain municipalities. Hungary, which ruled Slovakia for centuries, contends that the law is geared specifically to discriminate against Slovakia’s large ethnic Hungarian population. Both nations are EU members and have been working to resolve the conflict.

The economy has been another recent challenge for Hungary, which was gearing towards the euro-zone only a year ago. After the onset of the global economic crisis, Hungary’s currency has been dropping rapidly, unemployment has been rising, and the country has had to borrow $25.1 billion from the IMF. This March Prime Minister Ferenc Gyuresény had to resign in response to street riots about his mishandling of the dire economic situation and his admission to having lied about the country’s economic state in order to win re-election.

Prime Minister Gordon Bajnai has replaced Gyuresény. Bajnai has business and banking experience and plans to govern Hungary according to a stringent fiscal austerity program. As Bródi summed it up, “The biggest challenge has been to put the economy in order. The government needs to provide the necessary means and framework to establish the conditions of a sustainable and reliable development. We are doing this, and the results are promising.”
On a broader scale, “Hungary’s biggest foreign policy challenge is to find an approach for regions like Africa,” which for the most part have no defined role in Hungarian foreign policy, Bródi noted. He emphasized the necessity for Hungary to adjust to a globalizing environment and to enhance its presence in the United Nations.

Reported by Masha Udensiva-Brenner

(Please note that background information is provided by the reporter and, while it was approved by the presenter, was not a part of the original presentation).