



## INTERVIEW

# ’»Speaking the Same Language« – in Fact or Metaphorically – Makes a Difference.’ Interview with Dr. Mátyás Hegyaljai, Deputy State Secretary for EU and International Affairs of Ministry of Interior



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## Abstract

Dr. Mátyás Hegyaljai, Deputy State Secretary for EU and International Affairs of Ministry of Interior (Hungary), is the interviewee in our thematic issue commemorating the 100th anniversary of INTERPOL. Mr. Hegyaljai's name may ring a bell not only for our Hungarian readers but also for our foreign readers, as he was the head of the Hungarian INTERPOL National Central Bureau, a member and then President of the INTERPOL European Commission and later a member of the INTERPOL Executive Committee. During the interview we discussed the global, regional and national aspects of law enforcement, the importance of regional – including European – cooperation, the impact of the digital revolution and the COVID epidemic, Hungary's role in combating crime, and Mr Hegyaljai's personal experiences. The Deputy State Secretary was interviewed by Prof. Dr Valér Dános, Editor-in-Chief, and Dr Csaba Szabó, Deputy Editor-in-Chief.

**Keywords:** INTERPOL, INTERPOL European Commission, INTERPOL Executive Committee, global combating crimes

*INTERPOL's activity focuses on three broad categories of crime: trafficking in human beings and illegal migration, drug trafficking and organised crime and economic and cyber-crime. In the first two types of crime, Hungary is involved as a transit country. How does this fact determine our role and weight in international cooperation?*

INTERPOL focuses on sixteen types of crime (corruption, counterfeiting of currency and documents, crimes against children, crimes against cultural heritage, drug-related crimes, crimes against the environment, financial crimes, arms trafficking, trafficking in human beings and illegal migration, counterfeiting of goods, 'maritime crimes', organised crime, terrorism, vehicle crime, war crimes), including those listed in the question. Our country cooperates with the organisation on most types of crime, some more actively, others less so, such as maritime crime.

*Is there a difference in the way organised crime and trafficking in human beings are perceived domestically and by INTERPOL? How much does working in an international organisation change the way of thinking of the police adapted to domestic conditions?*

INTERPOL is a global organisation, so it takes the same approach to crimes, but it also takes into account the specificities of the regions, for example, the

situation of human trafficking in Africa is not the same as in the European Union. There is also a need to think more broadly for police officers at national level, as data can be accessed very quickly through INTERPOL which would have been unimaginable a few decades ago. Thanks to recent technological developments, national police officers can also directly access certain INTERPOL databases, so they may have to deal with persons wanted by American, Asian or African countries, or encounter documents, vehicles or works of art wanted by distant countries.

*How was the expected career and tasks of an INTERPOL officer different from those of colleagues who just starting their career?*

It is difficult to make a comparison when we are talking about professional police officers, as they can only join the organisation through a tender, spend a certain amount of time (3–4 years) in the INTERPOL Secretariat and are typically not at the beginning of their career. Although not many Hungarians have been seconded in this way so far, the cooperation is nevertheless excellent.

*The digital revolution has had a significant impact on INTERPOL's work, including on the effectiveness of international teams. What is your personal experience of this increase in volume?*

Our world, like the nature of crime, is constantly changing. In 2014, the organisation opened the INTERPOL Global Innovation Complex in Singapore, with the main objective of equipping Member State's police forces with the tools and knowledge to better tackle new challenges, with a particular focus on crimes related to the digital space. With the growth in the number of members, the increase in the amount of data transferred and the IT developments, the intensity of INTERPOL's activities seems to be increasing year on year.

*The COVID-19 pandemic has been an inescapable shaping force in recent years. Has the impact of the pandemic been felt on the work of the organisation and, if so, in what form?*

As regards the organisation of work, both the General Secretariat and the Member States have introduced a system adapted to local specificities. The General Secretariat was almost completely closed, with minimal staff and a large part of the staff working from home offices. The INTERPOL offices in the Member States have adopted different solutions. Full home office or presence-only,

and various combinations of these. INTERPOL has monitored the impact of the outbreak on global crime trends since its inception and has kept Member States informed through various analyses and other materials. Generally speaking, in addition to epidemic-related crimes (counterfeit medical devices, medicines, vaccines), offences committed in virtual space have become more prominent.

*Hungary (re)joined INTERPOL in 1981, during the socialist regime. How did the change of regime in 1989, the break-up of the bipolar world order, bring about a change in the cooperation for Hungary?*

At first we started with a small office, which expanded very slowly and for a long time functioned as a non-determining unit of the National Police Headquarters. After the change of regime, our country started to cooperate more and more openly with other Member States and with the centre on a purely professional basis, and then, as we were about to become a member of the European Union, an integrated international communication organisation was created, which was named International Law Enforcement Cooperation Centre (ILECC).

*In the period since accession, Hungary has been witness to a number of major events: in addition to the regime change, we have joined NATO, the European Union, Europol, SIRENE, and we have become neighbours of several countries on the external borders of the Schengen area. How have these events affected the changing role and weight of Hungary in the regional and international community of INTERPOL?*

Hungary is one of the few INTERPOL Member States that is a member of all the above-mentioned organisations. I would rather say that first all our borders were Schengen external borders, and then with deeper integration these borders were dismantled, so our external borders have been continuously shortened, but this does not mean that less attention has to be paid to external border control. In recent years, the migration crisis and the Russian-Ukrainian war have meant that our country has had to make even greater efforts to comply with national and EU law in these areas, while guaranteeing the highest level of public security. The EU, and therefore Europol, Frontex, other EU agencies, regional organisations and our membership of Schengen, gives us a prominent role in the INTERPOL community of 195 Member States.

*After 2015, the organisational structure of the INTERPOL Hungarian National Central Bureau changed several times. Have these organisational changes*

*affected the functioning of the office? Did the change of the superior body have an impact on the emphasis of Hungarian participation?*

Until 2015, the Hungarian INTERPOL National Central Bureau was part of the National Police Headquarters, initially as an independent body, then as part of the International Law Enforcement Cooperation Centre (ILECC) after its establishment. International cooperation in criminal matters through INTERPOL was not really influenced by the organisational framework of the office per se, but rather by the organisational integration that made and continues to make the operation more efficient.

*To increase INTERPOL's success, the organisation has also introduced a regional mode of operation. What are the specificities of each region? Has an international standard been created that transcends regional, cultural and civilisational differences and standardises the functioning of the structures for all Member States?*

In addition to the global approach, there is also a regional approach, for example, in addition to the global strategy, there are also regional strategies, which are prepared in line with the 'grand' strategy but focused on regional priorities. In addition, the organisation has developed the INTERPOL service standard, or what is now called the 'quality standards' framework, which sets out the requirements that each INTERPOL office should meet.

*Are there any differences between the functioning, competences and integration of the INTERPOL European Committee and the other regional committees? If so, do these differences create difficulties for cooperation with the other regions or does its uniqueness facilitate it?*

The INTERPOL European Committee is an advisory body made up of representatives of the Member States, which plays a role in strategic issues concerning the European region. The organisation's regional offices, which are located on every continent outside Europe as part of the General Secretariat, strengthen links with remote regions. It is difficult to talk about the difficulties of cooperation because of the different tasks, but the European Committee's role in strategic planning certainly contributes to the development of European cooperation and to the high level of interaction.

*The level of cooperation has reached a unique level in the European region: without being exhaustive, the European Union, Europol, INTERPOL, the SIRENE Bureau, the International Criminal Court, the European Court of Human Rights, Frontex, all work side by side, together and in each other. Is there ever a case where there is a lot of organisational clutter or, as the saying goes, everybody's business is nobody's business?*

The long-term objectives of these international organisations and EU agencies are indeed to protect public safety and prosecute crime, but they carry out their tasks with different powers and different tools, so their activities are complementary rather than obstructive. There may sometimes be so-called rivalry between organisations, but the competences and remits of EU agencies, for example, are clearly defined, so the chances of this happening are minimal. In addition, a co-ordination methodology has been developed whereby agency representatives meet regularly to avoid the phenomenon mentioned in this question.

*With a little exaggeration, it can be said that Mr Hegyaljai has been at all levels of the organisation. How has this career changed your personal world view, your perception of law enforcement and internationalisation? Did any of the work experience you gained in the international arena, whether in terms of methodology, organisation or leadership, bring back home with you any that you have embedded in the department(s) you lead?*

Indeed, and I am proud of the fact that I started my international career behind a desk in the INTERPOL National Central Bureau, and five years there was certainly enough time to get to grips with every detail of the organisation. After a few years of detour, but not leaving the international field, I also managed the INTERPOL National Central Bureau Budapest. It was a great success for me when I was elected to the INTERPOL European Committee in 2012 for a four-year term, three of which I was chairing the meetings of the Committee. I then applied to become a member of the INTERPOL Executive Committee, where I was elected in 2016. If it can be said that this was even more significant, as only 13 members out of 195 countries are elected to the membership, it is the most important decision-making body in INTERPOL, and no one from Hungary has ever been elected to this body before. In my career as a police officer, I have spent nearly thirty years in the international field and I have found that the knowledge I have acquired gives me a much broader perspective, allowing me to look beyond one country or even a narrow region and to see things from a global perspective. I learned a lot of techniques abroad that were not

used or given other priorities in our country at that time. I have of course tried to adapt these to the domestic context. What we often find is that information from other continents is more limited and very often the problem there may be geographically specific or society specific, so that it is not even present in our own environment. In many cases, we also see phenomena and trends that have simply not yet reached us.

The personal contact system also has its own specificity. In this area, we need to be more open, active and proactive. Just as in everyday life and in working relations, personal contact can improve quality and speed up resolution, because the trust required for police work is even more important here, especially in cases where external factors (political, cultural, religious, linguistic differences) may call this into question. Whether one is able to communicate directly with a partner through an interpreter or through knowledge of the language in question makes a difference, so it makes a difference whether we are actually or figuratively ‘speaking the same language’.

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