

IN MEMORIAM

In Memory of Professor László Valki (1941-2022)

A Pioneering Figure in the Teaching and Research of Public International Law in Hungary

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On behalf of the Department of International Law of ELTE Law School, we would like to pay our respects to Professor Emeritus László Valki in this brief obituary. We bid farewell to the former professor and head of our Department, one of the most influential figures in the field of international law in Hungary, our former boss, our colleague, but above all, our dear friend.

László Valki, Laci, as we called him as his colleagues and his former students, was a unique person and an outstanding individual both as a scholar, as a mentor, and as a friend. As a scholar, he was a pioneer in three disciplines, as a mentor he established a school of public international law in Hungary that by now matches its leading counterparts in Europe and beyond, and as a private individual, he set an example that will accompany us and shape our personality for the rest of our lives.

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1. The Rich Life and Legacy of László Valki

László Valki has made a lasting and outstanding impact as a scholar, a professor, a truly dedicated supporter of talented early career researchers, a head of department, an international legal advisor and a well-known figure in national media, who enthusiastically sought to educate the wider public about basic notions and rules of international law and international relations. In these brief remarks, we can only highlight a few of the several milestones in his rich career. Born in 1941 in Budapest, he graduated from the ELTE University, Faculty of Law in 1964. He then worked for almost sixty years at the Department of International Law, and for twenty-five of those decisive years he made his mark as Head of Department.

His academic work has always been forward-looking: in 1975 he defended his doctoral thesis concerning the organization and decision-making system of the Common Market,¹ and in 1985 he obtained his academic doctor of sciences title² with his thesis on the social character of international law.³ In 1990, he launched an international research group to study post-Cold War relations, the results of which have been published in several journal articles that are important references in English-language literature.⁴ In 1999, he established the NATO Information and Research Centre in Budapest and edited three books on the political-military-international legal aspects of the wars in Kosovo, Bosnia, and Iraq.⁵

Although László Valki was an international lawyer to the core, he was never satisfied with studying only the realm of positive law, but was always interested in the wider political, historical, economic and geopolitical background of international law. Consequently, he always interpreted and examined international law in its social context. His most engaging lectures and discussions persuasively introduced his students and his colleagues to his intellectually most exciting approach to understanding and analyzing international law.

Besides developing a rich academic career, László Valki also practiced international law in various ways. In 1989-1990 he was a member of the advisory board of the Németh government, in 1990 he participated as an expert in the Hungarian-Soviet troop withdrawal negotiations, and between 1993-1997 he represented Hungary before the ICJ in the *Gabčikovo-Nagymaros Project case*. His work was recognized with the Albert Szent-Györgyi Prize in 1993, the ELTE Silver

- 1 László Valki, *A Közös Piac szervezeti és döntéshozatali rendszere*, Közgazdasági és Jogi Kiadó (KJK), Budapest, 1977, 490 p.
- 2 Doctor Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae, DSc.
- 3 László Valki, *A nemzetközi jog társadalmi természete*, Közgazdasági és Jogi Kiadó (KJK), Budapest, 1989, 370 p.
- 4 See e.g. László Valki, 'Legal Surrealism: The War Against Iraq', *Foreign Policy Review*, Vol. 2, Issue 1, 2003, pp. 17-29; László Valki, 'Hungary's Threat Perceptions and Defence Policy', in Tom Lansford & Blagovest Tashev (eds.), *Transatlantic Security Dilemmas: Old Europe, New Europe and the US*, Ashgate Publishing, Aldershot, 2004, pp. 239-258; László Valki, 'The Kosovo war and the norms of international law', *The Military Law and the Law of War Review*, Vol. 41, Issue 1-2, 2002, pp. 195-218.
- 5 László Andor et al., *Irak – háborúra ítélve*, Zrínyi, Budapest, 2004; József Juhász et al., *Kinek a békéje? Háború és béke a volt Jugoszláviában*, Zrínyi, Budapest, 2003; József Juhász et al., *Koszovó – egy válság anatómiája*, Osiris, Budapest, 2000.

Jubilee Medal in 1998, the Order of Merit of the Republic of Hungary in 2006 and the gold degree of the Pro Universitate Medal.

2. The Scholar

László Valki always taught his students not to take anything for granted, to constantly strive to reveal and understanding the legal and extra-legal reasons for every phenomenon. He always interpreted and examined law in its social context. His lectures were highly coveted among students, because one could be sure that every year Professor Valki would give an up-to-date lecture based on most recent information regarding both theory and practice. He had a unique ability to pass on his breadth of knowledge with such an eloquent yet elegantly accessible style, which became one of the defining characteristics of his lectures.

He has published in Hungarian, English, German, French and Russian concerning a wide range of topics of international law and international relations. He was one of the first Hungarian scholars who studied the law of the European Communities, starting already during Hungary's communist regime; up to decades later, when Hungary became a candidate country, when he analyzed the relationship between the laws of Hungary and the EU.⁶

He was passionately interested in the interrelationship between international law and international relations, and in issues that lie at the crossroads of law and power, such as statehood, sovereignty, sanctions, self-determination and humanitarian intervention.⁷

He was also keen to study the relationship between history and international law,⁸ security policy,⁹ and in the impact of political philosophy on international law

6 László Valki, *A KGST és a Közös Piac szervezeti rendszerének összehasonlító elemzése*, MTA Közgazdaságtudományi Intézet, Budapest, 1982; László Valki, 'A közvetlenül választott Európai Parlament', *Külpolitika: a Magyar Külügyi Intézet elméleti-politikai folyóirata*, Vol. 7, Issue 4, 1980, pp. 17-33; László Valki, 'Az Európai Unióhoz csatlakozó államok szuverenitása', *Európai Tükör*, Vol. 2, Issue 3, 1997, pp. 85-91.

7 László Valki, 'Válaszolhatott volna másként Hága? A Nemzetközi Bíróság tanácsadó véleménye Koszovó függetlenségéről', *Külügyi Szemle*, Vol. 9, Issue 4, 2010, pp. 46-62; László Valki, 'Az államelismerés mint politikai fegyver – Jugoszlávia felbomlásának tanulságai', *Külügyi Szemle*, Vol. 1, Issue 2, 2002, pp. 121-142; László Valki, 'A koszovói válság és a humanitárius intervenció', *Acta Humana*, Vol. 13, Issue 46-47, 2002, pp. 136-165; László Valki, 'A nemzetközi konfliktusok és a nemzetközi jogi szankciók', *Külpolitika: a Magyar Külügyi Intézet elméleti-politikai folyóirata*, Vol. 10, Issue 2, 1983, pp. 58-72.

8 László Valki, 'A második világháború hatása a nemzetközi jog fejlődésére', in György Földes & István Feitl (eds.), *1945 a világtörténelemben: Milyen jövőt képzelt magának a világ? Tanulmányok*, Napvilág, Budapest, 2005, pp. 266-287.

9 László Valki, 'A kubai rakétaválság – a „katonai globalizáció” tudomásul vétele', in András Blahó (ed.), *Nemzetgazdaság, regionalitás, világgazdaság: Tanulmányok Simai Mihály akadémikus 70. születésnapja tiszteletére*, Aula, Budapest, 2000, pp. 183-190; László Valki, 'Hungary's Road to NATO', *Hungarian Quarterly*, Vol. 40, Issue 154, 1999, pp. 3-19; László Valki, 'Hungary and the Future of European Security', in Stephen J. Blank (ed.), *European Security and NATO Enlargement: A View from Central Europe*, Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, Carlisle, 1998, pp. 91-118; László Valki, 'Russia and the Security of East-Central Europe', *European Security*, Vol. 5, Issue 3, 1996, pp. 448-469.

and international relations.¹⁰ He was one of the few people who could write with wisdom and confidence about the crisis in the Middle East,¹¹ or the reform of the UN.¹² He condemned the unjustified use of armed force, in particular aggression, whether committed by the US against Iraq in 2003¹³ or by Russia in February 2022 against Ukraine.

Professor Valki also had a special attitude towards his colleagues and students. He always showed remarkable humility in listening to everyone from whom he thought one could learn something new. He was always concerned with deepening his knowledge of the world, but not for his own sake, but because he genuinely believed that the world could be discovered, analyzed, understood and ultimately influenced.

Accordingly, László Valki was never interested in the status or formal rank of the source of knowledge or information. He carefully listened to anyone who could bring in new ideas or supply new insights. More than once, therefore, he mentioned that a good conversation with bright students meant much more to him than an academic conference.

3. The Mentor

One of the most important features of the school created by László Valki lies in its student-centered nature. He showed us an example where the professor not only refuses to cut short on the time needed to answer the questions from students, but also specifically seeks the company of motivated and talented students, in the strong belief that one may learn something from others every day. As a result of his genuine interest and openness, a great number of students regularly stayed after class to talk to him about the topic of the lecture, and applied in very high numbers to write their master or doctoral dissertations under his supervision. He took every talented student equally seriously.

The Department of International Law has seen a vibrant community and wide-ranging research activities under his leadership as Head of Department. He established a NATO research center in cooperation with the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, which was hosted by the Department, in addition, he launched a most popular elective course entitled 'Foreign Affairs Discussion Group', which aimed to introduce law students to the world of international relations and international diplomacy by inviting leading experts, including ambassadors and diplomats, to an

- 10 László Valki, 'Egy eszme anyagi erővé válik: Neokonok a hidegháború utáni világtrendről', *Acta Facultatis Politico-Iuridicae Universitatis Scientiarum Budapestinensis de Rolando Eötvös Nominatae*, Vol. 47, 2010, pp. 181-194.
- 11 László Valki, 'Israel and the UN: Some False Beliefs', in August Reinisch & Ursula Kriebaum (eds.), *Law of International Relations: Liber Amicorum Hanspeter Neuhold*, Eleven International Publishing, The Hague, 2007, pp. 437-446.
- 12 László Valki, 'Az ENSZ-reformok sorsa', *Külügyi Szemle*, Vol. 4, Issue 3-4, 2005, pp. 95-111.
- 13 László Valki, 'The 11 September Terrorist Attacks and the Rules of International Law', *European Integration Studies*, Vol. 1, Issue 1, 2002, pp. 29-37; László Valki, 'A 2001. szeptember 11-i terrortámadás és az önvédelem joga', *Acta Universitatis Szegediensis: Acta Juridica et Politica*, Vol. 61, Tomus 1-26, 2002, pp. 419-429.

informal and engaged discussion with the students on a weekly basis. The course remained highly popular during its decades-long history.

It was also during these years that ELTE University's team became the first Hungarian team to compete in the Jessup International Law Moot Court Competition in Washington D.C. and the Telders International Law Moot Court Competition in The Hague in the 1980s. These talent support activities culminated in the 2019 European and World Championship awards won by the teams of ELTE University at both competitions.¹⁴

Professor Valki's dedication to and excellence in the teaching of public international law is perhaps best illustrated by the fact that many of his former students have become international law academics themselves or made a career in the practice of international law. He was a devoted scholar and educator, who truly believed that teaching was an act of love.

4. Laci, the Private Person

His spectacular and outstandingly rich academic career only partly explains the place that László Valki occupies in the hearts of his colleagues at the Department of International Law at ELTE, and indeed in the entire community of Hungarian international lawyers. For László Valki, the scholar, professor and adviser, cannot be separated from Laci, the private person, whose research and teaching virtues stemmed from, and were inseparable from, his human values.

When we think of Laci, the first thing that comes to mind is his balanced personality and serenity that radiated from him, and which did not leave him during his severe illness or even on his deathbed.

We are reminded of his reliability with which he always delivered his works on time and with a great attention to all details, including linguistic subtleties, whether it was a textbook chapter or an input to the written proceedings of Hungary in the *Gabčíkovo-Nagymaros* case. We remember the gentleman who was never late, always dressed elegantly as appropriate for the occasion, and who always had a kind, personal word for everyone. Who kept track not only of our professional progress, but also the major milestones of all of our family members, knowing them by name even though he may not have met all our children in person. And who bore everyone in mind, as Laci regularly engaged in thoughtful conversations with his colleagues at the faculty and the administrative staff, as he was genuinely interested in our personal and family matters too without ever being intrusive or indiscreet.

Laci's strength, charisma and exemplary life perhaps rooted in aiming at Aristotle's 'golden mean' that provided harmony not only for himself, but also everyone around him. He was a profound humanist who was genuinely moved by human suffering and tragedy. Despite this, or rather because of it, he was also aware of the limits of international law, which he never transgressed. He firmly

14 Gabor Kajtár & Katalin Sulyok, 'From International Law in Books to International Law in Action – ELTE Law School's Jessup and Telders victories in 2019', *Hungarian Yearbook of International Law and European Law*, Vol. 8, 2020, pp. 561-570.

believed that international law serves social needs, and that it can only achieve such an aim if it does not lose its normativity.

Laci was very serious about his discipline and about being thorough and well prepared, but he never posed or pontificated. He was frequently invited as a guest expert to various national media to provide background to developments in international affairs, but his media appearances were never about him, but about the important message he wanted to convey. He was always modest despite the *Zeitgeist* of self-aggrandizement. Laci was a strong leader who was never seen to be irritated or nervous. He truly loved and appreciated good humor and good jokes, but he was never joking around.

Laci was very disciplined in his work, in fighting for a good cause, and in always seeking to maintain a very high quality in all his writings. At the same time, he was also a warm, caring, affectionate, and sensitive person. He remained to the end of his life, including the last weeks and days, the same disciplined and loving man, who was attentive and genuinely interested in others, and who bore his physical suffering with the noblest dignity and patience until his very last moments.

László Valki taught us humanity, dignity, professionalism, and intellectual autonomy. It was not only his extensive and rich scholarly work, but also his whole personality that made him an influential role model for all those who came to know him. These are the reasons why he was and, continues to be, a central figure in Hungarian international law scholarship.

We have lost a mentor and a cherished friend. But we try to take comfort in the fact that Laci must have known what we now pledge here yet again. That he will live with us every day, because he has already been with us for a long time in all our consultations and in every advice we give to our students, in all our words of encouragement, and our handshakes. We will strive to live up to his example and legacy in our daily work. We feel privileged and truly grateful for having him among us.