

By Ilona Gizińska

The Hungarian Presidency of the EU Council has sparked controversy for months, primarily due to the conflict between Budapest and the EU institutions and the pro-Russian orientation of Viktor Orbán's government. Some concerns were confirmed by the diplomatic actions of the Hungarian prime minister (as part of his so-called peace mission) undertaken shortly after Hungary assumed the presidency. The debate surrounding these actions has significantly overshadowed the substantive goals of the presidency outlined in the official programme. One symbolically significant consequence of Prime Minister Orbán's foreign visits under the EU presidency banner is the diminished status of informal meetings organised by Budapest. The programme itself focuses on strengthening the EU's competitiveness, defense, and cohesion policies, combating illegal migration, addressing demographic challenges, and improving the situation of farmers. The programme clearly attempts to avoid topics that are problematic from the perspective of the divergent approaches of Brussels and Budapest, but which still remain crucial in the EU's context.

Circumstances of Hungary's EU presidency

On 1 July 2024 Hungary assumed the rotating presidency of the Council of the European Union. This six-month term is the last in the trio with Spain and Belgium and coincides with the end of the EU's five-year legislative cycle. The new European Commission (EC) is expected to be appointed in early autumn and will need time to set its priorities and establish a work plan. As a result, Hungary's presidency is not expected to be a period of intense legislative activity. Despite this, it has proven highly controversial due to Budapest's conflicts with the EU institutions, its practice of vetoing initiatives, and its challenges to EU policies on issues such as support for Ukraine, Ukraine's EU accession, and relations with Russia and China.

Over the past year, there were even discussions about revoking Hungary's presidency. In June 2023, the European Parliament (EP) passed a resolution on "violations of the rule of law and fundamental rights in Hungary and the freezing of EU funds," which questioned Hungary's ability to "credibly fulfil" its role. Despite efforts by the EP and critical statements from many EU politicians, Hungary's presidency went ahead. This is unprecedented, given that agenda-setting and the chairing of ministerial meetings have been entrusted to a member state subject to the procedure under Article 7 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) and the conditionality mechanism, under which part of the Cohesion

Fund has been frozen.

Start of the presidency in the shadow of Orbán's "peace mission"

In the first days after Hungary assumed the EU Council presidency, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán embarked on a series of foreign visits, which he termed a "peace mission". He visited Ukraine on July 2, Russia on July 5, China on July 8, and finally, from July 9-11 the United States, where attended the NATO summit and met with Donald Trump. The most controversial of these visits, especially among EU leaders and institutions, was his secretive meeting with Vladimir Putin in Moscow, which was kept under wraps until the last minute. European Council President Charles Michel and High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell emphasised that Hungary's rotating EU presidency does not authorise Orbán to conduct talks with Russia on behalf of Brussels, stressing that the meeting with Putin was purely a bilateral engagement. Orbán leveraged Hungary's EU presidency to create the illusion he was representing the entire European Union, despite the fact that, since the Lisbon Treaty came into force in 2009, this role no longer exists for the rotating presidency.

The misuse of the presidency's mandate sparked a debate within the EU about how to manage Hungary's leadership over the next six months, with some even suggesting Hungary's term be shortened. On July 10, a meeting was held in Brussels to discuss Orbán's visits to Kyiv, Moscow, and Beijing, and was attended by diplomats from 25 EU member states. With the exception of Slovakia, whose representative remained silent, all attendees agreed that Hungary had overstepped its mandate, though no decisions on consequences were made. In protest against Orbán's diplomatic actions regarding Ukraine, several countries, including Sweden, Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Germany and Denmark, announced they would downgrade the level of their ministerial representation at EU Council meetings chaired by Hungary. The EP also signalled its disapproval by not inviting Viktor Orbán to the inaugural session of the new parliamentary term on July 16. Furthermore, the EC announced its intention to boycott Hungary's presidency by not sending commissioners to informal EU Council meetings organised by Hungary. On July 22, Josep Borrell, the EU's chief diplomat, announced that the planned EU foreign ministers' summit on August 28-29 would be relocated from Budapest to Brussels — a clear diplomatic rebuke. As a result, Hungary's presidency has already generated significant controversy, overshadowing its substantive programme proposals.

Presidency programme – priorities and key detailed issues

On June 19, Secretary of State for International Communications Zoltán Kovács, along with

Minister for EU Affairs Janos Bóka, presented the detailed programme of the Hungarian Presidency. The substantive issues outlined in the programme had previously been communicated in very general terms and were not part of Fidesz's electoral campaign for the European Parliament elections. Therefore, the programme's unveiling attracted significant interest. The official slogan of the presidency, "Make Europe Great Again", garnered substantial media attention. According to its authors, the slogan is intended to evoke a proactive presidency and the pursuit of restoring Europe's international competitiveness. However, it is difficult to interpret this slogan other than as a direct reference to Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign slogan, especially given Viktor Orbán's strong support for Trump's potential re-election in the upcoming fall elections. The presidency's logo features the Rubik's Cube, a Hungarian invention celebrating its 50th anniversary, symbolising both the complexity of the EU's realities and representing the 27 member states (the same number as the cube's pieces).

Priorities of the Hungarian presidency:

- New European "Pact for Competitiveness" – Aimed at mitigating the economic challenges of recent years (high inflation and energy prices, rising public debt, fragmentation of international supply chains) by enhancing European productivity, stimulating growth, and supporting small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).
- Strengthening European Defense Policy – Focused on bolstering defense capabilities, crisis management, and the technological-industrial base of the defense sector, in light of "ongoing and emerging conflicts on the continent and worldwide" (notably, there is no mention of Russia's aggression against Ukraine).
- Consistent and Criteria-Based Enlargement Policy – Recognised as one of the EU's most successful policies, though the priority does not include plans for the so-called "accession trio" (Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia). Only the Western Balkans are mentioned, including a planned EU-Western Balkans Summit. There is also no discussion of EU reforms in preparation for admitting new members.
- Reducing Illegal Migration – Emphasises the migratory pressure on countries with external EU borders and the need for cooperation with neighbouring and third countries (countries of origin and transit for migrants), as well as combating smuggling as a criminal activity. However, there is no reference to the EU Migration Pact or the Asylum Directive.
- Shaping Future Cohesion Policy – Promotes strategic debate on furthering EU convergence in the traditional sense of reducing regional disparities in development.
- EU Agricultural Policy Directed Towards Farmers – Advocates for a more farmer-centred approach, recognising them as the guarantors of EU food security who face

numerous challenges (decreased competitiveness due to climate change, stricter production rules, and increased imports from third countries). It calls for the goals of the European Green Deal (EGD) to be better balanced, the stabilisation of agricultural markets, and ensuring a decent standard of living for farmers.

- Addressing Demographic Challenges – Although the Hungarian presidency has limited competencies in this area, it plans to direct the EC’s attention to demographic issues (particularly low birth rates) in terms of the stability of public finances and the EU’s competitiveness.

Key Detailed Issues:

- EU Values and the Rule of Law: The programme emphasises the importance of adhering to the rule of law by monitoring national institutions and broadly defending democratic values, though it does not specify examples of violations. It also highlights the need for candidate countries to respect the rights of national minorities (referencing Hungary’s dispute with Ukraine over the Hungarian minority in Zakarpattia) and stresses the importance of combating antisemitism and preserving Jewish cultural heritage in Europe.
- Strategic Agenda 2024-2029: The programme commits to initiating the Strategic Agenda for 2024-2029, with a focus on fiscal discipline, the need to explore new budgetary resources (without specifying what these might be), and combating tax evasion.
- Energy and Climate: Energy and climate-related topics are prominently featured, especially the coordination of the implementation of the “Fit for 55” package as part of the EU’s goal of achieving climate neutrality. Hungary promotes the development of nuclear energy and the use of geothermal energy, biogas, hydrogen, and biomass, as well as the expansion of transmission networks.
- EU Relations with Third Countries: The presidency’s agenda places significant emphasis on the EU’s relations with third countries, notably omitting any mention of relations with Russia. Surprisingly, a substantial focus is placed on the partnership with Turkey, mainly concerning energy security and migration challenges. Regarding China, the agenda reiterates the familiar call for a pragmatic approach and economic cooperation. In addition to the EU-Western Balkans Summit, Hungary will also organise the European Political Cooperation (EPC) Summit, scheduled shortly after the US elections in November, indicating how much Hungary’s position, often at odds with the Democratic administration, depends on the outcome. Currently, the programme only touches on transatlantic relations in passing.
- Military Engagement in the Sahel: The programme extensively justifies the need for

military engagement in the Sahel region, where Hungary plans to send a military contingent as part of anti-terrorism efforts. The mission in Chad is controversial as it stands in contradiction to Hungary's "peaceful" stance on the war in Ukraine.

- Other Initiatives: Hungary also plans to engage in a range of actions outside the mainstream political debate during its EU Council presidency. These include enhancing the competitiveness of European higher education institutions, the "Pharmaceutical Package" (aimed at improving the accessibility and affordability of medicines), developing a circular economy, and improving the work-life balance.

Overall assessment of the programme and predictions for the presidency

The Hungarian presidency programme can be described as broad in scope but superficial and lacking technical detail regarding the implementation of the proposed solutions. The selection of topics suggests an effort by the authors to avoid addressing issues that are crucial from the EU perspective but problematic due to the particularly divergent views of Brussels and Budapest. This approach is seen clearly in the numerous ambiguities in the programme, such as the vague definition of "breaches of democratic principles" that Hungary expects other countries to adhere to during its presidency.

One notably omitted issue is the war between Russia and Ukraine. The programme only addresses it peripherally, focusing on war refugees and the rebuilding of Ukraine, which contrasts with the Belgian presidency's programme that explicitly condemned Russian aggression and called for further sanctions against it. The thematic selectivity of the Hungarian presidency programme is also seen in the absence of direct mentions of Eastern enlargement or the "Migration and Asylum Pact." This omission indicates that Hungary maintains a firm stance on these issues and is unwilling to change its position.

In most areas covered by the agenda (e.g., cohesion policy, EU finances, defence, energy), Hungary operates within the already established EU policy frameworks, without making significant changes or introducing many new initiatives. The attempt to subtly introduce a Hungarian perspective, which diverges from Brussels' approach, is most apparent in international cooperation. Here, Hungary ignores the adopted de-risking strategy and advocates for closer economic partnerships with China. This generally cautious and conventional approach in relation to the EU mainstream is also reflected in the narrative of the programme — there are none of the anti-EU statements which were previously common in Hungarian government communications. The abandonment of extreme rhetoric may reflect an intention for Hungary's presidency to be as constructive and controversy-free as possible. This intention is underscored by the commitment to act as an "honest broker" during its time presiding over the Council of the EU.

Recommendations for Poland

From the perspective of Poland's upcoming presidency in the EU Council, which follows the Hungary's, it is beneficial to continue focusing on aspects of the Hungarian programme that align with Poland's strategic interests, especially those that transcend the differences in security approaches between Poland and Hungary. Key areas to consider include the agricultural, environmental and energy sectors:

1. Both Hungary and Poland seek to balance strategic goals related to the EGD with the standard of living of farmers. Both countries are actively working to stabilise local agricultural markets affected by international political developments.
2. There are also shared interests between Hungary and Poland in the green transition process. This includes the need to decarbonise heating systems (including district heating), promote the domestic production of green gases, expand the electromobility sector, and develop Carbon Capture and Storage (CCS) technologies.
3. Although Hungary is unique among EU countries in its intention to expand nuclear power with Russian collaboration, both Hungary and Poland share a commitment to supporting nuclear energy within the EU. They are both part of the so-called 'nuclear alliance' and recognise the crucial role of nuclear power in the decarbonisation process and in ensuring secure and stable energy supplies.

By focusing on these areas, Poland can build on the momentum of Hungary's presidency while aligning with its own strategic objectives, thus fostering continuity and cooperation in key sectors of mutual interest.



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