By Viktória Lilla Pató

This analysis examines the priorities of Hungary and Poland during their presidency of the Council of the European Union, highlighting shared interests and differing approaches. During its 2025 presidency, Poland would focus on strengthening transatlantic relations, EU enlargement, and achieving a just energy transition, while Hungary primarily aims to enhance European competitiveness, strengthen energy security, promote enlargement and neighborhood policy, and develop the EU’s defense capabilities. The paper also provides recommendations for potential cooperation between the two countries to effectively represent Central and Eastern European interests.

Introduction

Hungary and Poland, as two important members of the Central and Eastern European bloc, play a significant role in the political life of the European Union. With a population four times that of Hungary and an area three times larger, Poland falls into the category of large countries. Hungary’s GDP in 2023 was 217 billion USD, with a per capita GDP of around 22,000 USD, which matches that of Poland; however, due to its territorial and population advantage, Poland’s GDP approached 750 billion USD in 2023. Despite these differences, the two nations share numerous common interests and identity elements due to their historical past and geographical location. The V4 cooperation and the Three Seas Initiative further strengthen regional cooperation with political, economic, and social dimensions. Since the Russia-Ukraine war, relations between Poland and Hungary have weakened compared to previous years, a trend intensified by the government restructuring following the 2023 Polish parliamentary elections. While Poland found a way out of the EU’s rule of law debate, Hungary remains affected, leading to significant economic impacts through the partial freezing of cohesion funds and withholding of the RRF. Starting in early 2024, Poland has advocated for a stronger Europe and transatlantic-friendly policy, preparing for its EU Council presidency beginning on January 1, 2025, as the first member of the Polish-Danish-Cypriot trio, led by former European Council President Donald Tusk. Hungary took over the baton from Belgium on July 1, 2024, as the last country in the Spanish-Belgian-Hungarian presidency trio, whose effectiveness was strongly influenced by the institutional turnover and the summer recess of eurocracy.

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Advocacy during the Presidency

The rotating presidency of the Council is strategically important not only because it allows the presiding country to influence the EU's political agenda but also because it provides an opportunity to advance national priorities and interests on the European stage. The presidency gives Hungary a chance to improve relations with EU partners and consolidate the rule of law debate. Additionally, Hungary seeks an agreement on Hungarian universities excluded from directly managed EU funds,[1] which would be an important step in supporting domestic scientific life, as the December 2022 European Commission decision restricting access to some RDI funds remains a challenge.[2] Resolving this issue is particularly important for the European political agenda, as the second von der Leyen Commission aims to ensure the free flow of science and knowledge as a fifth freedom of the single market.[3] However, if 21 higher education institutions and their students in one Member State remain excluded from EU mobility and RDI programs, this goal remains an empty phrase.

Poland and Hungary both joined the Club 20 years ago, and thus belong to the widening category regarding directly managed EU funds—such as Horizon Europe, the largest RDI fund. Preparing for the next MFF, the two countries can jointly advocate for further strengthening of the widening conditions. A good example of this is the "Declaration of 15," signed by ministers from the region, insisting that FP10 retains the "Widening participation and spreading excellence" component and continues to promote research excellence in the EU.[4]

Analysis of Polish and Hungarian priorities

Hungary presented its 2024 EU presidency priorities on June 18, 2024, by the Minister for European Union Affairs, under the motto "Make Europe Great Again."[5] Hungary describes itself as an "honest broker" in international relations and aims to pursue a policy of economic neutrality. At the start of the presidency, the Hungarian Prime Minister embarked on a peace mission, which was not positively received by all Member States and was criticized by the EU.

Hungary identified seven priorities that align with the objectives of the reports on the EU internal market by Enrico Letta in 2024[6] and on EU competitiveness by Mario Draghi[7]; however, the tools differ on some points. Poland's priorities were unknown at the time of writing, but based on the policies and stance of the government led by Donald Tusk, we can infer areas likely to feature on the Polish

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political agenda.

Migration policy

Poland and Hungary are geographically similarly affected by the issue of migration, as some of their borders are also the EU's external borders. The two countries' migration policies differ from the EU's central approach, opposing the mandatory quota system for distributing immigrants among Member States, instead supporting voluntary contributions.[8] The aim of the Polish and Hungarian leadership is to combat illegal migration, strengthen border security, and address the root causes of migration, particularly through development aid in African and Middle Eastern regions. According to Viktor Orbán, cooperation on migration is important, but Member States have the sovereign right to shape their immigration policy. Donald Tusk retained his predecessor's official stance and rejected the new pact, and on October 15, Poland adopted its migration strategy for the period 2025–2030.[9]

On August 5, 2024, the Commission issued Implementing Decision 2024/2150 on the Migration Pact, which requires Hungary to register 7,716 border crossers from June 2026 to October 2027, and Poland—highest number from the Baltic region—to register 1,564, while Denmark, which will follow the Poles in the presidency, is exempt from the Decision.[10] The place of registration is important because if another EU Member State does not admit the registered person, they must remain in the registering country if they wish to stay within the EU. This will lead to a significant increase in the number of relocated migrants. In this area, the two countries can jointly represent the strengthening of the external dimension of migration, such as effective cooperation with third countries, developing innovative solutions in asylum rules, and the importance of EU funding for external border protection.

Enlargement policy

Poland strongly supports Moldova and Ukraine's EU accession process and pays particular attention to strengthening cooperation between the EU and Serbia.[11] This area is also important for Hungary, which pursues a merit-based enlargement policy, particularly promoting Western Balkan integration and organizing an EU-Western Balkans summit during its presidency. The two countries agree that fulfilling the Copenhagen criteria is essential and that enlargement objectives should consider the internal market's capacity to absorb new members. Poland places greater emphasis on Ukraine's accession, while Hungary focuses on the

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Western Balkans and Serbia and considers the protection of national minorities important in accession negotiations.

Competitiveness and Cohesion

Hungary has announced a policy of economic neutrality, while Poland supports following the EU's transatlantic direction.[12] Poland focuses on linking industrial policy to common trade policy, access to critical raw materials needed for the green transition, and the challenges of energy-intensive industries.[13] The Polish and Hungarian governments agree that competitiveness and innovation are fundamental to strengthening the internal market and simplifying EU regulations and reducing administrative burdens, which currently limit the potential of European companies, especially SMEs. Thus, cohesion policy is a central element of competitiveness, based on convergence between regions. In line with these values, Hungary's main goal is the adoption of the Competitiveness Pact, which could serve as a basis for Poland's presidency to establish the Competitiveness Fund. Poland will play a more significant role in advancing legal dossiers as the institutional cycle change will be completed by then. During the Polish presidency, the Competitiveness Fund, along with the Clean Industry Agreement, the Chemical Package (REACH simplification), a new Circular Economy Bill, public procurement reform, and the Clean Trade and Investment Partnership are also likely to be on the agenda.

Energy

Poland advocates for reducing the economic burdens of fossil energy, especially coal, and delaying the implementation of ETS2, rejecting its current form, as the system would significantly increase heating costs.[14] During its 2025 EU presidency, the Polish government is expected to push for ETS2 modification and the national scheduling of the energy transition. Hungary prioritizes the development of renewable energy sources, especially geothermal and nuclear energy, as well as diversifying energy supplies, with the development of the gas network also important to the country.

Recommendations for cooperation areas between the two presidencies

1. Cohesion policy: Joint support for cohesion policy reform, advocating cohesion

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protection during MFF negotiations to promote territorial convergence within the EU.

2. Competitiveness: Coordinating between the two presidencies on the creation of the Competitiveness Fund, jointly defining the strategic directions for implementing the Competitiveness Pact, with particular emphasis on developing SME competitiveness, on which both countries share the same position.

3. Migration, border protection: Supporting border protection investments and jointly opposing mandatory quotas.

4. Just Energy Transition: Cooperation in the green transition could contribute to the economic and environmental sustainability of the Central and Eastern European region.

5. R&I: The Central and Eastern European region draws down fewer directly managed EU funds than Western Europe, which is a significant challenge. Hungary and Poland have a common interest in increasing R&I funding absorption. The two countries share the goal of maintaining the “widening country” category and increasing the “widening budget,” especially during negotiations for the next budgetary cycle. It would be essential to maintain a balance between cohesion funds and directly managed EU funds and represent the interests of the Central and Eastern European region in terms of strengthening widening.

Although they differ in territorial size and population, Hungary and Poland, as states of the Central and Eastern European region and, due to their geographical position, as countries forming part of the EU’s external borders, face similar challenges. It is an exciting question whether the above policy recommendations can move beyond high-level political battles and whether substantial cooperation will emerge between the two presidencies, which is a rare, yet excellent opportunity for representing the region’s interests.

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