

Part I

Hungary in the European Union: 2004–2024: from the Accession to the 2024 EU Presidency

What Can We Expect from the 2024 Hungarian EU Presidency?

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Abstract

This paper examines the political and policy framework of the 2024 Hungarian EU Presidency, with a focus on the factors influencing its agenda and the key policy issues it aims to address. The 2024 Hungarian EU Presidency marks Hungary's second term as the rotating president of the Council of the European Union. Drawing on the experience gained during its Presidency in 2011, Hungary faces numerous challenges in shaping the EU agenda amidst geopolitical uncertainties and institutional changes. The paper begins by outlining the rotating presidency system, emphasizing its role as an 'honest broker' in facilitating EU legislative processes and fostering cooperation among Member States. It then analyses the 2011 Hungarian EU Presidency. The paper further discusses the factors shaping the 2024 Hungarian EU Presidency, including the institutional cycle change following the European elections and the geopolitical context marked by the Russian-Ukrainian conflict and Middle East crises. It also examines the seven key policy issues identified by Hungary for its EU Presidency, such as strengthening competitiveness, addressing demographic challenges, promoting enlargement, shaping cohesion policy, strengthening defence policy, combating irregular migration, and a farmer-centered EU agricultural policy. The manuscript was closed on 28 June (before the beginning of the Hungarian EU Presidency).

Keywords: EU Presidency, Presidency of the Council of the European Union, Hungary, rotating presidency, joint presidency programme

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1. Introduction

On 1 July 2024, Hungary will commence its second term as the rotating presidency of the Council of the European Union (2024 Hungarian EU Presidency), as the last country of the Spanish-Belgian-Hungarian presidency trio. The three Member States have collaborated on a Joint Presidency Programme¹ which was endorsed by the General Affairs Council on 27 June 2023.² In January 2025, Poland will assume the presidency following Hungary, as the initial member of the subsequent Polish-Danish-Cyprian trio.

During its Presidency, Hungary's task will be to shape the issues on the EU's agenda in the second half of 2024 in accordance with the common interests of the 27 Member States, acting as an 'honest broker'. While the scope for shaping the agenda is limited, there is an opportunity to advance issues that are significant from the Hungarian perspective.

Hungary already carried out an EU Presidency in 2011, thus the experience gained during that time can assist in the implementation of the 2024 Hungarian EU Presidency. However, this year the Hungarian government faces numerous additional challenges in relation to its Presidency. On one hand, in geopolitical terms, the Hungarian Presidency occurs during an extremely sensitive period. Not only the Russian aggression against Ukraine and the ongoing war, but also the security situation in the Middle East, especially the situation in Israel and Iran, may affect the Hungarian Presidency. Furthermore, the Hungarian government must anticipate and prepare for unforeseen crisis situations, too, that may arise in the second half of 2024. However, the Hungarian Presidency is also influenced by foreseeable factors, among which the most important is the renewal of the EU institutions following the European Parliament elections. This process, while limiting the Hungarian Presidency's scope of action in many aspects, also presents Budapest with extraordinary opportunities to participate in shaping EU politics. Hungary has also identified seven key policy issues that may be in the heart of its EU Presidency, namely promoting enlargement in the Western Balkan countries, combating illegal migration, shaping the

¹ 18-month Programme of the Council (1 July 2023 – 31 December 2024), Brussels, 20 June 2023, at <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-10597-2023-INIT/en/pdf>.

² General Affairs Council, 27 June 2023, at www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/gac/2023/06/27/?fbclid=IwAR3hvK8PEkAeyyIL2biKzqUSE2QdmdrYUMjtvYD0G2cC4cpcY0TDtdjCpCo.

future of cohesion policy, improving the EU's competitiveness, addressing demographic challenges in the continent, strengthening defence EU-level policy and the facilitating the adoption of the 2025 EU budget.

This article is a legal analysis and deliberately refrains from engaging with political debates and perspectives. Its focus is on the legal dimensions and the policy issues, aiming to provide an objective and comprehensive examination without being influenced by the prevailing political discourse.

2. Rotating Presidency of the Council of the European Union

The presidency of the Council of the European Union (Council) rotates among the EU Member States every six months, a system integral to the early stages of European integration. Every six months, a Member State assumes the presidency of the Council of the EU to facilitate the smooth operation of the EU legislative process. During its six-month term, the presidency leads meetings at all levels within the Council, ensuring the coherence of the EU's activities. Member States holding the presidency collaborate closely in groups of three, known as 'trios', a system introduced by the Lisbon Treaty in 2009. The trio establishes long-term objectives and formulates a common agenda that outlines the issues to be addressed by the Council over an 18-month period. Based on this agenda, each of the three countries develops its own more detailed six-month programme.

The presidency is responsible for advancing the Council's work on EU legislation, ensuring the consistency of the EU's agenda, orderly legislative processes, and cooperation among Member States. To achieve this, the presidency must act as an impartial and neutral mediator, an 'honest broker'.

The presidency has two primary functions. (i) Firstly, it plans and chairs meetings in the Council and its preparatory bodies. This includes chairing meetings of various Council configurations (excluding the Foreign Affairs Council) and the Council's preparatory bodies, such as the Permanent Representatives Committee (Coreper), as well as working parties and committees dealing with specific topics. It also organizes formal and informal meetings in Brussels and in the country holding the rotating presidency. This task involves not only planning and chairing Council meetings (including informal meetings held in Hungary) but also organizing and chairing Council working groups and preparatory committees, and coordinating the EU's position in international organizations on matters of internation-

al significance. The Council meets in ten different configurations, each chaired by the Member State holding the six-month presidency, except for the Foreign Affairs Council, which is chaired by the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy.

Council meetings are prepared by Council working groups and preparatory committees. Some of these are permanent but their actual number varies depending on the issues on the EU agenda. The Council currently has around 137 Council working groups and preparatory committees,³ including several with several sub-groups dealing with specific policy areas. There are currently around 32 Council working groups and preparatory committees with a permanent or elected President. In case of the latter, the rotating Presidency does not have a major role to play, but they also mean additional duties for the rotating Presidency, which is to ensure the coordination of the Council's decision-making as a whole. This means that overall Hungary will have to chair around 157 Council preparatory groups (including the sub-groups) in 2024.⁴

Additionally, it is customary for Council presidencies to host informal ministerial meetings, typically in the Member State holding the rotating presidency. These meetings, which are not formally considered Council meetings, aim to facilitate collective reflection and exchange of views in an informal setting.

(ii) Secondly, the presidency represents the Council in its interactions with other EU institutions, particularly the Commission and the European Parliament. It strives to reach agreement on legislative matters through trilogue negotiations, informal meetings, and Conciliation Committee sessions. The presidency closely collaborates with the President of the European Council and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy to achieve these objectives.

³ Council Decision 2009/937/EU of 1 December 2009 adopting the Council's Rules of Procedure, as amended by Decision (EU) 2022/1242 of 18 July 2022.

⁴ Csaba Zalai, 'Recruiting the Presidency Staff and Setting Up the Personnel Framework for the Hungarian EU Presidency', in Tibor Navracsics & Balázs Tárnok (eds.), *The 2024 Hungarian EU Presidency*, Ludovika University Press, 2024, pp. 117–126.

3. The 2011 Hungarian EU Presidency

Following the April 2010 elections, the newly formed Hungarian government had only six months to prepare for the Presidency. Concurrently, radical changes in domestic policies, rapid legislative activity, particularly in media law, and an unconventional economic policy aimed at deficit reduction, led to confusion and consternation. Additionally, the European economic crisis that began in 2008 posed significant challenges to the Hungarian Presidency.⁵

The Hungarian Presidency programme in 2011,⁶ under the slogan 'Strong Europe', outlined its Presidency tasks around four main priorities: (i) Promotion of economic growth through enhancing economic governance, focusing on job creation, and social inclusion: The Presidency aimed to promote the sustainability of public finances, fiscal discipline, and economic growth simultaneously. It spearheaded negotiations on the legislative 'six-pack' and initiated EU-level efforts to address Roma issues, resulting in the adoption of an EU Roma Strategy. (ii) Strengthening common policies while maintaining competitiveness and core values: Focus areas included internal cohesion, the future of the Common Agricultural Policy, energy security, water-related policies, and the Danube Region Strategy. (iii) Bringing the Union closer to its citizens: Objectives encompassed the preservation and promotion of cultural diversity, facilitating the accession of Romania and Bulgaria to the Schengen area, elaboration of a European refugee status, strengthening judicial and home affairs cooperation, and incorporating the Charter of Fundamental Rights into the Treaties. Migration and asylum issues increasingly dominated discussions, partly due to the 'Arab Spring' and Schengen expansion debates. (iv) Responsible continuation and credibility of the enlargement process, global engagement: Priorities included the conclusion of accession negotiations with Croatia, initiating accession talks with Iceland, promoting the effective functioning of the European External Action Service, and continuing the Eastern Partnership Program. Hungary prioritized concluding accession negotiations with Croatia, successfully closing negotiations on 30 June 2011, largely due to Hungarian diplomatic efforts.

5 'Hat hónap egy erősebb Európa szolgálatában. Áttekintés az Európai Unió Tanácsának magyar elnökségéről 2011. január–július', *Európai Tükör*, Vol. 16, Issue 7, 2011, pp. 94–155.

6 A magyar EU-elnökség prioritásai, at <https://2010-2014.kormany.hu/download/a/d1/1000/A%20magyar%20EU-elnökség%20prioritásai.pdf>.

Even though the 2011 Hungarian EU Presidency had to address unexpected events such as the Arab Spring and the Fukushima nuclear disaster, it achieved significant successes, including Croatia's accession, the adoption of the economic six-pack, the Danube Region Strategy, and the European Roma integration strategy. The 2011 Hungarian EU Presidency concluded with 103 closed legislative and non-legislative dossiers, 43 of which were agreed with the European Parliament, while the number of Council and Presidency conclusions adopted reached 60.⁷ A total of 261 Presidency meetings were held, of which 17 were ministerial meetings, 9 were ministerial conferences, 104 were senior official meetings and 131 were expert meetings. The Presidency hosted 120 civil society events in line with the Hungarian objectives. In Brussels, there were 2,300 working groups chaired by Hungary, and 45 official ministerial councils.⁸ Despite lacking relevant prior experience, Hungary prepared an ambitious Presidency programme, demonstrating capability in managing technical tasks during the government transition and maintaining institutional consensus on numerous policy issues.⁹

4. Factors Determining the 2024 Hungarian EU Presidency

4.1. Institutional Cycle Change

Among the foreseeable factors determining the work of the Hungarian EU Presidency, the most important one is the renewal of the EU institutions following the European Parliament (EP) elections, which occurred between 6 and 9 June 2024.

Informal discussions regarding EU leadership positions, including the President of the European Commission, the European Council, and the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, commenced immediately after the European elections. On 27 June, EU leaders agreed on the EU's political leadership for the next five years. Ursula von der Leyen was nominated as president of the European Commission, Kaja

7 Enikő Győri, 'The Context of the 2011 EU Presidency, Policy Successes and Challenges' in Navracsics & Tárnok (eds.) 2024, pp. 17–38.

8 Ferenc Robák, 'Experiences Gleaned from the Implementation of Hungary's 2011 EU Council Presidency' in Navracsics & Tárnok (eds.) 2024, pp. 39–48.

9 Ferenc Gazdag, 'Thirteen Years Later – Experiences from the 2011 Hungarian EU Presidency' in Navracsics & Tárnok (eds.) 2024, pp. 49–58.

Kallas as the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, while António Costa was elected as president of the European Council.¹⁰ Von der Leyen and Kallas's nominations were not final since they require confirmation by the European Parliament. Costa, a former prime minister of Portugal, will take office on 1 December.

The inaugural session of the European Parliament will place on 16 and 18 July 2024. The European Parliament shall elect its President, and also confirmed Ursula von der Leyen as the President of the European Commission for the next term. After this, each Member State will nominate Commissioner(s), with the Commission President responsible for allocating portfolios among the Commissioners-designate. The European Parliament must approve the Commissioners by an absolute majority. The Commissioners-designate are going to be heard in the European Parliament. This will take place in the European Parliament during the fall. Once the European Parliament approves the President and Commissioners, the European Council formally appoints them by qualified majority.

A principal focus of the Hungarian Presidency will be to facilitate a smooth institutional transition. According to Tibor Navracsics, the experience of the past three periods of institutional cycle change, that is the Swedish, Italian and Finnish Presidency in 2009, 2014 and 2019, suggest that countries holding the presidency during a period of renewal of the EU institutions are successful when they act in the role of a pragmatic and mediating presidency rather than an ideological and initiating one.¹¹

Institutional dynamics will impact the Hungarian Presidency in various ways. Initial phases of the EU Presidency may witness reduced legislative activities in traditional terms. It is imperative for the new European Parliament to expedite the resumption of legislative work, as a failure to convene triologue discussions during the Hungarian Presidency could lead to a suspension of legislative activities for up to a year. Concurrently, Member States' positions will undergo continuous negotiation within the Council. According to Bálint Ódor, Head of Hungary's Permanent Representation to the EU, triologues are expected to resume in October or November, provid-

10 See at www.euronews.com/my-europe/2024/06/27/eu-leaders-agree-on-top-jobs-ursula-von-der-leyen-antonio-costa-and-kaja-kallas.

11 Tibor Navracsics, 'The Predictably Unexpected Event: EU Presidencies in a Period of Institutional Shifts' in Navracsics & Tárnok (eds.) 2024, pp. 59–72.

ing an opportunity for the Hungarian Presidency to contribute meaningfully to EU legislation.¹²

4.2. Geopolitical Context

The Hungarian Presidency coincides with a notably sensitive period from a geopolitical standpoint. The Russian-Ukrainian conflict continues to dominate the agenda of the EU and is anticipated to remain a significant focus for the EU in the foreseeable future.¹³ The EU has thus far implemented thirteen rounds of sanctions against Russia in support of Ukraine.¹⁴ The European Council, in its conclusions of 21 March 2024, affirmed the EU's commitment to providing Ukraine with comprehensive political, financial, economic, humanitarian, military, and diplomatic support for as long as necessary and at the required intensity.¹⁵ Member States continue to demonstrate their dedication to supporting Ukraine against Russian aggression, which serves as a pivotal political backdrop for the Hungarian EU Presidency. Despite Budapest's opposition to further EU sanctions on Russia, the Hungarian government, acting as an honest broker during its Presidency, has limited scope to alter the prevailing political stance. However, it can facilitate critical discussions regarding the EU's sanction policy and foster political and professional debates on its review.

During the latter half of 2024, the Hungarian EU Presidency may confront additional challenges stemming from the Middle East crisis, specifically involving Israel's military engagements with Hamas and the broader Iran-Israel conflict. On 7 October 2023, Hamas, a group supported by Iran and classified as a terrorist organization, launched an unexpected attack on southern Israel from Gaza. In response, the Israeli military initiated a significant military campaign in the Gaza Strip, including a large-scale ground invasion that started on 27 October, with these operations ongoing. In 2024, another conflict escalated in the Middle East between Iran and Israel. On 1 April, Israel carried out airstrikes on an Iranian consulate

12 Bálint Ódor, 'The Challenges of Implementing the 2024 Presidency from a Brussels Perspective' in Navracsics & Tárnok (eds.) 2024, pp. 91–104.

13 Steve Guterman, 'The Coming Year May Not End the War In Ukraine. But It Could Decide The Outcome', *Refrl.org*, 23 February 2024, at www.rferl.org/a/ukraine-russia-war-2024-outcome/32832266.html.

14 See at www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/eu-response-ukraine-invasion/.

15 See at www.consilium.europa.eu/media/70815/sn00008-en24.pdf.

complex in Syria. In retaliation, Iran and its affiliated groups conducted airstrikes and drone attacks within Israel on 13 April, followed by Israel's retaliatory strikes in both Iran and Syria. Consequently, EU Member States agreed to impose new sanctions on Iran aimed at restricting drone and missile production.¹⁶

The outcome of these crises remains uncertain. Therefore, the Hungarian Presidency must be well-prepared for the possibility of further escalation in these Middle Eastern conflicts, as well as other unforeseen crisis situations.

5. Key Policy Issues of the 2024 Hungarian EU Presidency

On June 18, 2024, the Hungarian Government unveiled the programme, priorities and visual identity of the 2024 Hungarian EU Presidency. The logo of the Presidency incorporates the Rubik's Cube, representing problem-solving and strategic thinking, while also echoing Hungary's approach to addressing European challenges.¹⁷ The motto of the Presidency, on the other hand, turned out to be more controversial: 'Make Europe Great Again'. While several European politicians echoed their criticism over choosing this Donald Trump-inspired slogan,¹⁸ the Hungarian Government argued that the logo reflects on the key policy priority of the Presidency, competitiveness of Europe, symbolizing the perception that Europe can become an independent global player.¹⁹

The programme and priorities of the Presidency was also presented on June 18. Earlier, in 2023, the Hungarian government delineated seven pivotal policy domains that, according to their contemporary understanding, could represent high-priority areas for the Hungarian EU Presidency during the latter half of 2024.²⁰ The Hungarian Presidency's programme

16 See at www.euronews.com/my-europe/2024/04/22/eu-countries-agree-to-slap-new-sanctions-on-iran-to-curtail-drone-and-missile-production.

17 See at <https://hungarian-presidency.consilium.europa.eu/en/presidency/visual-identity/>.

18 See at www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2024/06/19/viktor-orban-criticised-for-make-europe-great-again-slogan/.

19 See at <https://hungarian-presidency.consilium.europa.eu/en/news/make-europe-great-again-the-official-priorities-social-media-pages-and-visuals-of-the-hungarian-presidency-unveiled/>.

20 Balázs Péter Molnár *et al.*, 'Policy Challenges and Opportunities for the 2024 Hungarian EU Presidency' in Navracsics & Tárnok (eds.) 2024, pp. 73–84.

is structured around seven priorities: acceptance of a New European Competitiveness Deal; the reinforcement of the European defence policy; a consistent and merit-based enlargement policy; stemming illegal migration; shaping the future of the cohesion policy; addressing demographic challenges; and a farmer-oriented EU agricultural policy.²¹

5.1. Strengthening Competitiveness

According to János Bóka, Minister responsible for EU Affairs, strengthening the Union's global competitiveness will be a 'central priority' of the 2024 Hungarian EU Presidency.²² This also means that all other priorities are to be derived from this objective.²³

The EU has faced enduring challenges in terms of competitiveness over several decades, ceding significant competitive advantage to global counterparts.²⁴ This trend has been further exacerbated in recent years by escalating energy costs, the economic and trade ramifications of the conflict in Ukraine, and protectionist policies implemented by major global competitors, notably the US and China.²⁵ The prevailing European challenges pertaining to competitiveness and trade policy present the prospect of sustained engagement in various areas during the upcoming presidency term. These areas include addressing conflicts between the EU and China concerning corporate subsidies, leveraging the Eastern opening strategy to mitigate decoupling effects, ensuring compliance with carbon dioxide quotas, mitigating national distortions, addressing the needs of both small and large enterprises, fostering innovation clusters, engaging in interna-

21 See at <https://hungarian-presidency.consilium.europa.eu/en/programme/programme/>.

22 See at www.hungarianconservative.com/articles/current/minister_janos_boka_conference_hungarian_eu_presidency_goals_competitiveness/.

23 See at <https://hungarytoday.hu/key-priority-of-hungarys-coming-council-of-eu-presidency-is-competitiveness/>.

24 Long-term Competitiveness of the EU: Looking beyond 2030, Brussels, 16 March 2023, COM(2023) 168 final.

25 Ursula von der Leyen, 'European Competitiveness and the role of research, innovation and education', Speech, 19 February 2024, Berlin, at https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_24_927.

tional trade negotiations, and enhancing the commercial standing of labor-intensive agricultural sectors.²⁶

The Hungarian Presidency is anticipated to undertake efforts to address these challenges and aim to strongly prioritize European competitiveness, specifically concentrating on establishing a framework to enhance productivity and narrow the growth and innovation differentials between the EU and its global rivals. Bureaucratic hurdles, particularly burdensome for small enterprises, have the potential to stifle entrepreneurial activity. Consequently, enhancing the resilience of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) is deemed imperative, given their significant role in both EU and national economies, as well as in the labor market. Streamlining administrative processes can mitigate unwarranted barriers for businesses and contribute to enhanced regulatory frameworks.²⁷ Furthermore, the Hungarian Presidency endeavors to safeguard against the adoption of protectionist measures and market-distorting practices within the EU that could impede foreign investment and jeopardize international trade, potentially leading to the formation of trade blocs.²⁸

According to the official programme, the adoption of a New European Competitiveness Deal is a key priority of the Hungarian presidency to restore economic development and create the conditions for sustainable growth, deepen the internal market, focus on supporting small and medium-sized enterprises, promote the green and digital transition in partnership with European economic stakeholders and citizens, international co-operation, and ensure the stability and sustainability of jobs.²⁹

5.2. Addressing Demographic Challenges

Addressing demographic challenges is intricately linked to enhancing the competitiveness of the EU, as perceived by the Hungarian government. The EU is grappling with a significant demographic crisis, characterized by a decline in the active population, which in turn impacts consumption,

²⁶ Gábor Kutasi *et al.*, 'The EU's Competitiveness and Trade Policy from the Perspective of the 2024 Hungarian Presidency' in Navracsics & Tárnok (eds.) 2024, pp. 141–164.

²⁷ Molnár *et al.* 2024.

²⁸ *Id.*

²⁹ See at <https://hungarian-presidency.consilium.europa.eu/en/programme/priorities/>.

investment, and economic vitality.³⁰ Even though the EU has a longstanding history of endeavoring to achieve objectives related to income, parental employment, and gender equality, there has been much less attention paid to a comprehensive family policy.³¹

The 2024 Hungarian EU Presidency presents a valuable opportunity for Hungary to explore strategies to tackle this challenge and advocate for the adoption of measures and recommendations aimed at countering demographic decline across EU Member States. Moreover, the Presidency is poised to facilitate the sharing of Member State experiences and best practices concerning family policies, a dimension that could be further strengthened under Hungarian leadership.

Another critical aspect of the Presidency will be to underscore the necessity of improving the situation of young people and the role of local communities in fostering their prosperity at the local level, which can indirectly contribute to achieving demographic objectives.³² The Demographic Toolbox³³ published by the European Commission on 11 October 2023 can serve as a valuable resource in this endeavor.

5.3. Promoting the Enlargement Process and the EU–Western Balkans Summit in Hungary

Since Croatia's accession, the EU has experienced a phenomenon known as enlargement fatigue over the past decade,³⁴ leading to a deceleration in accession negotiations. A significant factor contributing to the current slowdown in the enlargement process is the absence of a clear timeframe

30 Vasilis Margaras, *Demographic trends in EU regions*, EPRS – European Parliamentary Research Service, PE 633.160 – January 2019, at <https://ec.europa.eu/futurium/en/system/files/ged/eprs-briefing-633160-demographic-trends-eu-regions-final.pdf>.

31 Jane Jenson, 'Beyond the National: How the EU, OECD, and World Bank Do Family Policy' in Rense Nieuwenhuis & Wim van Lancker (eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Family Policy*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2021, pp. 45–68.

32 Molnár *et al.* 2024.

33 *Demographic Change in Europe: A Toolbox for Action*. Brussels, 11 October 2023, COM(2023) 577 final.

34 Milada Anna Vachudova, 'EU Leverage and National Interests in the Balkans: The Puzzles of Enlargement Ten Years On', *Journal of Common Market Studies*, Vol. 52, Issue 1, 2014, pp. 122–138.

for accession, stemming from a lack of political will.³⁵ This lack of political will understandably makes it challenging for decision-makers in candidate countries to undertake politically sensitive and far-reaching reforms, which engenders a similar lack of political will on the side of the candidates.³⁶

According to the official programme, the Hungarian Presidency will aim for a consistent and merit-based enlargement policy focusing on the Western Balkans.³⁷ The enlargement of the Western Balkans has long been of strategic importance for Hungary, owing to geographical proximity and shared historical ties that have fostered political and economic connections. Over the past decade, the Hungarian government has consistently advocated for the region's early integration into the EU. The enlargement of the Western Balkans will therefore most likely be a priority of the 2024 Hungarian EU Presidency. However, given the status of accession negotiations (involving Montenegro, Serbia, Albania, North Macedonia, and Turkey), it is unlikely that any negotiating country will conclude negotiations or join the EU during the Hungarian Presidency. The Hungarian Presidency yet aims to convene negotiations and expedite the process, in the course of which an EU-Western Balkans Summit is also planned during the Hungarian Presidency.

Apart from the enlargement process, it is worth mentioning the European Political Community (EPC). All EU candidate and potential candidate countries, as well as non-EU member states of the European Economic Area, are members of the EPC. In recent years, this forum has evolved into a high-level political consultation platform, where heads of state and government discuss critical issues affecting Europe as a whole. Given that the biannual EPC Summit is hosted by the Member State holding the Presidency in the second half of each year, organizing this summit will also be a top priority for the Hungarian Presidency.³⁸

³⁵ Tyyne Karjalainen, 'EU enlargement in wartime Europe: three dimensions and scenarios', *Journal of the Academy of Social Sciences*, Vol. 18, Issue 5, 2023, pp. 637–656.

³⁶ 'Serbia's EU aspirations delayed due to lack of political will', *Euractiv.rs*, 9 March 2021, at www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/serbias-eu-aspirations-delayed-due-to-lack-of-political-will/.

³⁷ See at <https://hungarian-presidency.consilium.europa.eu/en/programme/priorities/>.

³⁸ Molnár *et al.* 2024.

5.4. Shaping the Future of Cohesion Policy

Enhancing territorial cohesion and reducing developmental disparities among Member States and regions stands as one of the primary objectives of European integration. The 2024 Hungarian EU Presidency will be a pivotal period for the strategic future of cohesion. The discourse on the future of cohesion is characterized by a conflict between the principles of personal and territorial cohesion.³⁹ The proposed multi-speed Europe presents particular risks in this regard, as it undermines the fundamental principle of convergence, while institutionalizing the longstanding asymmetry within the European Union between core and peripheral regions, as well as between old and new Member States.⁴⁰ Ongoing preparatory efforts for the reform of EU cohesion policy post 2027 present a unique opportunity for regional and local stakeholders to influence the stance of European institutions at an early stage.

As emphasized in the Presidency programme, the Hungarian presidency will aim for a high-level strategic debate on the future of cohesion policy, including its role in promoting competitiveness and employment, as well as in addressing demographic challenges.⁴¹ The Hungarian Presidency is likely to encompass the mid-term review of cohesion programs, along with the anticipated release of the Commission's Cohesion Report in 2024. The Hungarian EU Presidency may chair the General Affairs Council on cohesion policy, while the period of the Presidency will provide Budapest the opportunity to host informal ministerial meetings, and other professional events enhancing the policy-oriented debates on the future of cohesion policy, all of which can contribute to disseminating the main findings of these reports and conveying political messages, including potential Hungarian proposals for the development of a new cohesion policy. The Ninth Cohesion Report, expected from the Commission in early 2025, immediately

39 Future of EU Cohesion Policy Post-2027. Placing Local and Regional Public Services at the Core of Economic, Social, and Territorial Cohesion. Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR) Position Paper, CEMR Policy Committee, 6–7 December 2023, at www.ccre.org/img/uploads/piecesjointe/filename/231129_CEMR_position_paper_on_future_of_Cohesion_Policy_PC_version-0.pdf; European Commission, The future of Cohesion Policy, at https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/policy/how/future-cohesion-policy_en.

40 Bernadett Petri, 'Cohesion Policy under Redesign: What Will the European Union Fund in the Future?', in Navracsics & Tárnok (eds.) 2024, pp. 191–204.

41 See at <https://hungarian-presidency.consilium.europa.eu/en/programme/priorities/>

following the conclusion of the Hungarian Presidency, will significantly influence the future trajectory of the policy.

5.5. Strengthening European Defence Policy

After the Russian aggression against Ukraine, it is evident that we can no longer take Europe's security for granted. Defence issues are becoming more important and visible than ever before. The need for the EU to take greater responsibility for its own security and to develop and reinforce an autonomous EU capacity to act, including the EU's coordinated approach to strengthening the protection of critical infrastructure, has been a key issue on the agenda for years.

The 2024 Hungarian EU Presidency, in addition to the implementation of the Strategic Guidelines⁴² setting out the main directions of EU defence policy for the next ten years, will place particular emphasis on encouraging the strengthening of the European Defence Technological and Industrial Base (EDTIB), including defence innovation and the enhancement of defence procurement cooperation between member states.⁴³ In this context, Hungary supports the long-term inclusion of the contribution to both defence research and the defence industry into the EU budget.⁴⁴ The mid-term review of the European Defence Fund (EDF) and the Council Decision establishing the European Peace Facility (EPF) are also due to take place during the Hungarian EU Presidency. Meanwhile, reflection on the future of the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) will also begin in preparation for the 2025 review. In the field of crisis management, leadership and governance, the promotion of the Strategic Compass targets to be achieved by 2025 (Rapid Reaction Capability, full operational capability of the Military Planning and Command Capabilities) is also a likely priority for the Hungarian Presidency.⁴⁵

⁴² A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence – For a European Union that Protects Its Citizens, Values and Interests and Contributes to International Peace and Security, Brussels, 21 March 2022, at <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-7371-2022-INIT/en/pdf>.

⁴³ See at <https://hungarian-presidency.consilium.europa.eu/en/programme/priorities/>.

⁴⁴ Molnár *et al.* 2024.

⁴⁵ *Id.*

5.6. Combating Irregular Migration with a Special Focus on the External Dimension

Combating irregular migration has been a key policy issue for Hungary in the past decade. Following the surge in irregular migration after 2015, the Hungarian government pursued a robustly migration-critical approach, implementing physical and legal barriers that resulted in significant conflicts with the EU. Alongside other Central European countries, Budapest rejected the mandatory distribution of asylum seekers, viewing it as an infringement on its sovereignty.⁴⁶

In 2024, both the European Parliament and the Council of the EU endorsed the new Pact on Migration and Asylum,⁴⁷ presented by the European Commission in 2020, as part of the ongoing reform of the EU's migration and asylum system that commenced in 2016.⁴⁸ The Hungarian government expressed concerns about the new Pact on Migration and Asylum, specifically about disproportionately bearing the burden of asylum procedures and the selective interpretation of solidarity.⁴⁹ Consequently, Hungary indicated that the pact, set to be enforced from 2026, can't be implemented in its current form⁵⁰ (Slovakia also declared its unwillingness to implement the new system).⁵¹

Conversely, Hungary supports the concept of enhanced cooperation in the external dimension of migration, closer collaboration with affected third countries, and the strengthening of return activities. According to the Presidency programme, illegal migration and human smuggling must

46 Viktor Marsai, 'Hungary's Migration Policy', in Navracsics & Tárnok (eds.) 2024, pp. 233–250.

47 European Commission, Pact on Migration and Asylum, 11 April 2024, at https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/migration-and-asylum/pact-migration-and-asylum_en.

48 'MEPs approve the new Migration and Asylum Pact', Press Release, European Parliament, 10 April 2024, at www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20240408IPR20290/meps-approve-the-new-migration-and-asylum-pact.

49 'Government Rejects EU Migration Pact due to Mandatory Admission of Asylum Seekers', *MTI-Hungary Today*, 21 December 2023, at <https://hungarytoday.hu/government-rejects-eu-migration-pact-due-to-mandatory-admission-of-asylum-seekers/>.

50 'Gulyás: EP has made a "bad decision" by endorsing new migration pact', *AboutHungary.hu*, 12 April 2024, at <https://abouthungary.hu/news-in-brief/gulyas-ep-has-made-a-bad-decision-by-endorsing-new-migration-pact>.

51 Jan Lopatka & Gabriela Baczynska, 'Slovakia will not implement new EU migration rules, says PM', *Reuters.com*, 16 April 2024, at www.reuters.com/world/europe/slovakia-will-not-implement-new-eu-migration-rules-says-pm-2024-04-16/.

be curbed. In this respect, the Hungarian presidency will pay particular attention to the external dimension of migration, including efficient cooperation with relevant third countries, more effective returns, and innovative solutions for rules on asylum. The Hungarian government also intends to highlight the importance of external border protection and the need for EU funds for this purpose.⁵² Furthermore, the evaluation of the annual Schengen cycle will coincide with the tenure of the Hungarian Presidency, offering an additional opportunity to underscore the importance of external border protection and EU funding for border security.

5.7. A Farmer-Centered EU Agricultural Policy

Even though the agricultural policy was not part of the pivotal policy domains earlier delineated by the Hungarian government,⁵³ it eventually became a priority of the 2024 Hungarian EU Presidency. After the farmer demonstrations all over the EU in early 2024, the policy's political relevance increased.

The Hungarian Presidency programme highlights that extraordinary weather conditions due to climate change, rising input costs, increasing imports from non-EU countries, and overly stringent production regulations have significantly undermined the sector's competitiveness. The convergence of these challenges has endangered the livelihoods of European farmers. According to Budapest it is therefore crucial to reframe agriculture as part of the solution to climate change by engaging farmers in sustainable production practices, rather than viewing it as a contributing factor.⁵⁴

The Hungarian Presidency will urge the Agriculture and Fisheries Council to leverage the institutional transition period to guide the new Commission in shaping the Union's post-2027 agricultural policy. This policy should aim to foster a competitive, resilient, and farmer-friendly agricultural sector. Promoting sustainable agriculture is a key priority, aiming to achieve a rational balance between the strategic objectives of the European Green Deal, the stabilization of agricultural markets, and ensuring a decent standard of living for farmers.⁵⁵

52 See at <https://hungarian-presidency.consilium.europa.eu/en/programme/priorities/>.

53 Molnár *et al.* 2024.

54 See at <https://hungarian-presidency.consilium.europa.eu/en/programme/priorities/>.

55 Id.

5.8. Other Tasks and Duties

The 2024 Hungarian EU Presidency is charged with establishing overarching policy guidelines in specific policy areas to facilitate the implementation of the new strategic agenda for the period 2024–2029.⁵⁶ The development and adoption of this Strategic Agenda fall under the jurisdiction of the European Council. At the conclusion of the Belgian Presidency, in late June, EU leaders have collectively discussed and agreed the EU's direction and goals for 2024–2029.⁵⁷ Hungary will be the first to preside over the Council while integrating the priorities outlined in the 2024–2029 Strategic Agenda into its activities.⁵⁸

Additionally, during the Hungarian EU Presidency, Hungary will play a crucial role in coordinating the EU as a unified negotiating bloc at the 29th Conference of the Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP29)⁵⁹ and the UN Biodiversity Summit. Traditionally, it is the responsibility of the Member State holding the rotating presidency to coordinate the development of the EU's common position, negotiate, and adopt Council conclusions that establish the general EU stance for negotiations within the Council working party, achieved through unanimity.

6. Conclusion

The 2024 Hungarian EU Presidency faces a multitude of challenges within the EU's institutional framework and the broader geopolitical context. Due to the renewal of the EU institutions, the 2024 Hungarian EU Presidency will be much rather a political one. The Hungarian Presidency's role as an honest broker rather than an ideological initiator will be crucial in navigating this transition.

As pointed out by Bálint Ódor, even though the effectiveness of presidencies is primarily assessed by the number and significance of closed cases, the success of the Hungarian Presidency will not be primarily judged based on the regular indicators, such as the number and significance of closed

⁵⁶ European Union Strategic Agenda 2024–2029, at www.consilium.europa.eu/hu/policies/strategic-agenda-2024-2029/.

⁵⁷ See at www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/strategic-agenda-2024-2029/.

⁵⁸ Molnár *et al.* 2024.

⁵⁹ Conference of the Parties (COP), at <https://unfccc.int/process/bodies/supreme-bodies/conference-of-the-parties-cop>.

legislative dossiers. Instead, the evaluation will focus on how the Hungarian Presidency contributes to ensuring a smooth institutional transition and implementing the new strategic agenda for the 2024–2029 period.⁶⁰ János Bóka is of the view that the success of the 2024 Hungarian EU Presidency will be measurable based on three aspects, namely whether the Hungarian Presidency *(i)* facilitated a smooth institutional transition in areas where the Council has a role, *(ii)* acted as an honest broker, and *(iii)* managed to shape the political discourse in a way that subsequent presidencies cannot detach themselves from it (in those policy areas prioritized during the Hungarian EU Presidency).⁶¹

Navigating the unique challenges the Hungarian government must face in the second half of 2024 requires strategic planning, effective coordination, and diplomatic finesse. The Hungarian Presidency's success will depend on its ability to act as an honest broker and address the diverse needs of Member States. A successful Presidency has the potential to positively influence Hungary's reputation for many years to come and enhance its effectiveness in promoting its interests within EU decision-making processes.

60 Ódor 2024.

61 Tibor Navracsics, 'Senki nincs az EP-ben, akinek fontos lenne a pártcsalád nélküli Fidesszel való szolidaritás', *Telex.hu*, 2 May 2024, at <https://telex.hu/kulfold/2024/05/02/navracsics-boka-janos-soros-eu-elnokseg-eselyei-programja-europai-tanacs>.

