



Hungary's EU Presidency Series

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The Hungarian Presidency of the EU Council in a Nutshell

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Hungary took over the presidency of the EU Council from Belgium in the context of the deepening crisis of the euro area, uncertainty about the future of some key policies, as well as enlargement fatigue. The motto of the Hungarian presidency has been a "Strong Europe", reflecting the conviction of the Hungarian government that after the crisis only further deepening (i.e. more intensified cooperation) can make the European Union successful. This deepening process however should be coupled with further widening: the EU must maintain the credibility of the enlargement process and leave its doors open to new members.

The presidency started work with an ambitious programme including, among other items, the launch of the first so-called European Semester, the adoption of legislative proposals (the so-called "six-pack") designed to reinforce EU level economic governance, the paving of the way for the Schengen membership of Romania and Bulgaria, the conclusion of accession negotiations with Croatia, the adoption of a new European strategy for the integration of the Roma minorities and the launch of the Danube Region Strategy. The Hungarian presidency however – similarly to all its predecessors – had to cope with unexpected events and challenges as well. Already at the very beginning, the presidency had to face a very unfortunate and unprecedented phenomenon, namely that internal political discord had also made itself felt at the European level (i.e. the harsh debates in the European Parliament about the new Hungarian media law or recently about the new constitution). Furthermore, the presidency had to react to such unexpected and unforeseeable events as the revolutionary changes in North Africa, the natural disaster and humanitarian catastrophe in Japan, and the necessity of postponing the Eastern Partnership summit.

Looking back over the last six months, we observe that the first Hungarian presidency was successful not only in terms of logistics but also of diplomacy and politics. The bulk of the priorities was completed, in many cases thanks to extraordinary diplomatic efforts and some marathon negotiations. Among the successes is the elimination of nearly all hurdles before the adoption (by the European Parliament and Council) of the six-pack. Here the presidency first succeeded in hammering out a compromise among the 27 member states before the March European Council. Second, it managed to settle almost all issues raised by the EP, despite the Parliament's more than 2000 proposed amendments. Agreement seems to be within reach on the remaining points of debate and the procedure may come to an end in July. Hungary was also successful in introducing a completely new issue to the EU agenda, namely the Roma strategy, while at the same time respecting and integrating different member state positions vis-à-vis minority policies. Establishing the common principles of future cohesion policy and reinforcing these with a territorial development dimension was extremely important on the eve of launching deliberations on the budgetary framework for 2014-20. The presidency also contributed to some ground-breaking commitments from the European Council in the field of energy policy, including having a real internal market for energy supply by 2014. The Hungarian presidency was able to achieve major progress in an important competitiveness issue (that has dragged on for three decades), managing to bring 25 member states on board for using the new European patent system from 2014. The filling up of the Danube Region Strategy – a macro region strategy involving the cooperation of 14 countries – with real content (in terms of coordination and soon to be launched projects) is also among the realised priorities. Furthermore, Hungary immediately reacted to the upheavals in the Southern

Mediterranean. The foreign minister worked closely together with the High Representative and, when it came to the presidency's competences, dealt with immigration pressures in the Justice and Home Affairs Council and organised the immediate evacuation of EU and non-EU citizens from Libya. Promoting the Schengen membership of Romania and Bulgaria has also been close to the heart of the presidency. This issue has been very challenging however as some old member states were not satisfied with Sofia's level of preparedness. The Hungarian diplomats strove to bring the two positions closer. They urged Bulgaria to meet all criteria while, at the same time, they tried to "reassure" doubtful member states. A political declaration from the EU27 eventually emerged stating that the two Balkan members are technically ready for Schengen membership and the timing of their accession is to be set in September. At the end of this incomplete list of achievements the successful conclusion of accession negotiations with Croatia should also be highlighted. This was achieved despite an initially rather sceptical mood across the EU and the talks could be concluded thanks to marathon negotiations, the perseverance and the strong commitment of the presidency. This also sends a very positive message to the whole of the Western Balkan region. And the Hungarian Prime Minister actually visited all of these countries in June.

On the other hand, the Hungarian presidency did not succeed in reaching a consensus regarding the principles of the future common agricultural policy. And, despite its pro-enlargement stance, it was not able to promote the accession process of Turkey, or indeed of the other Western Balkan countries. Furthermore, due to conflicting dates (OECD, G8 meetings), as well as due to weakened attention to the East because of the Southern Mediterranean events, the Eastern Partnership summit had to be postponed until the Polish presidency. This however was not a real disappointment, since the summit was originally to be co-chaired by Poland (the founding father of the programme) and Hungary. On the other hand, it is true that the host country will be Poland and not Hungary.

During its semester, Hungary had to preside over some two thousand meetings at working group, COREPER and Council levels, had to manage some 320-340 dossiers of which some 100 could be closed. Most of the Hungary-based events were held in the Grassalkovich castle at

Gödöllő, not far from Budapest, and the total cost of the presidency amounted to some 80 million euros (below the EU average).

Hungarian politicians and officials highlight the fact that during the presidency the entire Hungarian administration was able to enter into much closer contact with the other member states as well as with the other EU institutions. This learning process represents an unprecedented added value in terms of the knowledge gained about all the decision-making details and becoming more aware of the full range of possibilities for shaping decisions and promoting ideas.

In the final analysis, Hungary's management of the presidency has been highly flexible and pragmatic, as it was able to react quickly to unexpected events (e.g. by convening Council meetings to tackle unforeseen issues) and to reconcile very divergent views as an honest broker (e.g. patents, Schengen enlargement, six-pack). With all its achievements, the Hungarian presidency has obviously contributed to making the EU stronger and has left its footprint on European integration in terms of responding to the interests and concerns of the Roma minority, binding different nations together along the Danube in the framework of a new macro regional strategy as well as paving the way for the EU to soon have 28 members.

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