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**WHEN THE RENEGADE TAKES THE WHEEL: LESSONS
LEARNED FROM HUNGARY'S 2024 COUNCIL PRESIDENCY**

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When The Renegade Takes The Wheel: Lessons Learned From Hungary's 2024 Council Presidency

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Abstract

What makes a rotating Presidency of the Council of the EU successful? Existing studies have broadly argued that there are objective criteria based on which the performance of the Council Presidency can be evaluated e.g. being an honest-broker, agenda-setter, successful mediator etc. While doing so, they have problematically assumed that all Member States aim to achieve this goal when taking the helm at the EU and they disregarded the fact that renegade, EU-critical Member States might have other goals to achieve during the Presidency period. In this paper, I critically engage with the literature evaluating Presidencies' success through the case study of Hungary's Council Presidency of 2024. This is an interesting example because Hungary has been at odds with the EU in many ways in the past two decades, and even more so more recently, therefore, the Hungarian Presidency was a highly contested event, to an extent that some EU institutions even wanted to cancel or boycott some parts of it. Despite the controversy, Hungary held the position of the chair for six months, and it did not fail, especially not from the perspective of its own strategic priorities. Overall, Hungary's case demonstrates that we need to rethink how we evaluate the rotating Presidency and how we define success. This paper argues that there is a difference between what counts as successful from the perspective of the EU and that of the presiding Member State. Moreover, if a Member State wants to and can exert national preferences during its mandate, then the Presidency can be considered successful, at least from the national perspective.

JEL: D70, F55, N44

Keywords: European Union, EU Council Presidency, Hungary, success, national interest

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Introduction

In October 2024, Viktor Orbán stood at the European Parliament Plenary session like public enemy number one and was taking selected insults directed at him by the President of the European Commission, the President of the European People's Party and several MEPs. He went to Strasbourg to present the official program of the Hungarian Council Presidency, and instead, he received harsh criticism about his government's conduct on the domestic political field and towards the EU as well. Only a few MEPs rose to speak in his defence. Although the scenario of having to defend domestic issues in the EP was not unfamiliar to Orbán in the past 16 years, this happening to a Member State holding the Presidency is somewhat unexpected if not unprecedented. The rotating Presidency period is usually considered both by EU institutions and the Member States as an opportunity for the chair to prove itself as a reliable leader for six months. But doing so was not the intention of the Hungarian government when it took the reigns of the Council of the EU in July 2024, it had completely different goals in mind.

The mainstream academic literature of European studies has extensively dealt with the office of the EU Council Presidency. There is comprehensive research on the roles of the President, the achievements of different presiding Member States as well as analysis on what makes a presidency successful. However, there is less material to find on how to define success, especially in the case of non-conformist Member States who might have a different understanding of success and different expectations from their Presidency period than their fellow Member States and the EU institutions.

This paper analyses Hungary's 2024 Council Presidency through the lens of the academic literature focusing on the importance of the Council Presidency as a tool for Member States to shape the EU's agenda. The main goal of this paper, however, is not to determine whether Hungary conducted a successful Presidency or not, but to feed into the larger theoretical debate about what makes a Presidency successful and about the national preference formation of Member States through the institution of the Presidency. The most important thread of the current study will be finding new ways to evaluate success.

The study first reviews the traditional attributes of Presidencies: the historic development of the Council Presidency as an institution, and the role and different powers of the chair as defined by EU law and as identified by the academic literature. This is followed by an assessment of the definition of success, based on how the relevant academic literature defines it and what are the aspects that have been overlooked so far. The next part of the paper focuses on the Hungarian Presidency of the second half of 2024: it introduces the circumstances (both international, EU-wide and domestic) under which Hungary took over the rotating Presidency from Belgium in July 2024, it presents the Presidency priorities and the most important achievements of Hungary during the six months. The possibilities of being an agenda-setter meanwhile also being a renegade, generally non-compliant Member State of the EU will be considered as well. Finally, an assessment will be made about how the definition of success can be re-evaluated in light of the Hungarian example.

The following questions will be answered: What is success and what are some of the things taken for granted when we speak of 'success'? In what new ways are we forced to think about the institution of the Presidency with the Hungarian case in our mind?

The tasks of the Council Presidency as defined by EU law and the academic literature

Historical background

Throughout the history of the EU, the Presidency of the Council of the EU has gone through significant changes regarding its power and roles. It has basically evolved from a minor administrative office into a powerful political platform due to changes in the EU's institutional decision-making system and external ambitions.² In 1952 the Treaty of Paris establishing the European Coal and Steel Community set down the two basic principles of the office of the Presidency: to be held by a Member State and to be organized on a rotating basis (regardless of size, economy or any other features of EU countries). The length of the office was defined first in three months, which was extended to six months by the

² Jonas Tallberg, *Leadership and Negotiation in the European Union*, 1st ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2006), <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511492075>.

*Veronika Czina / When The Renegade Takes The Wheel: Lessons Learned From Hungary's
2024 Council Presidency*

Treaty of Rome establishing the European Economic Community.³ The inherent features of European integration, such as institutional development and enlargement transformed the office of the Presidency from a merely administrative role into a strategic, leading position. In the 1960s the European Commission's role was unchallenged as policy initiator and mediator between Member States, however, the 'empty chair crisis'⁴ of 1965 has shaken the Commission's leading position and strengthened the powers of the Presidency as a broker of negotiations between Member States and a defender of collective interests.⁵

In the 1970s, institutional developments of the EU, such as the establishment of the European Council and the European Political Cooperation (EPC) also increased the organizational and managerial workload of the Presidency. In 1981 the so-called London report⁶ was adopted by the Council which established the troika system in which the Member State holding the Presidency is diplomatically and politically supported by the preceding and succeeding countries. The Single European Act in 1987 extended qualified majority voting to new areas, which also increased the scope for the Presidency as a political arbiter. The introduction of the co-decision procedure by the Maastricht Treaty in 1991 added new representative functions to the plate of the Presidency.⁷ The 1999 Helsinki Council, foreseeing the necessity for institutional change ahead of the upcoming huge enlargement wave, came up with reform guidelines titled 'An effective Council for an Enlarged Union.' These guidelines stated that the Presidency holds all political responsibility for managing the affairs of the Council, however it drew importance to the support of the presiding Member State, such as the Council Secretariat, the High Representative for CFSP, or the succeeding Presidency. The troika system was ended by

³ Frank M. Häge, „The presidency of the council of the European Union”, 2019, 4, <https://hdl.handle.net/10344/8263>.

⁴ The empty chair crisis was a major political impasse in 1965-66. France opposed the Commission's attempt to confer additional budgetary powers on the European Parliament by extending majority voting and allocating bigger role to the Commission itself. As a result, France refused to take its seat in the Council of Ministers, halting key decisions and stalling integration.

⁵ Frank M. Häge, „The Presidency of the Council of the European Union”, in *Oxford Encyclopedia of European Union Politics*, ed. Finn Laursen (Oxford University Press, 2021), 2017.

⁶ „Report on European political cooperation”, Foreign Ministers of the European Community, 1981, https://www.cvce.eu/content/publication/2002/1/18/869a63a6-4c28-4e42-8c41-efd2415cd7dc/publishable_en.pdf.

⁷ Häge, „The Presidency of the Council of the European Union”, 2018.

*Veronika Czina / When The Renegade Takes The Wheel: Lessons Learned From Hungary's
2024 Council Presidency*

the Treaty of Amsterdam in 1999 which introduced the team of the Presidency consisting of the presiding Member State, the newly established position of the High Representative for Common Foreign and Security Policy and the Commissioner for External Relations.⁸

The Seville European Council of 2002 adopted a series of reforms which added agenda-setting and chairing meetings to the already existing brokerage and mediatory roles of the Presidency, thereby further increasing the duties of the office.⁹ Although the upcoming 2004 enlargement has initiated some institutional and procedural changes that were favourable for the position of the Presidency, during the years preceding the 'big bang' the question about the effectiveness of the Presidency with so many Member States arose. Therefore, the continuous expansion of the historical development of the roles and functions of the Presidency came to a halt.¹⁰ The Convention on the Future of Europe, which was entrusted to draft the new Constitution of the EU proposed to divide and reduce the Presidency's tasks by introducing a permanent President to the European Council, creating the position of the European Foreign Minister and proposing the system of Team Presidencies (groups of three Member States). Although the Constitutional Treaty of the EU failed, the system of the Team Presidencies was introduced by a revision of the Council's rules of procedures in 2006.¹¹ The Lisbon Treaty (2007) kept the substance of the Constitutional Treaty's provisions and only made slight modifications to the proposed changes, such as naming the EU's foreign minister High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security. Therefore, the Presidency has lost much of its foreign policy roles, as well as its agenda-setting and brokerage responsibilities in the European Council. Although the office has lost some of its previous functions, in other aspects the Presidency continues to fulfil important tasks in the day-to day functioning of the Council,¹² in guiding EU legislative processes, steering decision-making processes and building consensus between Member State governments and institutions of the EU.

⁸ Häge, „The Presidency of the Council of the European Union”, 2018.

⁹ „Presidency Conclusions: Seville European Council”, Presidency of the European Council, 22 June 2002., <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/20928/72638.pdf>.

¹⁰ Häge, „The Presidency of the Council of the European Union”, 2018.

¹¹ Häge, „The Presidency of the Council of the European Union”, 2019.

¹² Häge, „The Presidency of the Council of the European Union”, 2019.

EU law on the Presidency's powers

The Treaties do not define the exact powers and functions of the Presidency. Article 16 (9) of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) establishes that the Presidency of Council configurations – except for the Foreign Affairs Council – should be held by representatives of Member States and should be rotated equally.¹³ Article 237 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) says that “the Council shall meet when convened by its President on his own initiative or at the request of one of its Members or of the Commission.”¹⁴ Both of these paragraphs set out only very narrow and specific organizational rules, rather than explaining the roles or the functioning of the Presidency. Detailed tasks of the office are defined by the Handbook of the Presidency of the Council of the European Union. According to the Handbook, the key tasks of the Presidency are the following: planning, coordinating and chairing Council meetings (including the preparatory bodies), suggesting compromise solutions with the aim of reaching an agreement in the Council (being an honest broker), representing the Council towards other EU institutions and negotiating on behalf of the Council to reach legislative agreements with these institutions.¹⁵ Already these tasks contain more than just a narrow definition of roles, they also describe the spirit in which the President has to act: cooperatively and always aiming at reaching a compromise. The Handbook goes further into defining the principles according to which the President needs to act: the office is “by definition neutral and impartial,” it moderates the debates and therefore cannot favour its own or another Member State's preferences.¹⁶

¹³ „Consolidated Version of the Treaty on European Union”, Official Journal of the European Union, 2012. október 26., <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:12012M/TXT&from=EN>.

¹⁴ „Consolidated Version of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union”, Official Journal of the European Union, 26 October 2012., <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:12012E/TXT&from=EN>.

¹⁵ „Handbook of the Presidency of the Council of the European Union”, Council of the European Union, 2018, 9, https://kritisches-netzwerk.de/sites/default/files/handbook_of_the_presidency_of_the_council_of_the_european_union_-_edition_2018_-_111_pages.pdf.

¹⁶ „Handbook of the Presidency of the Council of the European Union”, 10.

The Presidency's roles

When it comes to the responsibilities of the Council Presidency, researchers usually define the main roles as managing and organizing the Council's work (sometimes referred to as the business manager role),¹⁷ mediating, providing political leadership and providing internal and external representation.¹⁸ Tallberg's definition of roles is also similar, although he differentiates between agenda management, brokerage and representation.¹⁹ An instrument for agenda-management is the allocation of time across different working bodies and determining the content of the meetings. Brokerage refers to aiming at compromises as described by the Handbook and representation means presenting but also defending common Council positions towards other actors.²⁰ In his detailed analysis of the powers of the Presidency, Tallberg examined the ability to shape the agenda and extended the concept of influence. Although the term agenda-setting has long been used to describe the role of the Presidency, Tallberg took a twist on the concept and extended the scope of influence. He coined the term 'agenda-shaping' and distinguished its three forms: agenda-setting, agenda-structuring and agenda exclusion. Agenda-setting refers to raising awareness to problems that have previously been neglected, developing concrete proposals for action and developing new institutional practices.²¹ Agenda-structuring means setting the frequency of meetings, holding informal meetings, structuring the agenda of the meetings and the co-decision procedure also belongs to this set of instruments.²² Agenda exclusion occurs when the Presiding

¹⁷ Lucia Quaglia and Edward Moxon-Browne, „What Makes a Good EU Presidency? Italy and Ireland Compared“, *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* vol 44, 2 (2006): 351, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5965.2006.00626.x>.

¹⁸ Mark Harwood, „The Continuing Significance of the Council of the EU Presidency for Small States: Agenda Setting or Painting-by-Numbers?“, *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* vol 33, 3 (2025): 720, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14782804.2024.2411633>; Häge, „The Presidency of the Council of the European Union“, 2015; Adriaan Schout and Sophie Vanhoonacker, „Evaluating Presidencies of the Council of the EU: Revisiting Nice“, *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* vol 44, 5 (2006): 1052, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5965.2006.00673.x>.

¹⁹ Tallberg, *Leadership and Negotiation in the European Union*.

²⁰ Häge, „The Presidency of the Council of the European Union“, 2020.

²¹ Jonas Tallberg, „The Agenda-Shaping Powers of the EU Council Presidency“, *Journal of European Public Policy* vol. 10, 1 (2003): 6, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1350176032000046903>.

²² Tallberg, „The Agenda-Shaping Powers of the EU Council Presidency“, 10-11.

country remains silent on an issue, it excludes certain items from the agenda or even when it presents impossible compromise proposals.²³

As Häge points it out, in order to fill the tasks mentioned above, the Presidency is equipped with a wide variety of resources, such as organizational and procedural prerogatives, access to sensitive information or discretion. These resources could potentially be used to advance the Member State's own interests instead of serving the collective goals of the Council.²⁴ Therefore, the question arises: why do other Member States take the risk and decide to delegate such important powers to the Presidency? According to Tallberg's functionalist understanding Member States recognize that delegating powers to the Presidency increases the efficiency of agenda-management, therefore reduces transaction costs and solves collective action problems.²⁵ In contrast, Kleine explains the accumulation of the Presidency's competences as the result of informal practices aimed at compensating for domestic policy uncertainties and maintaining international cooperation.²⁶

National interests in brokerage

Great power comes with great responsibility, therefore the possibilities of abuse of power should also be considered regarding the Presidencies. Whether the Presidency can exploit the powers vested in the institution to advance its own priorities and preferences has been extensively covered in the academic literature. In order to answer this dilemma, a distinction should be made between scheduling power and proposal-making power because these two differ "in terms of their source, their goal, and the means through which they are employed."²⁷ Scheduling power is based on formal and informal rules that entitle the presiding Member State to programme the work of the Council for six months, including establishing meeting calendars and agendas of individual meetings. In short,

²³ Tallberg, „The Agenda-Shaping Powers of the EU Council Presidency”, 12-13.

²⁴ Häge, „The Presidency of the Council of the European Union”, 2020.

²⁵ Tallberg, *Leadership and Negotiation in the European Union*.

²⁶ Mareike Kleine, *Informal Governance in the European Union: How Governments Make International Organizations Work* (Cornell University Press, 2013),
<https://doi.org/10.7591/cornell/9780801452116.001.0001>.

²⁷ Häge, „The Presidency of the Council of the European Union”, 2024.

they are quite concrete, formal tasks. These powers are more legitimate and less likely to be challenged, since they are unlikely to harm the neutrality of the Presidency. Still, according to the Handbook, although it should remain neutral, the President can put on the agenda matters that are important to them. Proposal-making power, is less clear in this regard because it is based on the informal understanding that the Presidency is responsible for helping the Member States reach an agreement.²⁸

The problem with proposal-making power is that the Member States participating in the negotiations cannot be sure, whether the proposal of the President is self-serving or is necessary in order to conclude negotiations successfully.²⁹ The Handbook states that "The Presidency is by definition neutral and impartial. It is the moderator of the discussions and therefore cannot favour his own or a particular Member State's preferences" - this essentially excludes the power of proposal-making, so in principle the President cannot push their own agenda, as that would be an abuse of power.³⁰ Therefore, if the presiding Member State tries to exercise its proposal-making power, they may face resistance from other Member States. Empirical studies have found support for the Presidency's exercise of both powers, however, the results regarding the Presidency's scheduling power are more consistent than the results about proposal-making power.³¹ Still, trying to pursue national interests meanwhile observing the main roles of the Presidency might be the most common behaviour of Council chairs. The rationalist approach examining EU Presidencies argues, the countries conduct a cost-benefit analysis and thus regard holding the position of the chair as an additional opportunity to exert national interests.³² While it is common knowledge that the rotating Presidency might pursue some national interest, Presidencies in general try to avoid being labelled as partial.³³

²⁸ Häge, „The presidency of the council of the European Union”, 17.

²⁹ Häge, „The Presidency of the Council of the European Union”, 29.

³⁰ Häge, „The presidency of the council of the European Union”, 22.

³¹ Häge, „The presidency of the council of the European Union”, 28.

³² Ole Elgström and Jonas Tallberg, „Rationalist and sociological perspectives on the Council Presidency?”, in *European Union Council Presidencies. A Comparative Perspective*, ed. Ole Elgström (Routledge, 2003).

³³ Ole Elgström and Jonas Tallberg, „Conclusion: Rationalist and Sociological Perspectives on the Council Presidency”, in *European Union Council Presidencies: A Comparative Perspective*, ed. Ole Elgström (Routledge, 2003), 202.

In its brokering activities, the Presidency is prevented from abusing its power by formal rules and informal norms. The most important formal constraints are decision rules in the adaption of proposals. The informal norms are effectiveness, consensus-building and the above-mentioned neutrality prescribed by the Handbook.³⁴ If a Member State violates neutrality, it may have reputational consequences, as mentioned above in relation to proposal-making power. However, Presidencies might still be urged to violate the norm of neutrality, but only if their own preferred outcome is different from the outcome expected under neutral brokerage. Thus, a Presidency with unusual or extreme preferences is tempted to abandon neutrality, while a presidency with central, uncontentious preferences has less reasons not to comply.³⁵ Hungary's case will show that the Member State may completely ignore the neutrality norm during its Presidential mandate.

To sum up the aspects of preference formation as an acting Council President, academic literature usually comes to the conclusion that the Presidency has considerable leeway to set the agenda by deciding what topics to discuss, when and how much time to allocate to them.³⁶ A President can only be an effective mediator if other Member States trust its impartiality. Therefore, merely out of caution, the Presidency can be expected to refrain from making strongly biased proposals.³⁷ The Presidency can only be a reliable mediator if it does not demand concessions from the majority. The Member State, during those six months, must act impartially and neutrally to fulfil its role as a mediator in negotiations, which limits its discretion to pursue national interests.³⁸ The roles and preference formation techniques described above already indicate that a Member State can be considered successful only if it effectively fulfils the expected behaviours and functions. All these observations, however, take it for granted, that the presiding Member States wants to serve EU purposes and fulfil traditional roles, as defined by the Treaties or the

³⁴ Ole Elgström, „The Presidency: the role(s) of the chair in European Union negotiations”, *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy* vol. 1, 2 (2006): 171–95.

³⁵ Jonas Tallberg, „The Power of the Presidency: Brokerage, Efficiency and Distribution in EU Negotiations*”, *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* vol 42, 5 (2004): 1005–6, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0021-9886.2004.00538.x>.

³⁶ Frank M. Häge, „The Scheduling Power of the EU Council Presidency”, *Journal of European Public Policy* vol 24, 5 (2017): 695–713, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2016.1158203>.

³⁷ Häge, „The presidency of the council of the European Union”, 23.

³⁸ Häge, „The presidency of the council of the European Union”, 24–25.

Handbook. There is a certain approach, honest brokerage, that is assumed on the part of the Member State charged with the Presidency. The broker is also a particular figure, reflecting a political economy approach to EU politics: there is a 'demand' for certain issues and agendas, and the broker supplies and manages those agendas through having a good sense of where consensus is achievable and where pushback is expected. Hungary's political figure, however, is more akin to the troll, or the carnivalesque trickster that does not follow the rules of the game and acts however it pleases with the main purpose of attracting attention and creating drama.³⁹ The term 'peacock dance' was often used to describe how Viktor Orbán has conducted his negotiations with the EU in the last decade. This rogue behaviour, instead of the traditional rules-based conduct of the chair, was detectable during the Hungarian Presidency.

What makes a Presidency successful?

One of the biggest undertakings of this paper is not to evaluate whether Hungary's 2024 Presidency was successful, but to propose new ways to think about success in the first place. Evaluating a country's performance as a President will always be a subjective exercise.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, there are some indicators that the academic literature uses in this in this regard. Scholars usually agree that a Presidency is successful if it succeeds in advancing the negotiating dossiers, mediating preferences between national and European institutions, and reaching agreement on some important issues.⁴¹ Success subsequently depends on the country's ability to fulfil the roles that are required from it on the Council level, during that certain period of time.⁴² This means that the concept of success is defined within a strict timeframe, which usually begins on the first day of the Presidency and ends on the last. Moreover, the chair's success as a broker depends on its

³⁹ Valerie Hopkins, „Viktor Orban's 'peacock dance' with EU may be step too far”, 5 March 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/8a9b0b82-3e91-11e9-b896-fe36ec32aece>.

⁴⁰ Ian Manners, „The 2012 Danish Presidency of the Council of the European Union: Bridging Exclusion”, *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* vol 51, S1 (2013): 70–79, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.12056>.

⁴¹ Ramūnas Vilpišauskas, „Lithuania's EU Council Presidency: Negotiating Finances, Dealing with Geopolitics”, *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* vol 52, S1 (2014): 99–108, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.12164>; Vít Beneš and Jan Karlas, „The Czech Presidency”, *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* vol 48, S1 (2010): 69–80, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5965.2010.02094.x>.

⁴² Schout and Vanhoonacker, „Evaluating Presidencies of the Council of the EU”, 1057.

ability to facilitate rather than to direct Council proceedings,⁴³ and it is also largely determined by both the external and the internal environment. A favourable external environment might facilitate the success of the Presidency but also serve as a constraint.⁴⁴ It is worth noticing that all criteria of success defined by the literature are biased in the sense that they take for granted that the chairing Member State is acting or will act in good faith. This is why this paper proposes not only to rethink the category of success as such, but also to unpack the conceptual politics of how it has been understood thus far.

Toneva-Metodieva offers a framework of quantifiable indicators that should be studied for the evaluation of the performance of the Presidency. She identifies three main groups of activity of the Presidency that determine the work of the chair. Chairing the Council meetings and participating in dialogues with the EP and the Commission, engaging in negotiations under various non-legislative processes, such as concluding international agreements, adopting the budget or elaborating strategic policy documents, and last but not least, putting forward or continuing political and strategic initiatives, based on individual preferences and conditions of the EU political arena. She finds that these indicators need to be studied, if one wants to analyse the performance and accomplishments of a Council Presidency. In other words, success here is understood in terms of a template to abide by. There are certain practices that can be done competently or incompetently.⁴⁵

Agenda-shaping is also considered to be one of the main roles of the Presidency and it is also considered to be the requirement of success. This can be translated as the 'effectiveness norm' identified by Elgström and Tallberg,⁴⁶ which means that Presidencies should actively work towards the European agenda and they should aim at concluding as many outstanding issues (dossiers or deliverables) as possible. With regard to brokerage,

⁴³ Sandrino Smeets and Jac Vennix, „How to Make the Most of Your Time in the Chair': EU Presidencies and the Management of Council Debates", *Journal of European Public Policy* vol 21, 10 (2014): 1435, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2014.914055>.

⁴⁴ Monika Sus, „Making Use of a Window of Opportunity: The Czech Presidency's Performance in Foreign and Security Policy", *Czech Journal of International Relations* vol 58, 1 (2023): 103, <https://doi.org/10.32422/mv-cjir.515>.

⁴⁵ Linka Toneva-Metodieva, „Evaluating the Presidency of the Council of the EU: Towards a Comprehensive Evidence-Based Framework for Performance Assessment", *European Politics and Society* vol 21, 5 (2020): 654–55, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23745118.2020.1712539>.

⁴⁶ Elgström and Tallberg, „Conclusion: Rationalist and Sociological Perspectives on the Council Presidency", 202.

the already mentioned impartiality is a pre-requisite for success.⁴⁷ Understanding the power dynamic within the Council, thus correctly assessing mood is also understood as a defining condition of success.⁴⁸ Dimitrakopoulos and Pappas understand success similarly, as they referred to the chair's ability to 'increase the pace of integration' and 'to manage political divergence.'⁴⁹ There are several definitions of an effective chair, but the main criteria usually are: being able to conclude negotiations, ensuring that the outcome meets quality standards and maintaining a good atmosphere, or one that achieves its objectives.⁵⁰

Smeets and Vennix argue that the way to evaluate a Presidency's success is to determine what successful Presidencies have in common. This common feature is their "ability to shape or at least to correctly assess their negotiation environment, meaning the configuration of players within the Council".⁵¹ They define „the degree to which a Presidency has been able to speed up (or slow down) decision-making in an issue area.”⁵² Therefore, what matters is the amount of progress the chair can achieve in those issue areas on which it decides to concentrate. This is an interesting interpretation and also somewhat different from the previous, more objective understandings of success, because it brings in the perspective of the Member State and what it considers to be important. These competencies were identified as proposal-making power in the literature. It is one of the more contested competences of the President, as it entails pushing ones own agenda, which in theory is against the honest broker nature of the President.

Smeets and Vennix's understanding of success serves as a good starting point for this paper's own interpretation of success because it focuses on the chair deciding what is important for them and focusing on that during the Presidency. Because what happens if the presiding country does not want to fulfil the roles that are required from it by the Council? Or what if their main goal during the Presidency period is not to push the

⁴⁷ Elgström and Tallberg, „Conclusion: Rationalist and Sociological Perspectives on the Council Presidency”, 201.

⁴⁸ Smeets and Vennix, „How to Make the Most of Your Time in the Chair”, 1440.

⁴⁹ Dionyssis G. Dimitrakopoulos and Argyris G. Passas, „The Greek Presidency: In the Shadow of War”, *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* vol 42, s1 (2004): 45, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0021-9886.2004.00500.x>.

⁵⁰ Schout and Vanhoonacker, „Evaluating Presidencies of the Council of the EU”, 1057.

⁵¹ Smeets and Vennix, „How to Make the Most of Your Time in the Chair”, 1436.

⁵² Smeets and Vennix, „How to Make the Most of Your Time in the Chair”, 1437.

*Veronika Czina / When The Renegade Takes The Wheel: Lessons Learned From Hungary's
2024 Council Presidency*

European, but their own agenda? While not disagreeing with the extensive academic literature covering the success of Council presidencies, I propose to look at success through a new lens.

This study argues that a distinction should be made between success from the perspective of the EU, and from that of the Member State. Even if the chair falls short in performing adequately from the perspective of the EU, and from what would be considered a success for the community, it may still have achievements in its own terms, results that are only important for the Member State in question. To put it simply, one might measure success based on how many dossiers were closed during the Presidency or how many high-level meetings were organized, but the Member State might have a completely separate agenda it wants to push during its six-month mandate. Overall, the literature has not only specified particular criteria of success. It has also implicitly articulated a baseline behavioural model according to which Member States should conduct themselves in and through the Presidency. This model has stressed the good-faith nature of the Member State, its care for the common project of the EU, and a particular Presidency rationality understood in terms of bargaining. While this model has been useful for assessing past presidencies, its behavioural expectations warrant a rethinking in light of a recent exceptional case, the Hungarian Presidency of 2024.

There is another factor that needs to be taken into account when analysing the Hungarian case, and it is the fact that Hungary is considered a rogue Member State, with several domestic political issues and also tense relations with the EU. Therefore, the subject of the analysis is not a liberal democracy, but a populist regime, already stigmatised by the EU. One would think that a country which experiences domestic instability, economic difficulties or has tensions with the EU, cannot conduct a successful Presidency. Quaglia and Moxon-Browne argue that good relations with EU institutions matter a great deal in determining a Presidency's success because the chair is expected to be the liaison point for EU institutions and national governments. They use the 2003 Italian Presidency to back their argument when there was clear tension between Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi and Commission President Romano Prodi. They come to the

conclusion that exporting domestic politics to the EU arena did not serve the Italian Presidency well.⁵³

According to Ramona Coman, the success of some Presidencies stands in stark contrast with the Member State's domestic problems or difficult relations within the EU. A good example for this is the Czech Presidency of 2009, the Hungarian in 2011 or the Belgian in 2010. Coman argues that this phenomenon can be explained as a two-level game. During the six months of the Presidency interactions happen on the national and the supranational levels as well. Although the government defines the priorities of the Presidency on the national level, and it is the political leader on the supranational level as well, most of the achievements of the Presidency can be attributed to the diplomats and civil servants who act as agenda-setters, organisers, mediators and honest-brokers. The prominent role of these actors actually neutralises the domestic political factors that would otherwise make the Presidency's tasks more difficult or unsuccessful.⁵⁴ Coman justifies her claim through the example of Romania's Presidency during the first half of 2019.

Hungary and its turbulent relations with the EU provide a good test case to see whether the black sheep of the EU, the country that has probably had the bumpiest relationship with the EU in the last 15 years was actually able to overcome its domestic difficulties and conduct a successful Presidency. The following pages present the most important events of the Hungarian Presidency (which cannot be constrained to the six-months period), its priorities and the tactics the Hungarian government pursued as Council President. The dynamics between Hungary's ways of exerting preferences and the EU's reception of such behaviours will shed light on a different understanding of success.

⁵³ Quaglia and Moxon-Browne, „What Makes a Good EU Presidency?”, 361.

⁵⁴ Ramona Coman, „The Rotating Presidency of the EU Council as a Two-Level Game, or How the “Brussels Model” Neutralises Domestic Political Factors: The Case of Romania”, *East European Politics* vol 36, 4 (2020): 587, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2020.1737522>.

The Hungarian Presidency

Expanding the timeframe and scope of determining Council Presidency success

The Hungarian Presidency of the Council of the European Union unfolded against a backdrop of persistent domestic political and legal controversies that, while not directly linked to the Presidency's agenda, significantly shaped the public perception and the expectations about it. In July 2024, the European Commission's annual Rule of Law Report once again issued a strongly critical assessment of Hungary, reinforcing long-standing concerns over democratic standards and governance.⁵⁵ Around the same period, the Hungarian government amended its decree on the national card scheme, expanding eligibility for permanent employment to nationals of several non-EU countries, including Moldova, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Russia, and Ukraine—an initiative that attracted scrutiny in light of the EU's current troubled relations with Russia and the security of the Schengen Area altogether.⁵⁶ Legal tensions were further underscored by the fact that Hungary's infamous Law on the Protection of Sovereignty became the subject of proceedings before the European Court of Justice, marking another milestone in Hungary's increasingly notorious rule of law violations saga.⁵⁷

One cannot examine the Hungarian Council Presidency without considering some major events that preceded 2024 and determined the nature of the Hungarian government's relationship within the EU. Even before the summer of 2024, Hungary's relations with the EU were never stormier and the conflicts appeared on several fronts. Due to the EU's concerns about the state of the rule of law in Hungary, EU funds have been suspended in Hungary in 2022 through the rule of law conditionality mechanism and the Recovery and Resilience Facility.⁵⁸ The Russo-Ukrainian war was not a subject where

⁵⁵ „2024 Rule of Law Report: Country Chapter on the rule of law situation in Hungary”, European Commission, 24 June 2024., https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/e90ed74c-7ae1-4bfb-8b6e-829008bd2cc6_en?filename=40_1_58071_coun_chap_hungary_en.pdf.

⁵⁶ „Orbán's »National Card« scheme risks »temporary suspension of Hungary's Schengen status«”, [reneweuropegroup.eu](https://www.reneweuropegroup.eu/news/2024-09-18/orbans-national-card-scheme-risks-temporary-suspension-of-hungarys-schengen-status), Renew Europe, 18 September 2024., <https://www.reneweuropegroup.eu/news/2024-09-18/orbans-national-card-scheme-risks-temporary-suspension-of-hungarys-schengen-status>.

⁵⁷ „Commission decides to refer HUNGARY to the Court of Justice”, European Commission website, 3 October 2024., https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/mt/ip_24_4865.

⁵⁸ Veronika Czina, „The effectiveness of the EU's rule of law conditionality mechanism: Theoretical observations based on the case of Hungary”, *Intersections* vol 10, 1 (2024): 171–88, <https://doi.org/10.17356/ieejsp.v10i1.1212>.

*Veronika Czina / When The Renegade Takes The Wheel: Lessons Learned From Hungary's
2024 Council Presidency*

Hungary stood united with the EU either. Hungary has never expressed open solidarity with Ukraine, as the government applied a rhetoric in which they oppose the war itself, while identifying all aid provided to Ukraine as supporting the war and not aiming to end it as soon as possible. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán vetoed the EU's attempts to provide aid to Ukraine several times since the outbreak of the war and Hungary also opposed Ukraine's EU membership. Accession negotiations could only be open in December 2023 because Orbán was sent out of the room "to grab a coffee", thus the Council could come to a unanimous decision without him.⁵⁹ Besides the erosion of the rule of law, the flourishing of corruption and violation of democratic principles, Hungary's choice of international allies also raised critiques from the EU. Even after the Russo-Ukrainian war broke out, the Hungarian government kept its close ties with Russia. Moreover, after the country lost a significant part of its EU funding, it turned towards China for loans several times. Last but not least, Hungary was an open supporter of Donald Trump's Presidential campaign, welcoming a new, post-liberal world, in which national-security, traditional values and secure borders would be the cornerstone of international cooperation. Due to the above-mentioned developments, even Hungary's ability to conduct an honest and successful Presidency was questioned by the EU itself. In 2023 a non-binding resolution was issued by the European Parliament which outright questioned Hungary's credibility to hold such an important position and called for finding a solution.⁶⁰ Green, leftist and liberal MEPs repeatedly called for cancelling the Hungarian Presidency.⁶¹

The period of July-December 2024 coincided with setting up the college of Commissioners following the European Parliamentary elections of June 2024. Hungary's proposed Commissioner was yet again Olivér Várhelyi, who was looking at a demotion after having held the position of Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement in

⁵⁹ Hans von der Burchard, „Scholz gets Orbán out the room to open Ukraine's membership talks”, *Politico*, 10 December 2023., <https://www.politico.eu/article/olaf-scholz-gets-viktor-orban-out-the-room-to-approve-ukraine-accession-talks/>.

⁶⁰ Nicolas Camut, „Parliament easily backs measure aimed at restraining Hungary's EU presidency”, *Politico*, 1 June 2023., <https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-parliament-clears-measure-aimed-restraining-hungarys-eu-presidency/>.

⁶¹ Emanuele Bonini, „Cancel rotating presidency”. EU Parliament, new attacks on Orbán's Hungary”, *EU News*, 6 February 2024., <https://www.eunews.it/en/2024/02/06/cancel-rotating-presidency-eu-parliament-new-attacks-on-orbans-hungary/>.

the previous von der Leyen Commission. In the newly formed Commission, Várhelyi was offered the Health and Animal Welfare portfolio. After having failed to fully convince the European Parliament's Environment, Public Health and Food Safety and Agriculture Committees on his hearing on 6 November, he had to answer a further round of written questions. Some political groups in the EU were not convinced that he was the right person for the job based on his lack of experience on the topic and his answers regarding sexual and reproductive rights. The solution of the EP was to strip his position of oversight after reproductive and sexual rights as well as health preparedness.⁶² Another factor that determined the nature of Hungary's Presidency was the timing: it is coming from the inherent nature of the EU that the first few months after the EP elections are about institutional transition and setting-up the administrative bodies, therefore not much can happen during a transitory Presidency when it comes to policy-making.

The circumstances under which Hungary had to begin its Presidency show that instead of limiting success to the institutional timeframe of the Presidency, we need to expand the concept by considering that *having the ability* to hold the Presidency has itself become less than trivial in today's EU. Having the ability to hold the Presidency is itself a form of success, particularly for a Member State like Hungary. Not only does this show that Hungary was never expected by the rest of the EU to be an honest broker, it also demonstrates that getting to hold the Presidency is itself a political contestation within the EU. Therefore, this paper argues that one cannot limit their analysis only for the six-months-period of the Presidency, but the relevant preceding interactions between the EU and the Member State, as well as the political circumstances on the national level should be taken into account. To sum up, the overall political climate before Hungary began its Presidency in the summer of 2024 was rather sceptical about the possibilities of Hungary conducting a 'successful' Presidency. The following pages will demonstrate how Hungary defied these expectations and transformed the meaning of success in the traditional sense of the word.

⁶² „MEPs strip Hungarian Commissioner of key health competencies | Euronews”, access 2 February 2026., <https://www.euronews.com/health/2024/11/20/meps-strip-hungarian-commissioner-of-key-health-competencies>.

Important milestones during the Hungarian Presidency

Despite the critical voices coming from within the EU itself, the Hungarian Presidency was not cancelled in the end. The priorities of the Presidency were revealed in June. The country committed to tackle key themes with its seven priorities, that were: a new European competitiveness deal, the reinforcement of European defence policy, a consistent and merit-based enlargement policy, stemming illegal migration, shaping the future of cohesion policy, a farmer-centered EU agricultural policy and addressing democratic challenges. The choice of these topics was justified by the political and economic reality of the time.

It was clear from the outset that Hungary would try to use the office of the Presidency to promote its own Eurosceptic, sovereignty-oriented political ambitions, rather than serving the roles usually intended for the chair. This was the perceived national interest of the Hungarian government, and they saw the Presidency as an opportunity to pursue these preferences instead of remaining neutral. A clear sign of this was the choice of the slogan “Make Europe Great Again” which was a straightforward reference to Trump’s “Make America Great Again” used in his election campaign. The choice of this motto was a symbolic message to the whole world about where Hungary stands on the political map of the world. Hungarian EU Affairs Minister János Bóka said that “it is a reference to an active Presidency” that “shows the expectation that together we should be stronger than individually but that we should be allowed to remain who we are when we come together. It also portrays the idea that Europe is able to become an independent global actor in our transforming world.”⁶³

Another sign of Hungary’s abandonment of the neutrality norm was Viktor Orbán’s so-called ‘peace mission’ at the beginning of July when he travelled to meet several important heads of state to talk about the prospects of peace and the possibilities for ending the Russo-Ukrainian war.⁶⁴ At first, one could have hoped for a shift in preferences or a

⁶³ Eddy Wax and Gabriel Gavin, „Make Europe Great Again: Hungary channels Trump in EU Presidency slogan”, *Politico*, 8 June 2024., <https://www.politico.eu/article/make-europe-great-again-hungary-channels-donald-trump-eu-presidency-slogan-viktor-orban/>.

⁶⁴ Abby Higgins, *Hungary’s Viktor Orbán and the July “Peace Mission”*, 5 September 2024., <https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/hungarys-viktor-orban-and-the-july-peace-mission/>.

*Veronika Czina / When The Renegade Takes The Wheel: Lessons Learned From Hungary's
2024 Council Presidency*

consolidation from Hungary's part as the first destination of the Hungarian Prime Minister was Kyiv where he spoke with President Volodymyr Zelensky. The two politicians discussed the possibilities of a ceasefire and peace negotiations. However, Orbán next travelled to Moscow to meet with Vladimir Putin. This was followed by a visit to Beijing to meet with Xi Jinping where the Hungarian praised China for its constructive efforts to achieve peace. The final stop of Orbán was in the United States where he went to Mar-a-Lago to meet Donald Trump with whom they also discussed peace options and Orbán also endorsed Trump's re-election campaign. The follow-up of the tour was a letter written by Orbán to Charles Michel, President of the European Council, in which he summarized his experience and noted that the 'pro-war policy' of the US was not working and the EU should diverge from this strategy.⁶⁵ Starting the Presidency like this was a clear sign that Hungary was not aiming at achieving success in the traditional sense of the word. Performing well on the dossiers was much less important for Hungary than the sheer fact of being seen at the helm of the EU for six months.

Although the travels of Prime Minister Orbán were not officially carried out within the framework of the Presidency (as the Presidency does not have foreign policy competence), they still resulted in a backlash from the EU. The fact that in the first meetings, Orbán's delegation used the EU flag was a clear sign that Hungary went rogue and wanted to provoke Brussels. High Representative Josep Borrell was quick to emphasize that the Hungarian Prime Minister was not representing the EU in any form, and Charles Michel reminded that the rotating Presidency has no mandate to engage with international partners about the questions of war and peace.⁶⁶ Other Member States also intervened in the debate, including Lithuania and Estonia whose leaders called out the importance of supporting Ukraine and not fraternizing with Russia.⁶⁷ Some political

⁶⁵ Viktor Orbán, „Report of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán to Charles Michel, President of the European Council”, 18 July 2024., <https://miniszterelnok.hu/en/report-of-prime-minister-viktor-orban-to-charles-michel-president-of-the-european-council/>.

⁶⁶ Higgins, *Hungary's Viktor Orbán and the July "Peace Mission"*.

⁶⁷ Vladimir Soldatkin and Anita Komuves, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/hungarys-orban-says-no-position-negotiate-between-ukraine-hungarys-orban-talks-ukraine-peace-with-putin-stirring-eu-outcry>, 5 July 2024., <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/hungarys-orban-says-no-position-negotiate-between-ukraine-russia-2024-07-05/#:~:text=European%20Commission%20President%20Ursula%20von,%2C%22%20she%20said%20on%20X>.

groups of the European Parliament expressed concerns about Orbán's actions and called for boycotting the Presidency events or even withdrawing the Presidency itself.

As a result of this contentious start, not only some Member States (such as the Baltic states, Finland, Sweden or Poland) decided to boycott informal meetings during the Hungarian Presidency, but even the European Commission asked its Commissioners to abstain from ministerial meetings.⁶⁸ Thus, it comes as no surprise that in August,⁶⁹ the informal Foreign Affairs Council meeting was held in Brussels, instead of Budapest, and on 2-3 September only half of the ministers came to the meeting of EU affairs ministers to Budapest. On the latter meeting, the Commission did not represent itself at the highest political level either. Many who came to Budapest for those few days met with representatives of the civil society, a sector that has been highly oppressed in Hungary for years, and they addressed the question of rule of law violations with these NGOs.⁷⁰ This was a symbolic opposition to the Hungarian government's domestic political conduct.

The programme of the Presidency was presented unusually late, in October, due to the fact that the floodings occurring in Hungary in September forced the Prime Minister to focus on solving the emergency instead of travelling to Brussels. On 8 October in Strasbourg, Orbán spoke at an international press conference to present the programme of the Presidency. Besides mentioning the priorities, he put a lot of emphasis on the war on Ukraine and peace in his speech. He stressed the importance of a ceasefire and stated that whoever wanted to support Ukraine could do so, but it should be a voluntary decision by each Member State. He also highlighted that Europe was in a crisis and that Hungary could be a catalyst for change in this situation. The war, migration and the importance of security and defence were recurring themes in his speech.⁷¹ On 9 October, instead of a simple presentation of the Hungarian Presidency's programme or priorities, a very heated

⁶⁸ Alexandra Brzozowski, „Commissioners to boycott attendance at Hungary meetings over Orbán's Ukraine diplomacy”, *Euractiv*, 15 July 2024., <https://www.euractiv.com/news/commissioners-to-boycott-attendance-at-hungary-meetings-over-orbans-ukraine-diplomacy/>.

⁶⁹ Alexandra Brzozowski, „EU braces for autumn battles with Budapest”, *Euractiv*, 29 August 2026., <https://www.euractiv.com/news/eu-braces-for-autumn-battles-with-budapest/>.

⁷⁰ Andrew Rettman, „Hungary in denial as EU continues snubbing its presidency”, *EUobserver*, 4 September 2024., <https://euobserver.com/65810/hungary-in-denial-as-eu-continues-snubbing-its-presidency/>.

⁷¹ Viktor Orbán, „Press statement by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán at an international press conference”, About Hungary, 8 October 2024., <https://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/press-statement-by-prime-minister-viktor-orban-at-an-international-press-conference>.

debate occurred in the European Parliament. Even though Orbán opened the floor with an uncontroversial, restrained, even constructive speech, he was severely criticised by his political opponents. First, Commission President Von der Leyen and then EPP leader Manfred Weber confronted the Prime Minister about his stance on Russia and Ukraine and his domestic politics. They were backed up by many progressive MEPs who criticised Orbán for his “false patriotism”, corruption and running his country by blaming Brussels for everything bad that was happening. Only sovereigntist, right-wing MEPs expressed solidarity with Orbán. Even newly emerged Hungarian opposition leader, Péter Magyar spoke up and promised to end Orbán’s governance through winning the Hungarian parliamentary elections in 2026.⁷² After this, Orbán’s tone was not so constructive and peaceful anymore when he reacted to the critiques he received. The plenary session quickly escalated into a debate about the legitimacy of the Hungarian government and the different questionable conducts of Orbán instead of the Hungarian Presidency programme and the promises of the remaining three months of the rotating mandate.

Despite this bumpy start, the Presidency was able to deliver some tangible results. Although it was not a priority for Hungary, rather on the contrary, on 9 October the Council reached an agreement on a financial assistance package for Ukraine, including an exceptional macro-financial assistance (MFA) loan of up to €35 billion and a lending cooperation mechanism to help Ukraine repay loans of up to €45 billion from the EU and G7 partners. Although Hungary and Malta abstained, they did not veto the decision that was later approved by the EP on 22 October.⁷³ On 17 October a European Council meeting was held in Brussels without any scandals. EU leaders came to agreement on questions related to Ukraine, the Middle East, ensuring a rules-based international order,

⁷² Simone de la Feld, „Von der leyen attacks Orbán in EU Parliament. Tensions erupt as pro-European forces face off against sovereignists”, *EU News*, 9 October 2024., <https://www.eunews.it/en/2024/10/09/von-der-leyen-attacks-orban-in-eu-parliament-tensions-erupt-as-pro-european-forces-face-off-against-sovereignists/>.

⁷³ „Immobilised assets: Council agrees on up to €35 billion in macro-financial assistance to Ukraine and new loan mechanism implementing G7 commitment - Consilium”, access 30 January 2026., <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2024/10/09/immobilised-assets-council-agrees-on-up-to-35-billion-in-macro-financial-assistance-to-ukraine-and-new-loan-mechanism-implementing-g7-commitment/>.

*Veronika Czina / When The Renegade Takes The Wheel: Lessons Learned From Hungary's
2024 Council Presidency*

competitiveness, migration, the Republic of Moldova, Georgia, external relations and other items.⁷⁴

The most important event of the Hungarian Presidency was the meeting of the European Political Community on 7-8 November and the informal European Council meeting of 8 November in Budapest. At the EPC meeting press conference, the tone of Hungarian Prime Minister was calm but firm, highlighting that he did not agree with the activist law-shaping practices of the European Court of Justice and Hungary was going to confront every such attempt. He also highlighted that the 'pro-peace camp' in Europe was growing but there was no consensus on how to achieve said peace, moreover he expressed his hopes for Hungary's excellent relationship with the US and the benefits this may bring in the future.⁷⁵ After the European Council meeting, all speakers used much friendlier tones than back in Strasbourg a month before and they tried to focus on the achievements of the meeting, rather than the differences between Hungary and the EU.⁷⁶

The most prominent result of the meeting was the adoption of the new European Competitiveness Deal which is a short document summarizing the EU's main tasks and commitments regarding competitiveness, taking into account the previous highly relevant documents on the subject, the Letta-report and the Draghi-report.⁷⁷ The Budapest Declaration invited the Commission to present, by June 2025, a new strategy on the deepening of the Single Market, including a roadmap with clear timelines and milestones. It called for decisive steps towards the creation of a Savings and Investments Union and the Capital Markets Union. Developing European industrial policy, creating a clear and more simple regulatory framework (simplification revolution), increasing the

⁷⁴ „European Council, 17 October 2024”, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/european-council/2024/10/17/>.

⁷⁵ „Press statement by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán following the 5th meeting of the heads of state and government of the European Political Community”, About Hungary, 7 November 2024., <https://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/press-statement-by-prime-minister-viktor-orban-following-the-5th-meeting-of-the-heads-of-state-and-government-of-the-european-political-community>.

⁷⁶ „Informal meeting of heads of state or government - November 2024”, 8 November 2024., <https://newsroom.consilium.europa.eu/events/20241108-informal-meeting-of-heads-of-state-or-government-november-2024>.

⁷⁷ „Budapest Declaration on the New European Competitiveness Deal”, European Council, 8 November 2024., <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2024/11/08/the-budapest-declaration/>.

EU's defence readiness and capabilities, spending at least 3% of the GDP on R&D by 2030, pursuing strategic energy sovereignty and climate neutrality by 2050, creating a more resource-efficient economy focusing on critical raw materials, achieving a strong digital transformation and focusing on skills to foster high-quality jobs on the market were the main priorities of the deal. Last but not least, the document called for a sustainable trade policy with the WTO at its core and a sustainable and resilient agricultural sector based on funding fit for the future.

In December, the Council adopted the 15th package of economic and individual restrictive measures (sanctions) against Russia.⁷⁸ While Hungary quietly supported the sanctions package against Russia adopted by the Council, it did so with conditions. The government managed to remove several individuals and entities from the list of those subject to asset freezes and travel bans. Even though the Hungarian government did not want to attribute the decision on the sanctions package to be the merit of the Hungarian Presidency, Commission President von der Leyen specifically mentioned it as the greatest achievement of the six months. On the 9-10 December Council meeting an important resolution was adopted on the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) for the period after 2027. Although this has been on the agenda for a while, a consensus could not have been reached until Romania finally agreed to the document, and this happened in December 2024.⁷⁹

One of the greatest achievements of the Presidency period was the full accession of Romania and Bulgaria to the Schengen area as of 1 January 2025. The Hungarian Presidency claimed this success to be its own, despite the fact that it was Austria who was vetoing the process and it was the changes in the domestic political climate of Austria that

⁷⁸ „Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine: EU adopts 15th package of restrictive measures - Consilium”, Council of the European Union, 16 December 2024., <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2024/12/16/russia-s-war-of-aggression-against-ukraine-eu-adopts-15th-package-of-restrictive-measures/>.

⁷⁹ „Council Conclusions on a farmer-focused post-2027 Common Agricultural Policy: Towards a competitive, crisis-proof, sustainable, farmer-friendly and knowledge-based future EU agriculture”, Council of the European Union, 9 December 2024., <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-16694-2024-INIT/en/pdf>.

have led to the green light. Nevertheless, Hungary did not miss the opportunity and announced the decision after a ministerial-level meeting attended by Bulgaria, Romania, Austria, and Hungary. The announcement was later formalized by the interior ministers in December.⁸⁰

Evaluation and achievements

According to Political Capital, Hungary's 2024 Presidency was a deliberately political Presidency in which the black sheep of the EU, so often criticised on so many grounds, wanted his political views and preferences to be seen, while provoking the establishment and strengthening ideological allies.⁸¹ This could be interpreted as the Presidency being rather performative, focusing on symbolic acts and not shying away from performing politically sensitive actions meanwhile holding the helm at the Council. Even though Hungarian politicians have emphasised more than once, that Hungary wants to achieve results during its Presidency as an honest broker, this attitude was barely visible during the six-month period. The only significant example for such honest brokerage might be the European Council and EPC meetings held in November 2024. It comes as no surprise that the EU pushed back several times by trying to undermine the Presidency itself (though boycotting the meetings) and by even mocking Hungary (for instance during the October Plenary, or when Von der Leyen highlighted the Russia sanctions as the biggest achievements of the period).

If we look at the numbers, we get a mixed picture about the Presidency's results. During the six months of the Hungarian Presidency, Member States adopted 55 Council conclusions and reached a common position on 19 issues. As a comparison, these numbers were 60 under the preceding Belgian Presidency and 44 under the Swedish Presidency. Nine legislative acts were finalized during the informal inter-institutional negotiations between the Council, the Parliament and the Commission (trilogues). The transitional nature of the Presidency partly explains this low number, but not entirely. In

⁸⁰ „Hungary's EU presidency in review: remembered more for its unorthodoxy than its policy achievements”, Political Capital, 22 January 2025., https://politicalcapital.hu/news.php?article_read=1&article_id=3487.

⁸¹ „Hungary's EU presidency in review: remembered more for its unorthodoxy than its policy achievements”.

2019, Finland finalized 23 legislative acts, while in 2014 Italy finalized 20. Over 1,200 working group meetings, 50 COREPER meetings, 30 formal and 13 informal Council meetings were organized by the Hungarian Presidency.⁸² In addition, the EPC meeting and the informal meeting of heads of state and government – both flagship events of the Presidency – were held during the six months.

According to the European Environmental Bureau's evaluation, the Hungarian Presidency's lack of civil society engagement at the informal meeting of environmental ministers was a disappointment. The overall conclusion of the EEB on the Presidency was negative, especially in contrast with the Belgian, and previously the Spanish Presidency, whose legacy in environmental issues the Hungarian Presidency failed to continue.⁸³

Out of the seven priority areas (competitiveness, defence, enlargement, migration, cohesion policy, agricultural policy, demography), the Hungarian Presidency was able to show significant progress in three: competitiveness, enlargement, but only with a focus on the Western Balkans, and agricultural policy. The expansion of the Schengen Area can also be clocked as a great achievement, but the topic of demography remained neglected during the six months.⁸⁴ In the area of competitiveness, the Budapest Deal was the proof of success. In terms of enlargement, Hungary kept its focus on the Western Balkans, and three countries' accession processes reached new milestones during the Presidency period, namely Albania, Serbia and Montenegro. At the same time, North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Ukraine and Moldova did not experience any substantial progress during their accession negotiations in the second half of 2024.⁸⁵

Contrary to the Presidency's plans, Member States could not come to an agreement on several important matters, such as the Combating Child Sexual Abuse in the Online Space (CSA) dossier, the European Defense Industry Program (EDIP), the European

⁸² „Hungary's EU presidency in review: remembered more for its unorthodoxy than its policy achievements”.

⁸³ „The EEB's assessment of the environmental performance of the Hungarian Presidency of the EU”, European Environmental Bureau, December 2024., <https://eeb.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/EEB-Assessment-of-the-Hungarian-Presidency-of-the-EU.pdf>.

⁸⁴ „Hungary's EU presidency in review: remembered more for its unorthodoxy than its policy achievements”.

⁸⁵ „About Hungary - Hungary's EU Presidency: Major step forward in advancing EU enlargement”, About Hungary, 2024, <https://abouthungary.hu/news-in-brief/hungary-s-eu-presidency-major-step-forward-in-advancing-eu-enlargement>.

*Veronika Czina / When The Renegade Takes The Wheel: Lessons Learned From Hungary's
2024 Council Presidency*

pharmaceutical dossier, and the patent package.⁸⁶ The so-called 'peace mission' conducted in July has not proven to be fruitful either. Even the Hungarian Prime Minister's ambitions had become watered down by the end of the Presidency. Even though initially he had called for a Christmas ceasefire and a prisoner exchange in Ukraine, at the closing press conference of the Brussels European Council on 19 December, he admitted that these were only goals, but peace negotiations were „the job of the big boys.”⁸⁷

When evaluating the Hungarian Presidency, the question of the frozen EU funds should not be neglected either. Even though the Hungarian government had every chance to achieve some kind of consolidation and rebuilt trust with EU institutions, it managed to achieve the opposite. Hungarian universities that were previously placed under the control of public trust funds chaired by people from government circles remained deprived of the possibility to participate in Erasmus+ or Horizon Europe programmes. This remained the case even though Hungary wanted to settle the dispute through approving an amendment to the law that regulated public interest asset management foundations. The amendment was to reassure the Commission that high-level politicians would be precluded from joining management boards of the affected Hungarian universities. The amendment did not prove to be enough to address the Commission's concerns and resume the flow of funds during the Presidency.⁸⁸ The EU funds lost due to the rule of law conditionality mechanism were not recovered either and have resulted in the loss of €1.04 billion and posed a serious threat to access the €9.5 billion from the RRF, which must be committed by the end of August 2026.⁸⁹ No progress was made in paying the fine imposed by the ECJ on Hungary due to the country's restrictions on asylum rights. As the €200 million fine was imposed in a ruling in June 2024 and Hungary has refused

⁸⁶ Róbert László, „Hungary's unorthodox leadership: A provocative political presidency yet with some significant policy achievements”, *Der (europäische) Föderalist*, 19 May 2024., <https://www.foederalist.eu/2025/05/hungary-council-presidency.html>.

⁸⁷ Press conference after the European Council on 19 December 2024 in Brussels., 2024, <https://newsroom.consilium.europa.eu/events/20241219-european-council-december-2024/147215-4-press-conference-part-4-q-a-20241219>.

⁸⁸ Jorge Liboreiro, „Hungary seeks to settle Erasmus dispute as ECJ fines on asylum soar to €360 million | Euronews”, *Euronews*, 20 November 2024., <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2024/11/20/hungary-seeks-to-settle-erasmus-dispute-as-ecj-fines-on-asylum-soar-to-360-million>.

⁸⁹ „Hungary's EU presidency in review: remembered more for its unorthodoxy than its policy achievements”.

to pay it ever since, a €1 million fine is being added for every day the country continues to ignore the ruling. This means that by the end of December 2024, the accumulated fine was almost €400 million and has been growing ever since.⁹⁰

Conclusions

Confronting the results of the Hungarian Presidency with the traditional requirements set out by the academic literature (honest-brokerage, deliverables, mediation etc.), we get a mixed picture with some results, but several contentious issues as well. The Hungarian Presidency was a performative Presidency which showed some honest brokerage, but this was mixed with trolling tactics from the part of the Hungarian government.⁹¹ Honest brokerage can be discovered in results achieved in competition policy, in enlargement policy, or in the case of the sanctions against Russia, where Hungary did not obstruct an EU agreement. This spirit of cooperation was something that could have been shown in more areas as well, during the Presidency. Hungary could have conducted a more successful Presidency, in the traditional sense of the word, if it deliberately tried to avoid sensitive issues and had the government focused on achieving some kind of reconciliation with Brussels, either on the political or the legal level. The country also could have used these six months to improve its perception within the EU. However, the Hungarian government did not have such intentions and this is where the Hungarian example brings in a new perspective in defining Presidency success.

The important takeaway from the Hungarian example is that Hungary clearly had its own standards of success, that were not in line with those of the EU as such. Instead of taking the traditional standards of a successful Presidency seriously, Hungary conducted its Presidency in its own terms and had other goals in mind, such as showing all of Europe that a rogue Member State, whose values differ from the majority of Member States, is able to lead the EU as the main orchestrator of events. Moreover, the EU itself had different expectations from Hungary than it usually has from upcoming Presidencies

⁹⁰ Jorge Liboreiro, „ECJ fines Hungary with €200 million over »extremely serious« breach of EU asylum law | Euronews”, Euronews, 13 June 2024., <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2024/06/13/ecj-fines-hungary-with-200-million-over-extremely-serious-breach-of-eu-asylum-law>.

⁹¹ About Hungary, „About Hungary - Hungary's EU Presidency: Major step forward in advancing EU enlargement”.

which was proven by the attempts to cancel the Presidency and the boycotts during the Presidency coming from within the EU itself. The Member State overstepped its competences with Orbán's peace-mission, because it wanted to act as an agenda-setter in a policy area which does not belong to the competence of the Presidency. This can even be understood as an attempt to exercise proposal-making power (by pushing its own agenda) or a disregard for the principle of neutrality, which resulted in a resistance from EU institutions and Member States alike.

Hungary was not a credible mediator, but not because it could not have been capable of it, but because it did not want to. Hungary deliberately chose the Presidency as a means to express its opposition with mainstream EU politics in some issues (especially foreign policy) and in that respect, it succeeded. In contrast, determinants of success from the EU's perspective, such as honest brokerage, were not fully achieved. Therefore, Hungary's example did not justify Coman's observations about countries with economic instability or having tensions with the EU being able to conduct successful Presidencies from the EU's perspective. In the case of the 2024 Hungarian Presidency, the hard work of the "background crew" (civil servants, diplomats, administrative personnel in Brussels) could not counterbalance or neutralize the government's contentious decisions. However, Hungary's case also showed us that we cannot evaluate a rotating Presidency's success based on objective criteria only, such as agenda-setting or reaching agreements, but the political climate and the trust vested in the Presiding country by the other Member States counts, as well as the unwritten, strategic goals set out by the chair itself.

For the traditional academic literature, a major indicator of a Presidency's success is whether the Presiding country's position within the EU can be strengthened by showing that the country can act as a credible mediator and a trustworthy ally. In this regard, Hungary has utterly failed in 2024. However, the Hungarian government was able to transmit its intended message both to the EU and its domestic audience, which can be considered a form of success. They showed Brussels what Hungary's political preferences are, they hosted some high-level political meetings and Prime Minister Orbán could reinforce his narrative that he is the one constantly and unjustly attacked by the EU (see the October EP plenary), yet, he still was able to deliver some important results (Competitiveness Deal, Schengen). Based on the usual Presidency roles: managing and

organising Council work, mediating, providing political leadership and providing internal and external representation, the Hungarian Presidency cannot be considered successful, as it was never a main goal for the country. The first major takeaway from the Hungarian case is that there is a difference between what counts as successful from the perspective of the EU (and this coincides with the traditional success interpretations of the academic literature) and from the perspective of the Member State. Thus, success cannot only be determined by the traditional roles of the Presidency, but the Member States own preferences should also be taken into account. The second major conclusion is that if a Member State actually wants to and can exert national interests, then the Presidency can be considered successful, at least from the national perspective. A President might disappoint the EU institutions and its fellow Member States, but it might still have achieved the goals it set out for itself.

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