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The 2024 Belgian and Hungarian Presidencies of the Council of the EU in Comparison: From an Honest Broker to a Dogmatic Disruptor

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Introduction

As a member of the Trio Presidency with Spain and Hungary, Belgium took over the post of the rotating presidency for the 13th time in the first half of 2024, followed by Hungary for the second time since its EU accession in 2004. The legislative agendas and operational flexibility of both presidencies were heavily influenced by the 2024 elections to the European Parliament (EP) scheduled between 6 and 9 June. Notably, the Belgian presidency concluded with the elections, whilst the Hungarian presidency began amid the institutional transition following the elections.

As members of the same Trio Presidency, Belgium, Hungary and Spain had committed to a few overarching thematic priorities. Their joint programme pledged to deepen the single market to increase competitiveness, to strengthen the area of freedom, security and justice internally and externally, to build a climate-neutral, green, fair and social Europe, to promote Europe's interest in the world (e.g., by continued support to Ukraine, strengthening the EU's defence and security capacities and promoting enlargement) and, finally, to adopt and implement the EU's Strategic Agenda for 2024–2029 (General Secretariat of the Council, 2023). However, despite these commitments and the significance of the upcoming EP elections for both, the two presidencies could not have been more different: whilst the Belgian presidency acted as a model honest broker and facilitator of European interests, the Hungarian presidency became a constant irritant and a dogmatic disruptor of common EU policies.

This article outlines the political contexts as well as the self-ascribed roles and priorities of both presidencies and assesses their respective achievements and failures. It argues that the Hungarian presidency represents a new type of presidency: for the first time in EU history, the position was filled by a hard Eurosceptic and radical right-wing populist government, which had been challenging the EU's legal and political foundations for years and continued to do so whilst serving as the rotating presidency. In comparison with the Belgian presidency, which was committed to the European agenda and acted as an honest broker, the Hungarian government leveraged the presidency to challenge the EU and its policies and to promote its domestic foreign policy objectives. Content-wise, the Belgian presidency focused on the finalisation of EU legislation and measures that addressed current challenges to the EU (such as those related to the single market, green

transition or support to Ukraine), whereas the Hungarian presidency's thematic priorities, especially the focus on countering illiberal migration and demographic challenges, reflected the government's domestic political agenda.

I. Honest Brokers or Self-Centred Presidents?

The Treaty of Lisbon has significantly changed the rotating presidency's role and responsibilities. First, the establishment of a permanent President of the European Council has reduced the rotating presidency's tasks to the Council of the EU, confining its power mainly to internal representation, that is, *vis-à-vis* the European Parliament and Commission. Second, it lost all competences related to the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), including the right to chair Foreign Affairs Council meetings. Finally, a Trio Presidency was introduced, mandating its three members to draft a joint programme to ensure legislative continuity (Batory and Puetter, 2013; Coman et al., 2024, 13ff.). Whilst this sparked a scholarly debate on the legislative power of the presidency post-Lisbon (e.g., Harwood, 2024), a consensus remains that the presidency retains significant agenda-setting and agenda-shaping powers, as it can prioritise, slow down or accelerate legislative files (Häge, 2017; Tallberg, 2003). According to the Presidency's Handbook, the rotating presidency is tasked with four major responsibilities: (1) planning, co-ordinating and chairing meetings of the Council and its preparatory bodies, (2) fostering compromises as 'honest broker', (3) representing the Council in its relations with the Commission, the Parliament and other institutions and (4) negotiating legislative files on behalf of the Council (trialogues) (Council of the European Union, 2018, p. 9).

Whilst these predefined tasks impose institutional constraints on the presidency's actions, the government's conduct of the presidency depends on various domestic and external contextual factors. Domestic factors include the (in)stability of the government, the size and capacities of the member state holding the presidency and the attitude of the government (i.e., whether Eurosceptic or Europhile). External factors encompass EP elections, the relationship with the other trio members, intra-EU crises and unforeseen events or crises (Kočí and Antal, 2025). Of particular relevance is the behavioural dimension, that is, how the government holding the presidency perceives its own role. Governments may either act as honest brokers, setting aside national preferences and aiming to contribute to the EU's collective interests. Or they can act as 'self-centred presidents', advancing their own priorities, including in foreign policy, even in the absence of formal powers (Mehlhausen and Karolewski, 2014, 14ff.). Theoretically, we may expect that Europhile governments are more inclined to act as honest brokers, whilst Eurosceptic governments may view themselves as self-centred presidencies. However, literature suggests two crucial factors that could mitigate the influence of Eurosceptic governments. The first is the separation of the position of the President of the European Council from the presidency of the Council of the EU after Lisbon, which diminishes the incentive for governments to exploit the position for domestic profiling. This weakened link between the presidency and domestic politics could hence lead to a depoliticisation of the presidency (Leconte, 2012, 142f.). Second, the 'Brussels model', that is, the crucial role of civil servants and diplomats socialised in Brussels, could neutralise the influence of Eurosceptic governments (Coman, 2020). Finally, the rotating presidency's performance is also contingent upon the political credibility and reputation of member states and their

governments (Quaglia and Moxon-Browne, 2006, p. 362). A government recognised for fostering compromise solutions is more credible as an honest broker compared to one known for its confrontational approach.

II. Belgium, the Honest Broker

Belgium, as a founding member of the EU's predecessor, has held the presidency multiple times, the last one being in 2010, shortly after the Lisbon Treaty entered into force. This made Belgium one of the first countries to serve in a reconfigured institutional system, where the presidency's role underwent considerable change (see Drieskens, 2011; van de Voorde, 2012). In 2024, under Prime Minister Alexander De Croo, the Belgian government took over 'at a watershed moment' (Permanent Representation of Belgium to the European Union, 2024), just ahead of the EP elections and the subsequent institutional transition. In addition, federal elections were also scheduled for June 2024. Consequently, the presidency coincided with both the end of the current government and a domestic election campaign.

Whilst the national election campaign did not affect the presidency (de Brouwer, 2024), the end of the EU's legislative cycle and the anticipated Hungarian presidency crucially influenced its actions. For one, it was uncertain whether a new European Parliament with potentially strengthened right-wing forces would continue work on pending legislative files, particularly on controversial ones such as the EU's Green Deal. Additionally, the forthcoming Hungarian presidency, led by a government notorious for its obstructive and anti-EU stance, was anticipated to complicate policy-making processes and obstruct decisions.

As a result, the Belgian presidency positioned itself as a facilitator of unfinished legislative work, support for war-torn Ukraine and the upcoming negotiations surrounding key EU positions – the Presidents of the Commission, the European Parliament and the European Council. Accordingly, Prime Minister De Croo's 'goal [was] to deliver' and finalise as many of the 150 open legislative files as possible by June (Permanent Representation of Belgium to the European Union, 2024), thereby limiting the Hungarian presidency's opportunities to impede EU decisions. In line with this, the Belgian presidency identified its role as that of an honest broker. De Croo announced to 'take a sober approach to [their] presidency, focusing on finding solutions and eliminating obstacles', and the presidency kept underlining that Belgium's culture of compromise, rooted in the country's linguistic and territorial diversity, made Belgium the perfect mediator (Griera, 2025).

The presidency's programme 'Protect, Strengthen, Prepare' reflected this ambition by largely referring to the completion of legislation in six priority areas: (1) defending the rule of law, democracy and unity; (2) strengthening competitiveness; (3) pursuing a green and just transition; (4) reinforcing the EU's social and health agenda; (5) protecting people and borders; and (6) promoting a global Europe (Belgian Presidency of the Council of the European Union, 2024a). Thematically, these topics were closely aligned with the Trio Presidency's objectives. Ultimately, the presidency concluded 74 agreements and reached 57 Council negotiation mandates (Belgian Presidency of the Council of the European Union, 2024b), successfully delivering on its promise. Many of these agreements were on issues that had stalled in the Council for years, often due to resistance from

France, Germany or Italy (e.g., Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive or Directive on improving working conditions in platform work).

In the first priority area, the presidency achieved final approval for two acts meant to safeguard media and journalistic freedom in the EU: the European Media Freedom Act (EMFA), which establishes binding regulations for national media systems, and the Directive on strategic lawsuits against public participation (Anti-SLAPP Directive), aimed at enhancing protection for journalists against abusive court proceedings often initiated by powerful actors such as governments (Priebus, 2025, 7f.). Additionally, the presidency organised a discussion on ways to strengthen the rule of law and democracy in member and candidate states, based on a report by International IDEA (International IDEA, 2024). The presidency also organised a hearing in the ongoing Article 7 (1) procedure against Hungary in June and facilitated the termination of the Article 7 procedure against Poland in May, following the new Polish government's presentation of its *Action Plan for Restoring the Rule of Law* in February 2024 in the Council. Highlighting the significance on the protection of democracy and the rule of law from internal and external threats, the presidency adopted the *Council conclusions on democratic resilience: safeguarding electoral processes from foreign interference* and the *Council conclusions on enhancing and protecting free, open and informed democratic debate*.

In the area of competitiveness, the presidency struck an agreement with the Parliament to reform the Stability and Growth Pact, introducing more flexibility to its preventive arm. Furthermore, it secured approval for the Net-Zero Industry Act, meant to support clean technologies in the EU, alongside legislation concerning the circular economy, notably the Right to Repair Directive and the Construction Products Regulation. Addressing challenges related to digitalisation, the Belgian presidency managed to get its compromise text of the Artificial Intelligence Act approved, the first rule book on AI worldwide (Council of the European Union, 2023). Moreover, the presidency reached a consensus with the Parliament regarding the Cyber Solidarity Act, aimed at enhancing EU capacities to respond to cyber threats. Lastly, the presidency concluded several files linked to the completion of the Capital Markets Union.

In the area of green and just transition, the presidency managed to secure the Nature Restoration Law, after losing support in the Council in February due to Hungary's withdrawal (Cagney, 2024). It also reached a deal on the reform of Single European Sky legislation and an agreement on the Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T).

Related to its fourth priority, social and health agenda, an agreement on the Directive on improving working conditions in platform work was reached, which improves the working conditions of people working for platforms (e.g., food delivery services). Belgium had to recommence negotiations after the Spanish compromise was rejected (Bourgerie-Gonse, 2024). Similarly, an agreement on the Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CSDDD) was reached, which holds companies with more than 1000 employees and a turnover of more than 450 million euros accountable for negative effects on the environment and labour rights as well as human rights abuses. Concerning its fifth priority, the protection of people and borders, the adoption of the controversial Pact on Asylum and Migration (see Wolff, 2024) and of the Schengen Border Code (which allows the reintroduction of border controls) deserves mentioning.

Finally, in the area of the promotion of a global Europe, the new Reform and Growth Facility for the Western Balkans was finalised, aimed at financially supporting reforms

concerning the rule of law and democracy in the region, which aligns with the presidency's emphasis on enhancing democracy and the rule of law amongst EU member and candidate states.

Support for Ukraine was also a high priority for the presidency, particularly due to the expectation that the Hungarian presidency would obstruct decisions concerning Ukraine. In December 2023, the Hungarian government vetoed the Ukraine Facility worth 50 billion euros and subsequently maintained its opposition to supporting Ukraine. In January, Belgium secured a partial negotiation mandate from the Council and subsequently reached an agreement with the Parliament on the Facility, after EU leaders persuaded Hungarian Prime Minister Orbán to retract his veto (Brzozowski, 2024). Additionally, the Belgian presidency facilitated Ukraine's accession process by adopting the Council's negotiation framework and organising the first Intergovernmental Conference (IGC) with Ukraine on 25 June. Furthermore, the presidency adopted the negotiation framework for Moldova, followed by the first IGC with the country.

Beyond these policy achievements, the presidency also advanced the European Council negotiations on the three chief EU positions and the EU's Strategic Agenda for 2024–2029 (de Brouwer, 2024). However, a few files remained unresolved, including the *Council conclusions on the post-2027 Common Agricultural Policy* (CAP), the proposed Regulation on plants produced by certain new genomic techniques, rules to combat online child sexual abuse and the extension of the Recovery and Facility Fund beyond 2026.

III. Hungary, the Dogmatic Disruptor¹

Following its first Council presidency in 2011, which was dominated by economic crisis management (Ágh, 2012), Hungary was set to hold the presidency for the second time in 2024. Under the leadership of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, four Fidesz-KDNP governments have been in power since 2010. Government officials framed this government continuity as an advantage, asserting that Hungary could draw upon substantial experience during its second presidency (Népszava, 2023). However, the domestic and foreign policy context in Hungary had changed fundamentally since 2011. First, despite controversial domestic reforms already overshadowing the first presidency (Ágh, 2012), Hungary was still a democracy in 2011. Subsequent reforms that undermined the judiciary, checks and balances and political rights have, however, led to a significant autocratisation, transforming Hungary from a frontrunner of the post-1989 democratisation to an 'embedded autocracy' (Bozóki and Fleck, 2024). According to the Swedish Varieties of Democracy Institute, Hungary has been an electoral autocracy since 2018 (Varieties of Democracy Institute, 2022). Second, following the government's 2014 re-election, the country's foreign policy underwent a shift under the new Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Péter Szijjártó. Foreign policy orientation changed from a strong Euro-Atlantic stance, still evident during Hungary's first presidency in 2011, to an 'Eastern opening policy' characterised by an increasingly confrontational position towards the EU (Visnovitz and Jenne, 2021). Consequently, for the first time in EU history, a member state led by a hard Eurosceptic² and radical right-wing populist government took over the rotating

¹This section is partly based on Ellen Bos and Sonja Priebus (2025).

²See, for the differentiation between soft and hard Eurosceptic parties, Havlík and Hloušek (2025).

presidency, whose government has persistently challenged the EU and has faced multiple rule of law procedures, including Article 7 (1) TEU (Priebus, 2022) and three conditionality mechanisms (Scheppelle and Morijn, 2024).

Against this backdrop, commentators and political actors expressed scepticism regarding the Hungarian government's capacity to fulfil the responsibilities of the presidency and raised concerns about potential damage to the EU. Following a study by the Dutch Meijers Committee, which proposed several legal avenues to prevent Hungary and Poland from assuming the presidency (Meijers Committee, 2023), an academic debate ensued about whether Hungary ought to be stripped of its right to hold the presidency.³

Opposition to Hungary's presidency also emerged within EU institutions, spearheaded by the European Parliament. Liberal MEP Moritz Körner cautioned that 'a Hungarian presidency would be like electing the schoolyard bully Orbán as headmaster'.⁴ On 1 June 2023, the Parliament adopted a resolution with an overwhelming majority (442 for and 144 against) 'question[ing] how Hungary will be able to credibly fulfil this task in 2024, in view of its non-compliance with EU law and the values enshrined in Article 2 TEU, as well as the principle of sincere cooperation' and asked 'the Council to find a proper solution as soon as possible' (European Parliament, 2023). The Parliament itself discussed various strategies, including a boycott of the presidency or a suspension of the legislative process (trialogues) (Vela, 2023). Nevertheless, Council members exhibited insufficient support for suspending or delaying the presidency.⁵ Whilst a few governments, such as Germany, endorsed the Parliament's calls, others, including Sweden and Austria, rejected such initiatives. The Belgian government viewed these moves as counterproductive (Gayet, 2023). Consequently, the suspension or delay of Hungary's presidency was never placed on the Council's agenda due to a lack of support.

The Hungarian presidency coincided with a significant domestic weakening of the government, stemming from the emergence of a new powerful opposition actor. In February 2024, a sexual abuse scandal erupted, leading to the forced resignations of President of State Katalin Novák and former Justice Minister Judit Varga, Fidesz's top candidate for the EP elections. In an interview on a YouTube channel, Varga's ex-husband, Péter Magyar, criticised the government's response to the scandal and launched a public campaign against Fidesz and the Orbán-led system. In April 2024, Magyar assumed leadership of the previously inactive Tisza party, enabling him to contest the forthcoming EP elections. Despite lacking a cohesive programme, Magyar's anti-system and anti-corruption rhetoric resonated with segments of Hungarian society unsatisfied with the regime. In the EP elections, Tisza secured 29.6% of the votes, gaining seven seats and becoming the second strongest Hungarian delegation after Fidesz, which received 44.82% and 11 seats. Adding insult to injury, Tisza MEPs joined the European People's Party, Fidesz's former party group. Since then, Tisza's approval ratings have steeply risen, and Magyar has become a serious challenger to Orbán (Körömi, 2024b).

At the EU level, relations between the EU and Hungary have been fraught for years, with Orbán emerging as the EU's most vocal critic, likening the EU to the Soviet Union and even Hitler's Third Reich. He advocates for a 'Europe of Nations', built on strong

³The academic debate mainly took place on the German legal blog *Verfassungsblog*.

⁴<https://twitter.com/moritzkoerner/status/1661352260570427395>.

⁵The current order of the presidencies is laid down in a 2009 European Council Decision, which the Council can amend with a qualified majority (Meijers Committee, 2023, p. 9).

sovereign states and weak supranational institutions. In October 2024, he urged his supporters to ‘occupy Brussels’ and announced his intention to march on Brussels to change the EU (Orbán, 2024a).

Hoping for a substantial right-wing and Eurosceptic shift, Orbán viewed the 2024 EP elections as an opportunity to remove the EU’s ‘bad’ leadership (Chiappa and Wax, 2024). He also perceived the presidency as a platform to challenge and reform the EU from within (see Lynch, 2024). However, whilst right-wing forces did gain strength in the EP, they fell short of Orbán’s expectations. Consequently, just 1 day before the start of the Hungarian presidency, Orbán formed a new pan-European alliance, the Patriots for Europe, alongside former Czech Prime Minister Andrej Babiš and Austrian FPÖ leader Herbert Kickl, to bolster his influence. By July 2024, Orbán’s group emerged as the third largest in the EP after securing support from several national delegations, particularly from Identity and Democracy (ID) (Kaczynski, 2024).

In its presidency programme, the government pledged to ‘work as an honest broker, in the spirit of sincere cooperation between Member States and institutions, for the peace, security and prosperity of a truly strong Europe’ (Hungarian Presidency of the Council of the EU, 2024, p. 4). However, in contrast to this, Hungarian spokesperson Zoltán Kovács announced the intention to pursue a ‘political presidency’. The Prime Minister also confirmed a deliberate choice against a bureaucratic presidency focused solely on legislative matters, opting instead for a political presidency that addresses pressing political issues (Csermely, 2024). These statements underscored the government’s self-perception as a self-centred presidency and indicated that the Hungarian presidency would be different from its predecessors. The presidency’s slogan, ‘Make Europe Great Again,’ echoed US President Donald Trump’s ‘Make America Great Again’, further amplifying scepticism.

The government’s hard Eurosceptic and right-wing populist stance, coupled with its aggressive anti-EU position, placed it in a state of ‘institutional schizophrenia’: it was required to represent an institution of the EU it had persistently challenged and criticised. This resulted in ‘duplicitous tactics’, characterised by continuous provocations at the highest political level, whilst lower ranking ministers and officials endeavoured to achieve policy results (Political Capital, 2024a).

Regarding policies, the presidency’s programme focused on seven priorities: (1) a new European Competitiveness Deal; (2) the reinforcement of European Defence policy; (3) a consistent and merit-based enlargement policy; (4) stemming illegal migration; (5) the future of cohesion policy; (6) a farmer-oriented agricultural policy; and (7) addressing demographic challenges (Hungarian Presidency of the Council of the EU, 2024). Whilst some of these priorities superficially aligned with the Trio Presidency’s priorities, others, such as stemming illegal migration and addressing demographic challenges, reflected the government’s domestic political agenda. For years, the government has accused the EU of addressing declining European birth rates by encouraging migration. Consequently, the government made a ‘family-centric’ policy and the rejection of migration the cornerstone of its policy agenda.

Due to the institutional transition occurring during the initial months of the presidency, Hungary’s capacity to shape the EU’s legislative agenda according to its priorities was constrained. In the area of competitiveness, the presidency managed to get the *Budapest Declaration on the New Competitiveness Deal* adopted. However, given that the

Hungarian government's proposals for enhancing EU competitiveness diverged from the Draghi Report published in September 2024 (and from most of the other governments' ideas), the declaration represented the lowest common denominator with few details (Political Capital, 2024b). In contrast to the Belgian presidency, Hungary achieved consensus on the member states' preferences regarding the EU's Common Agricultural Policy and adopted the *Conclusions on a farmer-focused post-2027 Common Agricultural Policy*. Regarding demographic challenges, an exchange of ideas led to the adoption of three Council Conclusions. However, in the areas of defence, cohesion and illegal migration, no formal results were achieved, despite intensive work at the technical levels, such as those related to the EU Defence Industry Programme. Finally, in the area of enlargement, progress was achieved for three candidate states: Albania, Montenegro and Serbia. In October and December, the second and third meetings of the Accession Conference with Albania were held, and in December, three negotiation chapters with Montenegro were closed. Furthermore, the presidency secured the Council's agreement on a letter inviting Serbia to submit its negotiation positions on two chapters and adopted Council Conclusions on enlargement. In addition, Austria and the Netherlands rescinded their vetoes on Romania's and Bulgaria's full Schengen memberships, which the government framed as one of its biggest achievements.⁶

In total, Hungary concluded 10 legislative files by reaching political agreements in the Council (General Secretariat of the Council, 2025). Whilst this figure is understandably lower than that of the preceding Spanish and Belgian presidencies, it also falls short of the outcomes achieved during previous transitional presidencies: Italy concluded 17 in 2014, whilst Finland concluded 14 in 2019. On multiple occasions, Hungary faced criticism for prioritising Hungarian interests over those of the Council. This was, for example, evident in the Commission's proposed Regulation concerning plants produced by certain new genomic techniques, as the Hungarian government, which is against gene-modified products, advocated for a complete reopening of Council negotiations, even on aspects previously agreed upon under the preceding presidencies (Arboleas and Manzanaro, 2024). Similar concerns arose following a Foreign Affairs Council meeting on the EU's trade policy, when Hungarian Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade Szijjártó articulated Hungary's position on sanctions against Russia, which sharply contrasted with the EU's stance due to Hungary's pro-Russian orientation (Wheaton, 2024). Similarly, Hungary's reluctance to make decisions regarding Ukraine, particularly concerning support from the European Peace Facility and the country's EU accession process, added to the controversy (Wallace, 2024).

The number of agreements reached with the EP during trialogues was similarly low, amounting to nine only. This was, however, attributable not only to the ongoing institutional transition but also to the EP's scepticism regarding Hungary's suitability to negotiate sensitive files. For example, in December 2024, legislators postponed negotiations on the Anti-Corruption Directive due to Hungary's dismal record on high-level systemic corruption until the beginning of the Polish presidency (Renew Europe, 2024).

However, the presidency's policy-related efforts were largely overshadowed by Orbán's ambitions for a political presidency. Shortly after the presidency began, he embarked on a self-declared 'peace mission', visiting Ukrainian President Volodymyr

⁶See <https://x.com/HungaryintheEU/status/1859938573207962057>.

Zelenskyy, Russian President Vladimir Putin, Chinese leader Xi Jinping and, ultimately, Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump. This peace mission, ostensibly promoting a peaceful solution to the Russo-Ukrainian war, was problematic for two reasons. First, as the rotating presidency no longer holds any competences in the area of CFSP, the government blatantly exceeded its authority (van Elsuwege, 2024). Although Orbán denied conducting these visits in his capacity as the chair of the rotating presidency, he utilised the presidency logo in videos and social media posts, creating the impression that he was acting on behalf of the EU. In addition, Orbán acted as the mouthpiece for Russia and China in a subsequent letter to European Council President Charles Michel, in which he condemned the EU's 'pro-war' policy and called for a reactivation of diplomatic channels with Russia and negotiations on a peace conference with China (Orbán, 2024b). Second, the trip starkly contradicted the EU's position on Russia and Ukraine following the 2022 invasion, as Orbán openly advocated for a peace solution on Russian terms. Consequently, the government violated its treaty-based obligations to harmonise its foreign policy with the EU's CFSP and to consult with the European Council and Council before undertaking action at the international stage (van Elsuwege, 2024).

European Council President Michel swiftly clarified that '[t]he EU rotating presidency has no mandate to engage with Russia on behalf of the EU', whilst the newly appointed High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Kaja Kallas, emphasised that Orbán did not represent the EU or its positions (Körömi, 2024a). Moreover, the government's unilateral action reignited calls for the premature termination of the presidency. Given the legal and political obstacles to such actions, several EU member states (the Baltic states, Sweden, Finland, Poland, Cyprus and Germany) opted for a political boycott of the presidency, only sending officials rather than ministers to informal Council meetings (Szumski, 2024). In addition, High Representative Josep Borrell announced the convening of an informal Foreign Affairs Council in parallel to Hungary's, rendering EU ministers unavailable for the latter.⁷ Finally, the Commission declared it would be represented at informal meetings by senior civil servants only and cancelled the traditional Commission visit to the host country.⁸

On 17 July, the European Parliament, with cross-party support, adopted a resolution on Ukraine, condemning Orbán's peace mission as 'a blatant violation of the EU's Treaties and common foreign policy, including the principle of sincere cooperation', indicating that such actions should be 'met with repercussions' (European Parliament, 2024). Nevertheless, the institution refrained from boycotting the presidency or terminating triologies, opting instead to abstain from attending events organised by the Hungarian presidency.

As a result of the institutional schizophrenia previously discussed, a second significant development that loomed over the presidency was the ongoing conflict with the EU regarding the rule of law, accompanied by the government's constant attacks on the EU. Instead of leveraging the presidency to rebuild trust and release billions in EU funding that had been suspended due to concerns about the rule of law (see Scheppele and Morijn, 2024), the Hungarian government ultimately forfeited over one billion euros in cohesion funds in December 2024 due to its refusal to implement requested reforms.

⁷<https://x.com/JosepBorrellF/status/1815431367494340931>.

⁸<https://x.com/MamerEric/status/1812899626468651195>.

Moreover, the government repeatedly provoked EU institutions and maintained its attacks on the EU. For example, in August 2024, Hungary announced its intention to charge the EU 800 billion euros for border defence, justifying this decision with a ruling of the European Court of Justice (ECJ) from June. This ruling ordered Hungary to pay a lump sum of 200 million euros, along with a daily penalty payment of one million euros for non-compliance with a prior ruling on migration policy from 2020 (hvg.hu, 2024). In official communications and social media posts, Foreign Affairs Minister Bóka and other officials depicted the EU as an adversary, criticising its policies and asserting that 'Brussels' was punishing Hungary for its stance on migration. During a speech commemorating the anniversary of the 1956 uprising against communist rule in October 2024, Orbán even accused the EU of conspiring against the government, claiming it sought to impose a 'Brusselite puppet government' upon Hungary (Orbán, 2024c), implicitly referencing his political rival Péter Magyar. Additionally, emboldened by Donald Trump's electoral victory in the United States, Orbán characterised Hungarians as 'the opponents of the Brussels system' and proclaimed the initiation of a 'second phase of the operation to take Brussels' during his evaluation speech on the presidency (Orbán, 2025).

To conclude, whilst chairing the rotating Council presidency, the Hungarian government perpetuated the country's dissociation from the EU, framing it as a hostile external force. The government's strategy to activate its electorate heavily relies on mobilising against Brussels, putting it in a schizophrenic situation. The government therefore continued to act as a dogmatic disruptor (cf. Hegedűs, 2021) of European policies. Whilst the presidency staff at the lower levels endeavoured to fulfil the role of an honest broker, they were ultimately unable to neutralise the Eurosceptic stance of the government, as suggested by research on EU Council presidencies led by soft Eurosceptic governments (Coman, 2020; Leconte, 2012).

Conclusion

The Belgian and Hungarian EU presidencies definitely did not do the same (cf. Kočí and Antal, 2025). The Belgian presidency, motivated by the upcoming European Parliament elections and the impending Hungarian presidency, operated as an honest broker. By mediating agreements on various issues both within the Council and between the Council and the Parliament, the Belgian government functioned as a facilitator of European interests.

In stark contrast, the Hungarian presidency represented an unprecedented chapter in EU history. The Hungarian government persistently pursued its domestic and foreign policy objectives, intentionally overstepping its legal competences. Orbán utilised this position to further his national foreign policy goals and to punch above the country's weight (Political Capital, 2025). As a strongly self-centred presidency, it continued to act as a dogmatic disruptor of European policies and European unity. Consequently, it was the first Council presidency against which EU institutions and member states took symbolic protest measures. Thus, 'the Hungarian presidency is likely to be remembered more for its unorthodox goal of using the presidency to troll and thus weaken the EU than for its practical results' (Political Capital, 2025).

The subsequent takeover by the Polish government, which focused on the rule of law and security, was therefore perceived as a return to normalcy (Rettman, 2024). Nevertheless, the Hungarian presidency established a new type of presidency, namely one held by a hard Eurosceptic and populist government. Given the rise of similar forces in various EU member states, most recently in Slovakia, it is reasonable to assume that such presidencies may become increasingly common within the EU.

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