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Experiences Gleaned from the Implementation of Hungary's 2011 EU Council Presidency

Individual motivation

Having experienced the seventies, it was clear to me that, following the trials of history, Hungary's place was in the European family, in line with the millennia-old aspirations of our forefathers. I considered it to be only a matter of time before this reintegration took place. As an early-career diplomat with a degree in economics, I sincerely cheered on the best of the Hungarian diplomatic and foreign trade profession, who were already forging closer ties with the European Communities in the 1980s. Thus, when the opportunity arose, I was also closely involved as the Antall Government's embassy counsellor in Paris in obtaining French support for Hungary's accession. Later, based on my experience in North Africa I gained a thorough inside view into the professional work of the EU when I represented Hungary as a Euro-Mediterranean Hungarian senior official at Brussels meetings before acquiring membership. Then, in 2004, the unforgettable day of accession finally arrived, and it was then that I was given the mandate to focus on building an effective alliance within the Union as Ambassador to Belgium, in addition to my usual duties. This effort was illustrated by the memorable success of the Hungarian–Belgian initiative in the Benelux–V4 meeting, achieving an important partial victory for Central Europe on the 2007–2013 budget.

With this European background, I had the unexpected challenge of using my experience as a Chief of State and Foreign Affairs Protocol to take the lead as a Government Commissioner in the operational organisation of the first Hungarian EU Presidency. The challenge was serious because there were only six months left before the first event due to take place in Hungary. The outgoing Government had conducted the substantive preparation with the Spanish and Belgian counterparts in the presidency trio; it was merely the Hungarian priorities that had to be redefined. However, it did not take the concrete steps necessary to organise the Presidency in time, but only completed the passive assessment of the circumstances instead. There were no established meeting venues, no adequate airport reception facilities, no capacity available for transporting and accommodating guests, no contract had been concluded, and the budget for the year of preparation was almost gone; for example, the initial expenses should have been covered by the sale of foreign properties, such as the former embassy building in Bonn, which still had no buyer. Such dramatic circumstances required effective and swift action. Therefore, the Government agreed that the Government Commissioner integrate the organisational work in the operation of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in particular, and the state in general.

The Government's objective

The Government's expectation was to create a framework for a frugal but high-quality presidency that would also showcase the essence of Hungarian identity, with the content provided by senior officials from the ministries and members of the Government, coordinated by the heads of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The Government approved our concept of an economical presidency through better use of public resources and sites, ensuring efficiency through centralised management. The Secretariat of the Government Commissioner was kept in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to ensure that the apparatus with European experience could better support the work of the Presidency and that operational needs arising from content-based requirements could be passed on to the implementing authorities as quickly as possible. The vast majority of the organisational tasks related to the events held in Hungary, as it was the Council's staff that was responsible for the meetings at EU headquarters.

As we are approaching the second presidency term, the saying of Heraclitus, an ancient sagacity, that no man ever steps in the same river twice will once again be proven, even if one initially thinks they can. In 2010, for example, external conditions were relatively favourable. Although there were some reservations and doubting voices in certain European circles surrounding the expected performance of the incoming Hungarian Presidency, the majority of the Member States were helpful and encouraging as they looked forward to January 2011. The Hungarian political environment was also positively inclined towards the Presidency, and the Foreign Affairs and European Affairs Committee of the Hungarian Parliament also expressed its support for the efforts, considering the successful completion of the first European Presidency a common national cause. The foreign and domestic political circumstances of the second Presidency are perhaps more difficult, but there was enough time to prepare and the logistical, budgetary and staffing resources are much more favourable as well.

Organisational setup

In the summer of 2010, the organising team was set up as a series of concentric circles. The Government Commissioner's team pulled the strings; its protocol, communication and management unit were in constant contact with the external circle, meaning with a designated person in charge of each of the ministries involved in the substantive implementation of the Presidency, and availed of the capacities of the partner organisations, bolstered by financial support where necessary.

Under the direct leadership of the Government Commissioner, effective teams with experienced and dynamic leaders worked in all three key areas. The events were organised by István Manno, who, despite his young age, had already proved his extraordinary skills in various areas of protocol. Communication and cultural background was ensured by György Urkuti, an outstanding expert with international and media experience, while

management was provided by a team of foreign affairs experts, assisted by the most knowledgeable budget expert in the Hungarian public administration system, József Bacsikai, who also excelled as Consul General in Ukraine. In each of these three areas, we established an external circle, a working committee, with those co-ministry officials who were most familiar with the Presidency's programmes in their respective portfolios as members. The central teams provided the general framework, while partner authorities consulted on the conditions they needed in each location, depending on the nature of the event. The experts from the individual ministries had already participated in EU negotiations concerning them even before the Hungarian Presidency, so they knew their partners well, could help with their accreditation, and knew exactly what European standards had been established in which format.

The protocol team had to be supplemented by contributors who accompanied the high-level delegations, who kept constant contacts with the organisers, but also with the delegations' embassies in Budapest. They also ensured the smooth flow of information between the places visited by Presidency participants, from the airport to the various meeting venues. This required young, dynamic people with a sound knowledge of foreign languages. These positions were advertised to students studying international relations at the various Hungarian universities. Following an interview, a pool of around 200 people was selected, who finally carried out their duties to the satisfaction of all. The European environment was a great experience for these young people, and many of them found jobs thanks to the contacts they made during the Presidency.

Time factor

According to Hungarian practice, it can take up to a year to tender, evaluate and complete a public procurement due to the various additional procedures, while the organising team only had half a year time before the launch. The vast experience of the Head of Finance helped: where possible, existing framework contracts were used, and any tendering that was still necessary was carried out with the help of an experienced contracted consultant. Nevertheless, numerous complications still arose; for example, even if tender for gifts was successful, when the best bidder only agreed to deliver the umbrellas for the spring rains on 1 March and the tender specified the general date of 1 January for these, the whole procedure had to be restarted. Yet the prudence of the procedure could not be criticised.

The composition of the organising team was also affected by the short deadline. Solutions were found out of necessity. The tasks had to be performed by staff who were employed by the administration for presidency work, but under different titles (e.g. Serbian referent, protocol waiter). The professional team leaders distributed the work with an excellent sense of proportion, and everyone could perform their part of the work to a high standard. The central team was in constant flux, because, for example, with the active involvement of the State Secretary for Administration in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, each department offered a replacement opportunity as and when needed.

Tight budget

As already mentioned, there were insufficient budgetary resources available in the year of launch. Had the management team not been led by a highly experienced professional, the organisation would have been in a hopeless situation. József Bacsikai, the Consul General in Ukraine, was carrying out an extremely important foreign service mission in the Hungarian-inhabited areas of Ukraine, but he answered the call at once: he returned home by car on the weekends and set the work in motion. He found proper, lawful solutions to the challenges faced, carrying the organisers through these difficult months. The payments were linked to the performance of contracts, so that they were charged to the following year's budget, and only those items were paid that were actually delivered. The management was fully transparent and all related documents were posted on the website. Even after a dozen years, continuous internal and external audits have not revealed any irregularities. (One business weekly could only object that in the tender negotiations meal prices for Gödöllő had been “too cheap”).

Organisational tasks

The tasks related to informal Presidency meetings in Hungary involved traditional hospitality. Some foreign guests were met at the airport, and their transport, accommodation, meals, meeting places and cultural activities were taken care of. This was typically the case for “high-level” deliberations under the Presidency. Meanwhile, for distant acquaintances helped make their stay in Hungary easier: they were advised on how to get from the airport to the preferential accommodation safely and at a reasonable price, how to get to the pre-arranged venue where they can work in peace and quiet, including a working lunch following a tiring morning. Participants at expert-level meetings also received this support, and they were also eligible to participate in a cultural programme.

For the organisers, the established European practice was very important, including the precise rules and customs regarding presidency deliberations' circumstances. During the preparation for this, people with European Union experience played a key role but, to be on the safe side, an expert in management matters was also assigned to the Secretariat of the Government Commissioner. It does matter how many participants can be expected at each meeting, who can attend the meetings, what kind of interpretation is needed and what the organisational practice is, because only thorough preparation can we prevent complaints and uncomfortable situations. The protocol officers managed the data in a huge matrix: who was responsible for which part of the meeting, which services had to be discharged and which services had been requested, and so on.

Conference venues

The venues for expert meetings (usually working groups) had to be chosen to meet specific conference requirements; they could not be generic hotel rooms, but needed to be tailored to the meeting and had to ensure easy access. We therefore chose the former building of the Museum of Ethnography on Kossuth Square as the permanent venue for experts. We assisted the state-owned institution in providing the conference facilities, in exchange for the use of suitable rooms at cost. The working lunch was provided by the nearby Faculty of Commerce, Catering and Tourism's training restaurant, giving a youthful atmosphere to the meals. As several expert meetings were scheduled for the same day, especially during the busy spring months, several similar alternate venues had to be secured. We assisted some ministries and public institutions in upgrading their conference rooms, and we could use these rooms for expert meetings in return.

The choice of venue for meetings at senior level (ministerial councils, ministerial conferences) was based on other requirements. As the delegations visiting the venue were transported by the organisers, accessibility by public transport was not a prerequisite, instead, the need to reflect Hungarian historical traditions, not to bore participants with a generic conference centre, meeting security and logistical requirements were more important. At the suggestion of János Martonyi, Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Government agreed to use the Royal Palace of Gödöllő, which was undergoing renovation. The wing adjacent to the main entrance was already complete, and the renovation of the great hall, which was used as a riding school in Queen Elizabeth's time, could begin in September. A terrifying race against time began, because the builders had a more complicated job than if they had erected a new building: they had to create a basement with delegation rooms and toilets, while preserving the old structure, and to bring the future theatre hall to a state that would be a worthy place for meetings of Heads of State and Government. This risky venture was a success, but it required the constant cooperation of dozens of institutions and companies, the constant resolution of problems that arose, and a professional sacrifice that went far beyond the normal working hours. The costs of the investment were financed by European Union funds with a contribution from the municipality, and only conference equipment and furniture were charged to the Presidency's budget, the subsequent use of which was also ensured. The closed-circuit videoconferencing system used by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has been extended to other parts of the administration and to the conference room in Gödöllő. This often helped link the Presidency meeting with EU and NATO headquarters.

For high-level meetings, simultaneous interpretation was provided by the EU's established department for interpreting (SCIC), and for lower-level meetings by the Hungarian Office for Translation and Attestation (OFFI). The 'language regime' (i.e. interpreting between the source languages and target languages required for the meeting) was determined by the established presidency practice. The biggest workload was the meeting of European and Asian foreign ministers (ASEM), where the meeting was held in 6 Asian and 6 European languages.

Gödöllő was also an excellent choice because the transport of the delegations was smooth and did not disrupt Budapest traffic. Participants arrived in the capital in the afternoon to check into their hotels and attend the banquets, which were held in prestigious locations, mainly in museum spaces, accompanied by a cultural programme. There was no traffic jam on the way into town in the afternoon or evening, just as it was easy to get to Gödöllő by car in the morning hours. From the castle, at the end of the programme, participants could reach the airport by motorway, bypassing Budapest. The meeting venue itself was a memorable experience for the participants. I can still recall the French Minister of Culture, Frederic Mitterrand, nephew of the legendary President, giving a spirited lecture to the Hungarian guide about the paintings in the castle museum.

Airport reception

In addition to building the conference hall, the other most difficult task was to receive high-level participants at the airport. The available government lounge could only accommodate two or three small delegations at most, and ministerial meetings have an average of 30–35 delegations in a very short space of time, not to mention events such as ECOFIN or ASEM, where almost double that number is expected. In case of a senior leader from Europe, the welcome after landing is more of an escort, but on departure, even with a special flight, there is often a longer wait in the lounge while delegations are allowed to board the plane. While one waits, a pleasant stay must be ensured, with refreshments.

For a long time, providing a high level reception seemed hopeless, and we were already looking with the airport officials for the most practical place to set up a temporary tent or container lounge, which would meet the minimum conditions even in winter, by breaking the airport fence. During one of the site visits, a brand-new green office building was spotted, which was apparently abandoned. It turned out to be a service building for the Hungarian Post's new letter sorting plant, and that the plant itself would not be completed for some months. The idea was born to use this office building as a waiting room during the Presidency. It was a win-win deal, because, with a little refurbishment and design, we had a world-class waiting lounge, decorated with posters of spectacular Hungarian stamps. The building also provided an opportunity for visitors to taste the "fröccs" (spritzer) here, as part of the promotion of Hungarian wine and innovation, and to admire the "Gömböc", the first homogeneous body ever developed by Hungarian mathematicians, which has only one stable point, meaning it can return to its position of equilibrium from any position. The biggest success in the press was the pálinka vending machine in the waiting room, which offered three different flavours of this spirit served in small quantities for toasting.

The idea of exhibiting the Gömböc was born during the presentation of the gifts from the Presidency, when one of the journalists asked why only well-known Hungarian inventions such as vitamin C, Rubik's cube, hologram, safety match, dynamo, etc. were displayed, and not the inventions of contemporary Hungarian scientists. Since

the discovery of the parameters of the Gömböc was a recent scientific discovery and a tangible prototype already existed, we contacted the scientists to get a copy. Moreover, having the opportunity not only to admire the object in the waiting room, but also to try it out was great fun as well. Hungarian inventors were experimenting with the traditional stringbike drive at that time. We also requested a couple of samples of these for the press to try out on their way from the press centre in Gödöllő to the nearby castle for interviews.

Transport of delegations

The provision of high-end cars for the transport of high-level delegations was also a requirement during the Presidency. The motorcade was led by a police car. This was followed by the car of the head of the delegation, where an agent could also travel. We had to provide a minibus for members of the delegation and, for protected persons, a security car. Hiring that many cars and drivers for six months would have cost a lot of money, but I was hopeful that, based on my previous experience, a large car manufacturer would make its fleet of delegation cars available at cost price to countries holding the EU Presidency where it has manufacturing capacity. My hopes were confirmed, because this company, with production facilities in Győr also submitted a bid in the tender, which was very favourable. Police officers were asked to drive the cars, of course, with financial compensation to their employers due to the fact that they often had to work overtime. At little cost, we were able to get cars to transport delegations from the aircraft to the lounge also. These were driven by drivers in public service who were about to be made redundant. Not only did they get a job for the duration of the Presidency, but they also received the special airport training that allowed them to take up jobs at European airports with ease. A Hungarian patent was used to optimise the movement of the Presidency's fleet of vehicles: a micro-enterprise wanted to introduce its development to the international market at the time; it used computer software for tracking vehicles to compute their ideal scheduling for the central controller. Fortunately, the cars were given the officially-issued MEU number plates, allowing them to appear as 'Hungarian EU Presidency' fleet, without the need to apply for a special costly number plate.

Communication tasks

A major challenge was also to handle communication tasks, whose central tool was the Presidency's website. The software for the website was provided free of charge by the Belgian Presidency; it just needed to be adapted for Hungarian use. The content was fed by an editorial team led by Ambassador Urkuti, partly to inform experts and partly to inform the general public. The website allowed both participants and members of the press to register for the events. In addition to the usual English and French, the website was also published in Hungarian, as the host Member State's language, and in German, due to the historical traditions of Central Europe. The translation work was of course

also provided on the basis of a public procurement. Besides the website, a professional publication was produced for each event by the communication team with the help of the Hungarian negotiating team responsible for the topic. The publication also provided a basis for preparation and then reported on the results.

The technical support was provided by the Department of Telecommunications of the Foreign Affairs Ministry and the relevant government authority, so even in the event of a DoS attack, there was no problem in accessing the website. They also made it possible for the Gödöllő press centre to have secure internet access even in periods of the heaviest internet traffic.

To ensure constant information, the Presidency had to engage a media company to act as a ‘host broadcaster’ for interested foreign media. After collecting the bids, the choice fell on the then independent Duna Television, which performed its task to the general satisfaction of the public with the appropriate technical background. Professional information was provided by competent spokespersons in Brussels and Hungary.

Building the country image

We used the informal meetings held in Hungary to raise awareness for Hungarian gastronomy and drinks. To ensure professionalism, a top sommelier and an expert in gastronomy were hired. The selection of wines, champagnes and pálinka to be served was made under strict conditions, with expert blind tastings. The gastronomy expert consulted with the winners of the catering competitions and the wine expert of the Presidency on the choice of dishes and wine pairings. The high quality of the catering was also illustrated by a recipe book, which, in addition to highlighting some moments of the organisation, contains descriptions and pictures of the food and drinks served.

We also made sure that the restaurants of the European institutions in Brussels got to know Hungarian wines, and served them during the Hungarian Presidency. We handed over the Presidency to our Polish friends, this time by renewing the historic wine route and transporting Tokaj wine to the opening ceremonies, and we encouraged the Polish Presidency to use Hungarian wines.

We also made sure that Hungarian culture was showcased during the Presidency. At executive-level meetings, in agreement with the relevant ministries, participants could enjoy a different arts programme, typically linked to a banquet. During the break in the Gödöllő meeting, the local music school presented a short programme. We also gave participants in the experts’ meeting the opportunity to visit exhibitions and the Parliament building.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ cultural units organised a number of high-end events abroad, also in the context of the Liszt anniversary. (One of the Presidency gifts was a jubilee Liszt CD.) Besides operating the usual channels of professional information, the Hungarian public was also informed about the Presidency’s objectives and achievements in the context of a number of cultural and sporting events.

Summary

Finally, some facts about the first Hungarian Presidency of the Council of the European Union. Some 50,000 people attended the informal meetings in Hungary. A total of 261 Presidency meetings were held, of which 17 were ministerial meetings, 9 were ministerial conferences, 104 were senior official meetings and 131 were expert meetings. The Presidency hosted 120 civil society events in line with the Hungarian objectives. In Brussels, there were 2,300 working groups chaired by Hungary, and 45 official ministerial councils, which set a 'world record': on 21 March 2011, four ministerial Council meetings were held simultaneously. This was accompanied by meetings and cultural events held in third countries, organised locally by Hungarian diplomatic missions.

The first Hungarian EU Presidency was a great success. In substantive terms, we achieved the objectives set, including the finalisation of Croatia's accession, the adoption of the economic six-pack and the European Roma integration strategy. A tight budget did not prevent the high quality implementation of the Presidency. The participants were satisfied with the organisation, the venues and the hospitality. It is estimated that many officials and their families returned later as tourists, which partly offset the expenses of the Presidency. Hungary proved that it had provided the European Community with an effective and professional presidency that would have been a credit to any experienced Member State.

The author was the Government Commissioner in charge of the operational implementation of the 2011 Hungarian EU Presidency.