

# Preparing for the 2024 Hungarian EU Presidency from the Perspective of Training and the Involvement of Civil Society

## Introduction

Carrying out the duties of the Presidency of the Council of the European Union is an occasion that falls on us every 13 and a half years, which is the second time since 2011. It represents a significant responsibility and at the same time a great opportunity for all Member States. During the half-year period of the Hungarian EU Presidency, Hungary will play a major role in the political management of the European Union, in the functioning of the Council of the European Union and in representing the European Union towards EU institutions and third countries, as well as international organisations. We will have an impact on the Council's work, by determining what issues will be put on the agenda.

Following a series of crises, Hungary will hold the Presidency of the Council of the European Union in an institutional transition amid unprecedented geopolitical uncertainty. As Minister János Bóka stated: "While we could say that not many would swap with us, we would rather say that this is a task worthy of Hungary, the Hungarian Government, and we would not settle for anything less."

In the second semester of 2024, Hungary will be the face and the voice of the Union, which entails a special responsibility for our country. We can say that the prerequisite for the successful implementation of the Hungarian EU Presidency is a well-trained, dedicated and motivated presidency staff committed to representing Hungarian national interests. The Presidency takes place in a special period, immediately after the European Parliament elections, i.e. the time of the EU institutional renewal, which recurs every five years for changes to take place in the EU institutional system and in the ranks of those managing it. Therefore, it is essential that the officials participating in the work of the Presidency receive practice-oriented training on institutional issues as well as decision-making and European politics, covering internal procedures as well. Instead of taking a theoretical approach, the training plan was developed taking into account aspects of practical feasibility, effectiveness and timing.

Hungary has already held a successful EU Presidency in 2011, so the current Government could launch the preparations for the Hungarian EU Presidency following the 2022 parliamentary elections almost two years before its implementation, relying on the experience gained a decade ago. As such, political and institutional stability was a given. At the highest level, the Hungarian EU Presidency will be represented by the most experienced Head of Government in the European Union, Viktor Orbán, who

is preparing for his second Hungarian EU Presidency during his mandate as Prime Minister.<sup>1</sup> However, the 2024 Hungarian Presidency is in many ways different from the Presidency implemented in the first half of 2011. On the one hand, the second half of the 2024 Presidency is in practice one month shorter, as the Union's institutional work typically grinds to a halt in August. This also means that there is less time for the implementation of the Hungarian Presidency Programme, related events and informal meetings.

On the other hand, the Presidency comes at a peculiar time, during the change of the Union's institutional cycle. The heads of the foremost EU institutions are nominated and approved during this period. The process will start with the elections to the European Parliament, to be held between 6 and 9 June 2024. Next, the European Parliament is scheduled to elect the President of the European Parliament, which, according to the adopted parliamentary calendar, will most probably take place in July, so during the Hungarian EU Presidency, followed by the election of the President of the Commission and the approval by the European Parliament of the Commissioners and the new Commission; and the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy during the second half of 2024 (in light of the hearing of the Commissioner-designates by the European Parliament). Based on the experience of the last two instances of institutional renewal, the earliest possible date for setting up the next European Commission would be November or December 2024, but this could be delayed until early 2025, as the elections to the European Parliament are about two weeks later than those of the previous two institutional cycle changes. Consequently, it is a characteristic of presidencies taking place in such periods that legislative work (including the interinstitutional negotiations known as 'trilogues') is less active than in other, 'normal' periods. The legislative process is expected to be revived only in the second half of our Presidency. As such, one of the most important tasks of the Hungarian Presidency will be to ensure the stability of the institutional transition. Institutional transitions have already been managed by Presidencies (for example the 2014 Italian Presidency and the 2019 Finnish Presidency), but, in my personal view, the EU has never experienced such a tense geopolitical, geostrategic and institutional situation. A 'show of force' by the European Parliament, namely, its efforts to strengthen its own institutional role, are expected to gain momentum: the Spitzenkandidat system,<sup>2</sup> transnational list, demands for treaty changes and legislative initiatives all foreshadow interinstitutional and high political tensions.

The European Union is currently experiencing a series of crises: one crisis hardly ends, and another begins. In our EU policy, we represent a marked sovereigntist position, namely that a strong Europe based on strong nation states is the only way for the European Union to succeed in the future, as opposed to the increasingly federalist position of the EU institutions, which seek and, little by little, acquire more and more powers in the context of crises.

<sup>1</sup> Chancellor Angela Merkel had this opportunity in 2007 and 2020.

<sup>2</sup> The EP's demand to nominate the head of the list of the political party that won the elections as President of the European Commission.

## **Structure of the preparations for the Hungarian EU Presidency in the second half of 2024**

Preparations for the Hungarian Presidency started in July 2022 within the organisational framework of the Ministry of Justice, given that, from 1 July 2019 (until 31 July 2023) the Ministry of Justice was responsible for the coordination of EU affairs. Already back in 2022, as a first step in preparing for the tasks of the Presidency, the Ministry of Justice started to establish the institutional structure of the Presidency. In this context, two Government Decisions were adopted, Government Decision 1350/2022 (VII.21.) on the tasks related to the preparation for the Hungarian EU Presidency in the second half of 2024, and Government Decision 1351/2022 (VII.21.) on the establishment of the Government Committee for the EU Presidency. Preparations continued in the Ministry of European Union Affairs as of 1 August 2023.

The Government Decision on the tasks related to the preparation for the Presidency enumerates the main tasks related to the implementation of the Presidency, such as the definition of priorities for the Hungarian EU Presidency, human resource needs, informal meetings and events and the budget. In addition, following the institutional logic of 2011, a separate post of a Government Commissioner has been established to prepare for and manage the operational tasks of the Presidency. The said decision also requires the preparation and training of staff involved in the preparation for, and implementation of the EU Presidency. In October 2023, the Minister of Justice appointed me as Ministerial Commissioner for this task, starting from 1 January 2023, in order to contribute to the discharge of complex tasks and to our long-term staff policy goals (this position did not exist during the 2011 Hungarian EU Presidency).<sup>3</sup> My responsibilities include staff training, involvement of civil society organisations and coordination of staff policy tasks. I continued the performance of these Commissioner's tasks from 1 August 2023 as Ministerial Commissioner in the Ministry of European Union Affairs.

## **Preparation and training of staff involved in the preparation for and implementation of the Hungarian Presidency in the second half of 2024**

The preparation and the implementation of tasks related to the EU presidency place a heavy workload on the staff in the administration of a Member State. During the Hungarian EU Presidency, the Council will have to be managed from the lowest level, meaning from the Council working party and preparatory committees level (hereinafter referred to as the committees) to the highest, i.e. ministerial level. One of the most important tasks during the Presidency is chairing more than a hundred Council working parties and committees. It is also necessary to negotiate on behalf of the Council with the European Parliament, and that the Member State holding the Presidency act and

<sup>3</sup> The Ministerial Commissioner is supported by a two-person secretariat, Zsuzsa Ágnes Cser and Renáta Patai, Senior Government Advisers, who also contributed to this article.

negotiate<sup>4</sup> on behalf of the Council at political level in the role of a so-called *honest broker*. In addition, a considerable number of informal meetings and more than a hundred events must be organised and held, both in our country and in Brussels.

In view of this, it is justified that particular emphasis be placed on the training of the members of the Presidency staff involved in the preparation and direct management of the Hungarian EU Presidency. It is Hungary's essential interest and a prerequisite for the successful performance of our Presidency that we have a well-qualified, committed and motivated Presidency staff, committed to Hungarian national interests. A key objective is to equip the Presidency staff with comprehensive, practice-oriented training, including knowledge related to the EU's internal institutional and decision-making processes, as well as the context of European politics.

The training was designed with practical feasibility, efficiency and timeliness in mind, rather than taking a theoretical approach. The training for the Presidency aims to prepare for the work of the Presidency, so that staff effectively acquires and improves their practical knowledge necessary for a successful performance during the Presidency. The training plan for the Presidency staff was adopted by the Government in March 2023.

The training plan identified different target groups. The training will be given to officials directly involved in EU affairs who are posted to the Permanent Representation to the European Union (hereinafter: PR) and will carry out Presidency tasks in Brussels, as well as the EU affairs officials (primarily working party leaders and their deputies and EU affairs coordinators), who will carry out Presidency work from Budapest. The training plan also includes ministers and secretaries of state representing the Presidency in the Council, as well as deputy secretaries of state directly involved in the preparation of Council meetings, senior diplomats and specialised diplomats of the PR, and finally, liaison officers, who facilitate the Presidency's high-level meetings and events.

The training will take place in close cooperation with the Ludovika University of Public Service (hereinafter: Ludovika University), established in 2011.<sup>5</sup> The aim of the Ludovika University is to train professionals in the fields of public administration, national defence and law enforcement, to ensure the supply of officers for the national defence and law enforcement services and to create interoperability between civil service career paths.

As a key institution in the training of Hungarian public administration professionals, the Ludovika University provides training for the civil service's personnel supply base and for officials already active in the civil service. The experience gained in the field of preparing for a career in public administration at the Ludovika University, as well as in training professionals for EU and international diplomacy (in particular the Europe of Nations Career Programme, which was developed jointly with the Ludovika University, in my capacity as Deputy State Secretary for EU Relations), all justified the involvement of

<sup>4</sup> GYÖRI et al. 2014: 163–184.

<sup>5</sup> As set out in Act CXXXII of 2011 on the National University of Public Service and on Higher Administrative, Law Enforcement and Military Education.

the Ludovika University of Public Service in this targeted programme for the preparation of the Presidency staff.

The Presidency training period was opened on 8 May 2023 by Judit Varga, former Minister of Justice.

### *Fields and target groups of EU Presidency training*

Some parts of the EU Presidency training are unified, while other parts are differentiated according to the level of knowledge and experience of the selected individuals and based on the tasks they will have to perform during the Presidency (e.g. chairing a working party).

The training programme for the Hungarian EU Presidency covers five main areas: a specific Hungarian EU Presidency training; competence and skills development; Presidency training provided by the Council General Secretariat; English language training at C1 level (in the framework of Ludovika University) and French language training at B1, B2 and C1 levels, as well as security awareness training.

A target group will receive around 100 hours of training over four months, including English language training, plus an additional 24 hours of competence development per individual for working party chairs and their deputies. The preparation of the first target group, those to be posted to Brussels, took place in the second quarter of 2023. The training of the second target group, namely officials performing Council working party and preparatory commission chair tasks from Budapest, started in September 2023 and ended in December 2023. The specific training programme at the Ludovika University will be completed in April 2024 with the training of EU coordinators and newly recruited officials, who will support the domestic presidency staff. We will also focus on the training of the *liaison officers* of the Delegations, who will be selected in a tiered selection process and will be trained in the course of April–May 2024.

### *The Hungarian EU Presidency training established together with the Ludovika University*

The Government has a long history of professional cooperation with Ludovika University. An excellent example would be the one-year European Union civil service training programme, the so-called Europe of the Nations Career Programme, established in 2019 by the Ministry of Justice and Ludovika, operated today by the Ministry of European Union Affairs and Ludovika. The Career Programme was launched in 2020; fourth year students of the Programme started their studies in autumn 2023. The experience gained in the implementation of the Career Programme has also been put to good use in the development of the Presidency training programme.

One of the guiding principles for the development of a specific Hungarian EU Presidency training at Ludovika University was to provide the most useful, hands-on

training possible, as well as to cover the EU's internal institutional and decision-making processes and policy context. In the training programme we have engaged lecturers who were involved in the work of the 2011 Hungarian EU Presidency as leaders and/or are currently in key positions in the management of the 2024 Presidency, so they can share the experience, insights and practices that will be essential for officials working in central administration as well as for diplomats delegated to the PR.

The following seven subjects have been identified for the specific training programme at the Ludovika University:

- Introduction to the objectives of the Hungarian EU Presidency
- Presidency in practice
- The EU's institutional and decision-making system in practice
- Government communication
- Protocol challenges during the Presidency
- Member State EU policies
- English as a specialised language

The training programme was designed to prepare for the substantive and practical tasks of the Presidency, placing them at the same time in a broader geopolitical context. Particular focus was placed on training the Council working party Chairs and their deputies, treating them as a separate group. In their preparation, it is appropriate to focus in more detail on the practical tasks of the Presidency of the Council and the conduct of the 'trilogues'. English as a specialised language course is compulsory for those who have not passed a complex tertiary level exam in English. The training is complemented by so-called 'Presidency Europe Clubs', to allow for an informal exchange of views with senior civil servants and politicians on issues and topics of particular importance and with the broader political and institutional context in the run-up to the Presidency.<sup>6</sup>

### *Skills development*

In the course of the year 2023 we also offered a differentiated training opportunity for working party and committee chairs focusing on *soft skills*. In order to ensure the success of the Hungarian EU Presidency, the high-quality performance of presidency tasks it is crucial that the officials conducting and participating in negotiations and consultations possess the appropriate skills and abilities. Therefore, we provided specific training for them in the areas of communication, networking and negotiation techniques. These competences are developed by trainers who are experienced and are recognised, successful trainers in their field.

<sup>6</sup> Guests of EU Presidency clubs were in 2023: Balázs Orbán, Political Director of the Prime Minister, Tamás Deutsch, Head of the Fidesz–KDNP EP delegation, Zsolt Németh, Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the National Assembly, Judit Varga, Chairman of the European Affairs Committee of the National Assembly, Pál Barna Zsigmond, Vice-Minister in the Ministry of EU Affairs, and Kinga Gál, Member of the European Parliament.



### *Training to be provided by the General Secretariat of the Council*

A further requirement for the successful implementation of the Presidency is that the Presidency staff be able to run the Council and conduct its meetings at a high professional standard. The General Secretariat of the Council (General Secretariat) has an institutionalised practice for the preparation and training of those involved in the tasks of the Presidency. In preparation for the presidencies, the Secretariat General organises horizontal and field-specific briefings and training sessions for those in the various levels of the presidencies' institutional structure, such as the Permanent Representative and Deputy Permanent Representative, senior diplomats of the PR, future chairs and deputy chairs of working parties at different stages of the presidency preparation. Since autumn 2023 we have taken advantage of the General Secretariat's training courses, which had been tailored to the specific needs of the administration in Budapest and the PR.

#### *French language training*

A high level of knowledge of English with EU specific terminology is essential for the performance of presidency tasks, and a working knowledge of French is an advantage. The French language training is designed so as to reach a level of language proficiency of at least intermediate (B2), and where possible, upper intermediate level (C1). In view of this objective, it has been proposed that French language training should start from level B1. The language training module was designed based on the level of language skills assessed and expected during the selection process, building mainly on EU professional modules in addition to general language training. The aim of the French language course is to develop French language competencies in the field of international relations and diplomacy, as well as to improve French language skills and their practical use in professional situations.

### **Involvement of civil society**

The Presidency of the Council always poses a great challenge for the Member State holding it, but now, because of the political, institutional and geopolitical constellation, it shall take place at a particularly important moment in history, which is both an exceptional opportunity and a responsibility. As mentioned above, the second Hungarian Presidency of the Council comes at an important time in many respects, it is the period of the institutional cycle change.

The elections to the European Parliament will take place between 6 and 9 June 2024, less than a month before the start of our Presidency. On the European Parliament website one can read: "The European elections give you the chance to select who will represent you in the European Parliament and help decide what kind of Europe we have."<sup>7</sup> The extent to

<sup>7</sup> European Parliament s. a.

which citizens or Member States have the possibility to influence the future of Europe and whether the position of all Member States really has the same weight could be analysed at length, because, as Deputy State Secretary in charge of government coordination of the Conference on the Future of Europe, I have experienced how the Hungarian views put on the EU table regardless the active Hungarian participation (Hungary was the most active Member State with 816 events) were ignored. However, this experience has also highlighted that Hungarian civil society organisations and citizens are remarkably active and committed to issues affecting the future of the European Union and our continent.

All these factors, i.e. the forthcoming elections to the European Parliament and the subsequent Hungarian EU Presidency, as well as the institutional, power and decision-making efforts, which are currently being interpreted as a follow-up to the Future of the EU conference, could lead to an even stronger interest from society, the opportunity to directly influence the functioning of the EU recurs once every five years, the opportunity for a Member State to hold the Presidency of the Council arrives merely once every 13.5 years.<sup>8</sup>

In light of the above, it is important to be able to think about the Hungarian EU Presidency in the context of European elections, since the decision of European citizens, including Hungarian citizens, will also strongly influence the political direction of post-2024 Europe.

As the Ministerial Commissioner in charge of relations with civil society organisations, it is my priority and an important objective to ensure that the dialogue with the citizens on the Hungarian EU Presidency starts well before the Presidency begins, and that the society is adequately informed of the forthcoming Presidency, consequently bringing them closer to the European Union and our Presidency.

In view of the above, we have started working with our social partners and NGOs a year before the Presidency. One of the main objectives behind liaising with civil society organisations, youth organisations, business organisations, research institutes and think tanks is to obtain information on their events and for them to share their views with us, to cooperate along common points, to gain a more comprehensive picture of the civil society's position as well as to inform them of the Hungarian Government's positions, and finally, to inform them of the preparations for the Hungarian EU Presidency.

Our aim is to provide the widest possible range of information, for example by regular reporting on preparations for the Hungarian EU Presidency at the plenary session of the National Economic and Social Council, or at the National Youth Dialogue.

We place great emphasis on the involvement of academia. As a partner of the Hungarian Government, Ludovika University is actively involved in the preparations for the Hungarian EU Presidency, since we also jointly perform the training of the Hungarian EU Presidency staff. Ludovika University also edits several EU Presidency publications and organises conferences. There is also close cooperation with the Central European Academy and the Ferenc Mádl Institute for Comparative Law (FMI). These research institutions plan numerous conferences in the context of the Hungarian EU Presidency in 2024.

<sup>8</sup> Council of the European Union s. a.



We also maintain close contact with the EU institutions during the preparations for the Presidency, and we are working together with the representations of the European Commission and the European Parliament in Budapest. In this framework, we are holding a series of high level and expert level (from academia) events together with the Representation of the European Commission in Hungary. The first event of this series took place on 22 September, where we presented the Presidency Programme of the Spanish–Belgian–Hungarian trio and the expected focus points of the Hungarian EU Presidency to the representatives of interested civil society organisations. The participants were also informed of the operational preparations for the Presidency. Minister János Bóka and Government Commissioner Zoltán Kovács shared information and answered questions from participants. We will present in detail the focus points of the Hungarian EU Presidency in the following four sessions, involving academia and civil organisations, moving towards a veritable consultation with interested civil society players.

The Presidency is not only a forum for political and institutional coordination, but also includes a series of events that will allow us to present Hungary to Europe, as the number of entries to Hungary will multiply during the six months of the Presidency. Many of those travelling to Hungary from the EU Member States will be either first-time visitors or have visited for the last time in 2011, during the first Hungarian EU Presidency. This is why now is a great time to showcase the values of our country. We are convinced that showing the true face of Hungary will help promote the priorities of the Hungarian EU Presidency and we hope that visitors will not only get to know but also understand the Hungarian position during their stay in Hungary.

Although we will be displaying the Hungarian way of thinking and virtues to many visitors during the Hungarian EU Presidency, there will also be many who will not have the opportunity to visit Hungary. For this reason, I believe it is important that the Hungarian EU Presidency also be prominently displayed abroad. Our partners in this endeavour are our embassies in the EU Member States, who present the Hungarian priorities, positions and culture at formal and informal events throughout the Hungarian EU Presidency.

For the same reason, we are also working closely with the Hungarian members of the two advisory bodies of the EU, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) and the European Committee of the Regions (COR), to promote the Hungarian EU Presidency across the EU.

### **Credo**

The period up to 31 December 2024 will not be easy; indeed, it will be rather challenging, since we have a lot on our plate. However, besides the great responsibility we must shoulder, the Presidency is a huge opportunity to show the true colours of our country, to help understand the Hungarian position, while contributing to our country image.

Those participating in the work of the Presidency must have the skills and competences to carry out all the additional tasks arising throughout the Presidency and manage the challenges of the Presidency work effectively. In Brussels, the environment will not necessarily be friendly, which will require the appropriate attitude and stance.

Consequently, we have structured a training to be as useful and practical as possible, drawing on examples from other Member States, also using best practices and the experience of the 2011 Hungarian EU Presidency. I chaired the working party drafting the Croatian Accession Treaty in 2011, so I experienced first-hand the skills, internal institutional procedures and Member State dynamics required to perform the presidency work successfully. When compiling the training plan, we kept in mind that each and every colleague participating in the training should benefit as much as possible from the training and possess a hands-on knowledge, equipping them with the skills to confidently represent the Hungarian position and have a good understanding of the institutional and political processes that will be particularly tense at this time.

By the end of the training period in May 2024, we will have trained around 900 officials (in addition the so-called liaison officers). Thanks to the training and the successive implementation of Presidency tasks, we will be able to rely on the work of highly qualified EU professionals speaking several languages, with a deep knowledge of EU institutions and decision-making processes. Training for the EU Presidency is both a long-term investment and an opportunity that can contribute to achieving our EU staff policy goals and, on the long run, increase the efficiency of central administration through the employment of trained and experienced staff.

It is my honour to contribute for the second time to the success of the Hungarian EU Presidency. In 2011, during the first Hungarian EU Presidency, I had the opportunity to work on a policy area in Brussels, and this time I take part in the preparations in Budapest. I believe that the efforts and work invested in the Presidency will contribute to both the success of the European Union and the effective representation of our country's interests.

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