

Recruiting the Presidency Staff and Setting Up the Personnel Framework for the Hungarian EU Presidency

Introduction

For the second time, Hungary will take over the Presidency of the Council of the European Union between 1 July 2024 and 31 December 2024, as the last member of the presidency trio¹ consisting of Spain, Belgium and Hungary. In order to ensure the successful and high-quality implementation of the Presidency, the Hungarian Government has started the main preparations immediately after the May 2022 parliamentary elections.

As a first step, the Government Committee for the EU Presidency was established,² which is chaired by the Prime Minister and provides strategic and political guidance in relation to the Presidency, and the Minister of Justice, in line with the Minister's overall responsibility for the coordination of EU affairs, was appointed to assume the tasks and the political coordination of the Presidency.³ Relevant for the structuring of the preparatory work was that in July 2022 the Government set out the main tasks and the corresponding deadlines for the preparation of the Presidency.⁴ The roadmap adopted included, among other things, the establishment of the political and operational governance structures, calling on the ministries to prepare the strategic orientation for the Presidency's priorities, setting up the conceptual framework of the informal meetings and events to be held in Hungary, drawing up the Presidency budget, and developing the personnel framework for the Presidency.

Considering the established practice of previous presidencies, including the Hungarian EU Presidency held in the first half of 2011, the Government decided to create a two-pillar structure under the responsibility of the State Secretary responsible for EU Affairs in the Ministry of Justice. Accordingly, the Deputy State Secretary for EU policy in the Ministry of Justice was responsible for the substantive tasks related to the Presidency, i.e. primarily the coordination of government measures, the preparation of the strategic

¹ Member States holding the Presidency work closely together in groups of three, referred to as 'trios'. This system was introduced by the Lisbon Treaty in 2009. The trio sets long-term goals and prepares a joint agenda determining the topics and major issues that will be addressed by the Council over an 18-month period. The institution of the trio presidency is also expressed in the mutual assistance that the members of the group provide to each other.

² Government Decision 1351/2022 on the Establishment of the Government Committee of the EU Presidency.

³ On 1 August 2023, the Government established the Ministry of European Union Affairs, thus these tasks have since been taken over by the Minister responsible for European Union Affairs.

⁴ Government Decision 1350/2022 on Tasks Related to the Preparation of the Hungarian EU Presidency in the Second Half of 2024.

priorities of the Hungarian Presidency and the Trio Presidency, the tasks related to the Government Committee of the EU Presidency, and the selection of the Presidency staff. A special Government Commissioner was appointed in the Ministry of Justice to coordinate operational tasks, i.e. selecting venues and conducting informal meetings and events related to the Presidency, as well as preparing and implementing the Presidency Budget.

One of the first and foremost substantive tasks involved in the preparation of the Presidency was the screening of ministries in the autumn of 2022 to determine the exact number of officials required for the successful implementation of the Hungarian EU Presidency. Therefore, as part of the process, the Ministry of Justice, in close cooperation with the competent ministries, assessed the relevant Presidency tasks, and the specific undertakings these would imply for the Hungarian central administration.

The tasks under the EU Presidency

Taking over the rotating presidency of the Council of the European Union, Hungary's primary task is to act as an honest broker, shaping the issues on the EU agenda in the common interest of the Member States and ensuring the continuity of legislative work in the Council. In this context, Hungary must help shape the Council's position and represent it in negotiations with the other EU institutions. This is a multifaceted task which, in addition to the planning and the chairing of Council meetings (including informal meetings to be held in Hungary), includes also the planning and chairing of Council working groups and preparatory committees and coordinating the EU's position in areas of international relevance in various international organisations. A notable difference compared to the Hungarian Presidency in the first half of 2011 will be that, in line with the practice of recent years, Hungary will also host an informal meeting of Heads of State and Government in the second half of 2024.

Under the EU treaties in force, the Council meets in ten different configurations, chaired by the Member State holding the six-month Presidency of the Council, with the exception of the Foreign Affairs Council.⁵ There is no hierarchy between the different Council configurations, but the General Affairs Council has a specific coordinating role, including the preparation and follow-up of European Council meetings and is responsible for organisational, administrative and horizontal matters. The Council configurations

⁵ These Council configurations are the following: General Affairs Council (including cohesion policy); Foreign Affairs Council (including European security and defence policy, trade policy and development cooperation); Economic and Financial Affairs Council (including the budget); Justice and Home Affairs Council (including civil protection); Agriculture and Fisheries Council; Competitiveness Council (Internal Market, Industry, Research, Space and Tourism); Transport, Telecommunications and Energy Council; Employment, Social Affairs, Health and Consumer Affairs Council; Environment Council; and Education, Youth, Culture and Sport Council (including audiovisual issues).

themselves often meet in different formations, so that in practice a configuration may have several Presidents. Member States are represented at ministerial level, i.e. ministers or state secretaries, at Council meetings and can therefore only be chaired by a minister or state secretary. The Foreign Affairs Council is chaired by the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. The High Representative may be deputised, if necessary, by a member representing the Member State holding the rotating Presidency of the Council, which, as has been the practice in recent years, usually takes place when the Council discusses issues related to common commercial policy. It is also standard practice for Council presidencies to organise informal ministerial meetings, usually in the Member States holding the rotating Presidency. These meetings are not formally considered Council meetings and their main purpose is to facilitate joint reflection and exchange of views, without any formal setting.

Council meetings are prepared by Council working groups and preparatory committees. Some of these are permanent but their actual number varies depending on the issues on the EU agenda. The frequency of the meetings of each working group also varies considerably, depending on the number of dossiers on the agenda and the practice of the working group concerned. The Council currently has around 137 Council working groups and preparatory committees,⁶ including several with a number of sub-groups dealing with specific policy areas. There are currently around 32 Council working groups and preparatory committees with a permanent or elected President. In case of the latter, the rotating Presidency does not have a major role to play, but they also mean additional duties for the rotating Presidency, which is to ensure the coordination of the Council's decision-making as a whole. This means that overall Hungary will have to chair around 157 Council preparatory groups (including the sub-groups) in 2024.

Similarly to the Hungarian EU Presidency that took place in the first half of 2011, there are still Council working groups which Hungary has limited expertise to chair (typically on fisheries and maritime policy issues). In this case, the possibility of handing over the chairmanship of the Council working group to another Member State, e.g. to either one of our trio partners, Spain or Belgium, or to the Polish Presidency following the Hungarian EU Presidency, could also be an option. In addition, EU institutions are also open to second their officials to the rotating presidency to help them perform their duties. The General Secretariat of the Council is usually prepared to second two officials for up to 9 months, while the European Commission is prepared to second five to ten officials for up to 8 months to the Member State holding the rotating presidency. Experts from the European Parliament, other EU institutions and even international organisations may also be called upon to carry out Presidency tasks on a temporary basis. Hungary will make use of this opportunity in 2024, as it did during its Presidency in the first half of 2011.

⁶ Council Decision 2009/937/EU of 1 December 2009 adopting the Council's Rules of Procedure (OJ L 325, 11.12.2009, 35), as amended by Decision (EU) 2022/1242 of 18 July 2022 (OJ L 190, 19.7.2022, 137).

The Presidency Staff

The Presidency will involve the whole of the central administration, considering the wide range of activities from chairing Council working groups and preparatory committees to presiding over Council configurations. In view of the different responsibilities involved in each Council configuration and in light of the Hungarian Government structure, in order to ensure that the preparations for the Presidency progress properly, the Government decided in June 2023 which ministries will chair what Council configuration in the second half of 2024. Accordingly, with one or two exceptions, just about all the members of the Hungarian Government will actively participate in performing the duties arising from the EU Presidency, while a few of them will also be responsible for chairing multiple Council configurations next year.

In order to ensure a successful conduct of the EU Presidency, it is essential to select skilled officials to be involved in the Presidency's tasks, i.e. the Presidency Staff, some of whom will be based at the Permanent Representation to the European Union in Brussels, while others will be working in the central administration in Budapest. The guiding principle of the human resources policy concept developed by the Ministry of Justice in the autumn of 2022 was that, in order to successfully carry out the Presidency tasks, it is essential that Council preparatory configurations and working groups are chaired by, and include people with excellent knowledge of the relevant dossiers, who have several years of experience in the national administration and in EU affairs, and have the ability to conduct negotiations in English (although in many working groups a good command of French is also required). Accordingly, the staff who will be involved in the working groups during the Presidency will be primarily those government officials who are already working at the Permanent Representation to the EU in Brussels and in the ministries or Government Agencies in Hungary.

An important criterion for the selection of the Presidency Staff was the need to appoint at least one chairperson and one vice-chairperson for each of the Council working groups and preparatory committees, and often for the sub-working groups as well, to be able to carry out the tasks of the Presidency. Besides, one or two additional officials are usually selected to assist the chairperson and to be present at meetings as Hungary's representative (sitting behind the 'Hungary' flag). However, in addition to this minimum number, a significant number of working groups require more staff than this, considering the frequency of meetings or the number, importance and complexity of the dossiers dealt with by the working group. Accordingly, by the end of October 2023, the Presidency Staff includes a total of around 750 persons, who will carry out the day-to-day Presidency tasks in the different Council configurations, as well as the central coordination tasks during our EU Presidency.

For the selection of the staff, it was the ministries in charge of the respective areas who proposed the experts who would be assigned to the Council working groups, with the final decision being taken by the ministries together with the Ministry of Justice, which has the overall responsibility for the Presidency tasks and policy coordination.

A further important guiding principle was that the number and composition of the staff involved should be kept flexible so that it may be adjusted in the event of unforeseen changes in the run up to the Presidency.

The Permanent Representation to the European Union in Brussels

A significant part of the EU presidency work is carried out in Brussels, which is why each presidency temporarily and significantly increases the staff (both diplomatic and administrative/technical) of its Permanent Representation to the EU, usually a year before the start of the respective presidency. Accordingly, in the autumn of 2022, the Ministry of Justice, in cooperation with the competent ministries, assessed the human resource needs of the Hungarian EU Presidency, as a result of which the Government decided to increase the staff of the Permanent Representation to the EU in Brussels for a limited period.⁷ As a result, the personnel of the Permanent Representation will double by the start of the Hungarian Presidency in the second half of 2024, similarly to the situation during our Presidency in 2011.⁸

Most of the additional diplomatic staff will take up work by 1 September 2023 in order to ensure smooth cooperation with the trio partners. Their timely deployment is also necessary to allow them, as members of the incoming Presidency, to build up the necessary contacts before the start of the Hungarian Presidency and to acquire a better understanding of the functioning of the EU institutions and the dynamics of negotiations. By contrast, the increase in administrative and technical staff will take place only a few months before the start of the Presidency.

Closely linked to the work in Brussels is the coordination of the Council's position in international organisations and international conferences during the Presidency. The coordination of the EU's position in international organisations, in particular the United Nations (UN) and the World Trade Organisation (WTO), is a major additional task in the context of Presidency responsibilities. In view of this, the Hungarian Government has also decided that, in addition to the Permanent Representation to the EU in Brussels, three other key multilateral missions will also be reinforced during the Presidency: the Permanent Representation to the UN in New York, the Permanent Representation to the UN, the WTO and other international organisations in Geneva, and the Permanent Representation to the Food and Agriculture Organisation in Rome. It is also important to note in this context, that these additional Presidency posts are fixed-term, in which case the date of posting – in accordance with established practice of previous Presidencies – starts on 1 September 2023 and, taking into account the follow-up work related to the Presidency, as a general rule, ends on 30 June 2025.

⁷ Government Decision 2089/2023 on Tasks Related to Ensuring the Human Resource Requirements Necessary for the Hungarian Presidency of the Council of the European Union in the Second Half of 2024.

⁸ The staff of the Permanent Representation to the European Union in Brussels consisted of nearly 100 diplomats and about two dozen administrative and technical staff and local employees in 2022, i.e. at the beginning of the preparations for the EU Presidency.

The central public administration

In addition to the staff of the Permanent Representation to the EU in Brussels and other relevant multilateral representations, the successful implementation of the Presidency will also mean a significant additional workload for the Budapest-based part of the central administration, i.e. the competent ministries and Government Agencies. Firstly, this means taking part in the work related to the Council's 137 or so working groups and preparatory committees. Along with the additional Presidency Staff seconded to Brussels (the Presidents, the Vice-Presidents, and those sitting behind the 'Hungary' flag), part of the tasks will be carried out by government officials from Budapest who will occasionally have to travel to Brussels. This means a considerable increase in the workload of the central administration, as meetings will have to be organised, coordination with Member States and EU institutions must be ensured, and documents to be discussed by the working groups and the preparatory committees will have to be prepared. Secondly, the central management and coordination of the EU Presidency, ensuring the coherence of the Presidency's activities and the related high-level strategic and political discussions will be the responsibility of the Ministry of Justice (succeeded by the newly created Ministry of European Union Affairs after 1 August 2023), through the Deputy State Secretariat for EU Policy. Thirdly, the coordination of the activities of each Council configuration (including tasks related to formal and informal Council meetings) will be carried out involving the relevant ministries to ensure that the Presidency's activities in each field are coherent and well-coordinated. Fourthly, each competent ministry has government officials whose main task is not closely linked to EU affairs, but who, due to their special expertise, are only occasionally involved in the negotiation of EU proposals and only assist the chair of the working groups and preparatory committees during the Presidency on a part time basis.

In view of the tasks outlined above, from the autumn of 2022 onwards the Ministry of Justice has held several rounds of consultations with all competent ministries on the increase in staffing required due to the additional tasks arising with the Presidency. As a result of several months of consultations and taking into account the workload of the Presidency, the tasks based on objective criteria,⁹ and at the same time observing budgetary considerations, in August 2023 the Government decided to create 230 temporary posts between 1 September 2023 and 30 June 2025 in order to cover the tasks arising from the Hungarian Presidency in the second half of 2024. The increase in the number of staff outlined above also includes the specific staffing needs stemming from Presidency tasks that are related to major international conferences in the second half of 2024. From among these, the 29th Conference of the Parties to the UN Framework

⁹ These primarily covered the number of council (sub)formations, council working groups, (sub)working groups and preparatory committees falling under the responsibility of each ministry, as well as the expected number of their meetings during the presidency semester, as well as the expected workload of ministries, i.e. the number of dossiers expected to be on the agenda during the Hungarian EU Presidency.

Convention on Climate Change (COP29) and the 16th Conference of the Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Biological Diversity (COP16) stand out. The Presidency will be responsible for coordinating and representing the EU position, i.e. negotiating on behalf of the EU and its Member States at these major international conferences, which sometimes last several weeks and take place in various locations.

As in the case of the staff increase at the EU Permanent Representation in Brussels, it was an important aspect of the Presidency planning that unforeseen or unexpected situations and tasks should be prepared for in advance, allowing for an appropriate strategy, organisational system and staff to be mobilised immediately where necessary. With this in mind, the above mentioned 230 temporary increase of posts includes a reserve of 30 posts. The decision on how, and if at all to use the reserve will be taken in the run-up to the Presidency. It is important to note furthermore, that the above figure does not include the additional approximately 60 staff requested during the development of the Presidency structure in 2022 to reinforce the operational staff of the Presidency in the Ministry of Justice.

Training the Presidency Staff

The Hungarian EU Presidency in the second half of 2024 can only be successful if it can rely on well-prepared government personnel that is committed to Hungarian national interests and capable of representing them adequately. The tasks of the Presidency require government officials who are well acquainted with the institutions and functioning of the European Union and possess a good understanding of the relevant dossiers and have at least a good command of English while the knowledge of other official languages of the Union is an added value. It is also important that, in addition to their expertise and language skills, government officials also have the appropriate skills to carry out the tasks related to the Presidency.

A systematic training of government officials is necessary to get ready for the tasks of the presidency, the preparation for which usually starts 2–3 years before the actual implementation of the presidency. The Hungarian Government set 1 January 2024 as the target date for the human resources preparations for the Hungarian EU Presidency. Accordingly, preparations regarding the staff started in the autumn of 2022, with the selection and training of government officials involved directly in the Presidency. This was in line with paragraph 4 of Government Decision 1350/2022 on the tasks related to the preparation of the Hungarian EU Presidency in the second half of 2024, which stipulated that the preparation and training plan for staff involved in the preparation and management of the EU Presidency had to be finalised by 31 December 2022.

The main objective of the Presidency training plan was to develop and deliver training courses specifically tailored to the preparation and work of the Hungarian EU Presidency. The Ministry of Justice, in close cooperation with the Ludovika University of Public

Service, has set up a special programme for the training of the Presidency Staff, e.g. for those persons who will be directly involved in managing the Hungarian EU Presidency.¹⁰

As the Presidency approaches, the General Secretariat of the Council is also increasingly involved in the preparation of the Presidency Staff. As a part of this effort, a high-level awareness raising seminar was held in Budapest in June 2023 for the future chairs of Council configurations, providing an opportunity to take stock of the main elements of the presidency role and best practices in small groups, allowing for interactive discussion. Furthermore, the Secretariat General provides support for presidency tasks related to press and communication (e.g. speaking points for post-Council press conferences) and, upon request and before the start of the presidency, provides personal presidency coaching in Brussels or Budapest for future chairs of Council configurations, adapted to their area of expertise.

Incentivising Presidency Staff

Not only does the implementation of the EU Presidency pose a considerable challenge for those involved in the professional work, but it also requires an adequate quality of support schemes to incentivise the Presidency Staff and to compensate them for the additional tasks arising from the Presidency. An experienced, well-trained, committed and motivated team of officials is a prerequisite for the effective delivery of the Presidency. Indeed, the tasks of the Presidency are not only challenging and demanding for those involved, but they also entail a high level of responsibility and a significantly increased workload.

In order to ensure the efficient and effective conduct of Presidency tasks, Act IX of 2023 on the legal status regarding the tasks undertaken in relation to the Hungarian Presidency¹¹ was adopted establishing the so-called EU Presidency scheme. This new type of legal status allows officials working in the broader public sector – as specified by the law – to receive additional remuneration depending on their salary and the task performed during the Presidency.

According to the Government's decision in August 2023, between 1 September 2023 and 28 February 2025, a maximum of 450 EU Presidency schemes will be established, covering the majority of the Presidency Staff. From this and based on the extra workload arising from the tasks related to the EU Presidency, competent ministries can distribute between 20 to 50 EU presidency schemes among their government officials belonging to the Presidency Staff. The Ministry of European Union Affairs prepared the proposal on the distribution of the available EU presidency schemes between the competent ministries, for which it used the same objective criteria already described above as the

¹⁰ On the training of the Presidency Staff see the chapter authored by Boglárka Bólya in this book.

¹¹ Act IX of 2023 on the Legal Relationship Regarding the Tasks Undertaken in Relation to the Hungarian Presidency of the Council of the European Union in the Second Half of 2024 and Certain Related Provisions.

basis for determining the increase in temporary staff for the competent ministries involved in the Presidency. It is important to note that the establishment of an EU Presidency scheme is initiated by the competent ministry's Administrative State Secretary, while the contract is concluded with the official concerned and the Administrative State Secretary of the Ministry of European Union Affairs. Meanwhile, in the case of an employee of the Ministry of European Union Affairs, the contract is concluded with the official concerned by the Administrative State Secretary of the Prime Minister's Cabinet Office.

Conclusion

Hungary will have to undertake a variety of diverse tasks during its Presidency of the Council of the European Union in the second half of 2024, involving the bulk of its national public administration. The successful performance of tasks requires a well-organised and well-prepared staff consisting of government officials who are committed to Hungarian national interests, capable of properly represent these. Such professionals must be well acquainted with the functioning of the European Union institutions and must have relevant and up-to-date knowledge of the given EU policy and should be able to negotiate at least in the English language. They must furthermore be able to shape the issues on the EU agenda as honest brokers in accordance with the common interests of all the Member States. In order to achieve all this, the Hungarian Government began already in 2022 the assessment of the human resource requirements necessary to carry out the EU Presidency, as a result of which it significantly increased the staff of the Permanent Representation to the EU in Brussels by 1 September 2023. At the same time, temporary posts were created in the central public administration to ensure the performance of additional duties arising with the Presidency, following which the Government started the selection of the officials responsible for the Presidency tasks, i.e. the Presidency Staff. In addition to the training of the Presidency Staff, a so-called EU Presidency scheme was introduced to incentivise the Presidency Staff and to compensate them for the additional tasks stemming from the Presidency. As a result of all this, there is every chance that by the beginning of 2024, i.e. half a year before the start of the Presidency, the personnel conditions of the EU Presidency will be secured, which is indispensable for a successful Hungarian Presidency.

References

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