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The All-Time Stepchild – Directions for Climate Policy Development

Climate protection and policy development have been part of the international discourse since the 1970s. In the European Union, however, it was only the first report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in 1990 that started the real dialogue. Although the EU institutions are trying to encourage policy development, member states have different views on how to achieve climate protection because of their different geographical, climatic and geopolitical situations. The Presidencies of the Council of the EU have the opportunity to shape policy (and regulation) by channelling their interests based on past achievements and setting the agenda for future ideas. In the 2010–2011 Spanish–Belgian–Hungarian trio, but specifically in Hungary’s programme and achievements, the focus on green policy was rather slight; the policy was mostly driven by energy policy. However, the changes after 2020 in the international environment and discourse have made the field even more prominent, with the European Green Deal and its legal instruments now having a compelling force on aspects such as biodiversity conservation or the development of a circular economy. A holistic approach to policy is essential, as the effects of climate change are felt differently everywhere and therefore require different approaches: Hungary (and the other two members of the trio) must take this perspective into account. This paper examines the policy issues that will be unavoidable for Hungary’s future, both at national and EU level.

Introduction

In terms of climate change trends, the year 2023 surpassed the intensity of previous years: in Hungary, and indeed in all parts of the planet, the year 2023 saw daily temperatures approaching the warmest ever recorded, and even breaking previous daily records. For example, on 27 August 2023, the highest dawn temperature ever recorded, 24.6 degrees Celsius, was recorded in Budapest.¹ In southern Europe (Greece, Sicily, Sardinia, southern Italy or eastern Spain), but also in China and across the United States thermometers recorded over 45 degrees Celsius. This steady but significant rise, which has continued in previous years, is clearly linked by many studies to man-made (anthropogenic) climate change.² According to the European Union’s Copernicus Climate Change Service, the temperature rise on the European continent over the past five years has been 1°C above the global average, which is about 2.2°C higher than the values for the second half of the 19th century. As a consequence, extreme heat in summer 2023 (for example, due to the formation of a heat dome, i.e. persistent heat in an area due to high air pressure) could lead to more and more record-breaking summer days in the

¹ Infostart 2023.

² ZACHARIAH et al. 2023: 2.

future.³ Of course, this phenomenon does not only mean that longer siesta periods will be introduced in the Mediterranean regions: forest fires, droughts, adverse effects on human health (e.g. through heat stress, which means high temperatures and humidity, low air movement) will all increase.

Extreme weather events, heatwaves and their outgrowth are only one of a number of disasters that have hit Europe in recent times; floods, flash floods and severe storms have occurred on an equally large scale across the continent. Even today, these extreme anomalies continue to shock society and decision-makers, demonstrating that it is still more common to look for solutions after the occurrence rather than to identify and then act on the causes or to prepare for the effects of climate change. This may be due to the fact that, in the political sphere, climate policy-based decision-making is largely obscured in the hour of action, not to mention the majority of society, which is also unable or unwilling to live its daily life as a surrender to its own needs, associating itself with climate change and its management as a stepchild.

The European Union (the European Commission as the initiator of legislation) is trying to develop climate policy-making in many respects, both at Union and Member State level, although in many cases with contradictory actions. Yet, the Community level may be the key to climate-focused policy-making, as EU legislation can be a “constraint” on Member States if they would access some EU funding. One thing is for sure: alongside the Commission, the Council of the European Union can help shape the future of the policy issue by taking decisions that represent the interests of the Member States. Hungary will have this key role from July 2024.

History of policy development

While the real recognition of anthropogenic climate change, i.e. climate change accelerated by human activity, is often associated with the second half of the 20th century, science has shown since the 19th century that the amount of heat retained by the atmosphere can vary both as a result of the Earth’s natural evolution and as a result of human activity.⁴ However, it was only after 1979 that climate change really began to make a significant role into the scientific and political arena at the global level as a challenge for the future.⁵ The international debate was launched by the World Meteorological Organisation, a specialised agency of the United Nations (UN), in the wake of a study on the relationship between the industrial revolution and climate change, and also by the first World Climate Conference.⁶ Within a few years, the issues of climate change, biodiversity conservation and sustainable development were gaining increasing attention on the political agenda

³ Copernicus 2023.

⁴ THOMPSON 2019.

⁵ GUPTA 2010: 636.

⁶ World Meteorological Organization 1979.

in parallel with the scientific community. Recognising the complexity and seriousness of the issue, a science-based body to contribute to global action was soon required, and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) was established in 1988.⁷

The mainstreaming of a ‘green perspective’ in international and national politics has been driven by the growth of green parties and their voters since the 1970s and 1980s,⁸ as well as by international meetings and scientific findings: the Brundtland Commission’s report on *Our Common Future* (1987), the Villach (1985) and Toronto (1988) Conferences, the second World Climate Conference (1990) or the first IPCC report (1990) are just a few of the major moments that formed the basis for this. In the last decade before the turn of the century, the institutionalised development of an international framework for climate protection under the aegis of the UN was given greater prominence. The main pillars of which are the Rio Conventions (1992), one of the elements of which is the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC 1992), the COP-1 (Conference of the Parties to the UNFCCC) in Berlin and the Kyoto Protocol (1997).⁹

Green thinking in Europe – alongside the rise of green movements and parties and the fight against increasing industrial pollution – was re-energised by the first IPCC report in 1990, in preparation for the UNFCCC negotiations.¹⁰ At that time, targets were set primarily for the turn of the millennium, with Member State leaders agreeing that the European Community’s GHG emission reductions should be brought into line with 1990 levels. Unlike today’s approach, no decision was taken on the set of measures to be taken, but three focus areas were identified to avoid future disputes: reducing GHG emissions, promoting the use of renewable energy sources and improving energy efficiency.¹¹ Subsequently, programmes were announced for all three segments (e.g. SAVE, ALTENER), and significant resource mobilisation was needed for implementation and to achieve the continuously revised targets. One of these was the Financial Instrument for the Environment (*L’instrument Financier pour l’Environnement – LIFE*), which was set up in May 1992 with an initial budget of ECU¹² 400 million. Launched thirty years ago, LIFE now has more than 5,500 projects to preserve the circular economy, clean energy or biodiversity, with an increased budget of nearly €5.5 billion for the programming period 2021–2027.¹³

While climate protection, and thus support for all its dimensions, is in the interest of the entire international community, achieving the much-vaunted emission reductions is resource-intensive: it is enough to take a simple example, the internal combustion engine

⁷ IPCC s. a.

⁸ MCBRIDE 2022.

⁹ GUPTA 2010: 638–639.

¹⁰ In the 1970s, the Community also addressed environmental issues (e.g. the Birds Directive, Actions by the EU for Nature – ACNAT financial fund, etc.), but these were not sustainable.

¹¹ PRAHL et al. 2014.

¹² The European Currency Unit, the predecessor of the euro, was the currency of the European Community and then of the European Union from 1979 to 1999.

¹³ LIFE Programme 2022.

vehicles, to which the automotive industry has allocated a huge amount of money; the mandatory switch to a completely different technology (in this case electromobility) will throw away decades of work and money, encouraging companies for another multi-decade investment. At the same time, it should be noted that in a market-based economic system with a focus on capital accumulation, it is particularly difficult to encourage industry and other sectors to engage in activities that do not generate profits. It has therefore become necessary to introduce a market mechanism that can act as an incentive to change the mindset of these actors. In that reason, the European Union implemented a key part of the Kyoto Protocol on market-based mechanisms with the introduction of the European Emissions Trading Scheme (ETS) in 2005.¹⁴ Its basic idea is to reduce GHG levels of large emitters (industry, airlines, power plants) by setting an emission quota for companies, which, if exceeded, are obliged to pay. Under a market-based system, operators can buy from others or sell their remaining allowances (one allowance/unit is equivalent to one tonne of CO₂) through auctions.¹⁵ However, it is important to note that the system is often the victim of speculative activity by investors,¹⁶ which sometimes makes the pricing of allowances unrealistically high or low.¹⁷ Whether as a result of this or due to a lack of willingness, the ETS has not worked well for a long period,¹⁸ but has managed to reduce emissions in recent years: a record level (11.4% reduction) was reached between 2019 and 2020, which can be explained by the shutdowns generated by the coronavirus epidemic,¹⁹ but a reduction was also seen in 2022, albeit to a lesser extent.²⁰

The triple aim (renewables, GHG emissions, energy efficiency) has determined EU climate policy since the 2000s: the European Climate Change Programme, which includes targets for 2010, and the Climate and Energy Package for 2020 have followed this structure. The latter included, for example, the reform of the ETS²¹ and the 20–20–20 by 2020 programme, which set a 20% reduction in GHG emissions by 2020 compared to 1990, a 20% share of renewables and a 20% saving in final energy consumption.²² At EU level, the targets have been met, but not at the level of each Member State.²³

In the 2010s, the discourse on how to achieve climate protection and emission reduction targets has become increasingly important: more significant and increasingly ambitious action plans have been adopted, such as the *Roadmap for Moving to a Competitive Low Carbon Economy in 2050* from 2011,²⁴ which set a target of 80–95% GHG emission

¹⁴ European Parliament 2017.

¹⁵ TÓTH 2023a: 145–157.

¹⁶ MORAWIECKI 2021.

¹⁷ To remedy this, a decision on the market stability reserve was adopted as part of the “Fit for 55”.

¹⁸ REYES 2011: 2.

¹⁹ European Environment Agency 2022.

²⁰ GUPTA 2023.

²¹ For example, abolishing free quotas, extending them to the building, maritime and road transport sectors, etc.

²² PEÑA–RODRÍGUEZ 2022.

²³ European Environment Agency 2021.

²⁴ European Commission 2011.

reductions by 2050; the Environment Action Programme, which has been in place since 1970 and is now in its eighth edition;²⁵ and the Europe 2020 Strategy for Smart, Sustainable and Inclusive Growth.²⁶

Nevertheless, 2015 marked a decisive turning point in international climate policy: all European countries adopted and later ratified the Paris Agreement, after that the EU committed to reducing greenhouse gas emissions by at least 40% by 2030 compared to 1990 levels under the Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs). Linked to this, ratifiers have committed to a headline target of keeping the global average temperature increase below 2 degrees Celsius but aiming to keep it below 1.5 degrees Celsius.²⁷ However, a few years later, the European Union made an even bigger commitment than before, no longer to reduce GHG emissions, but to achieve net zero emissions (GHG emissions no higher than the amount of GHG absorbed within the EU): the European Commission, chaired by Ursula von der Leyen, which took office in 2019, announced the European Green Deal (EGD), the framework document that today forms the basis of European green policy.²⁸ The details and the current state of play are outlined in the section on the current state of the policy issue, opportunities and challenges.

While the European Commission plays a key role in integration efforts, in the development of (policy) guidelines and in decision-making, the importance of the Council of the EU is not negligible. The fact that the Council is not chaired on a permanent basis and is not tied to a particular person/party, but by a different Member State every six months, gives the country holding the rotating presidency the opportunity to channel national interests into the various policies. Hungary will have this opportunity for the second time since joining the EU in 2004: the first time was in 2011, when climate policy priorities were less prominent than today's EU agenda, while the Hungarian programme focused on important aspects of climate change and climate protection. The following section aims to present these ideas and achievements.

How did the policy feature among the priorities of the 2011 Hungarian Presidency and what were the results?

Compared to the broader themes identified by the Spanish–Belgian–Hungarian trio, the 2011 Hungarian Presidency Programme was rather narrow in its focus on green policy,²⁹ but focused on issues of direct or indirect relevance to climate change, even for the Central and Eastern European region: water policy, the adoption of the Danube

²⁵ Decision (EU) 2022/591 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 6 April 2022 on a General Union Environment Action Programme to 2030.

²⁶ European Commission 2020a.

²⁷ Council Decision (EU) 2016/1841 of 5 October 2016 on the conclusion, on behalf of the European Union, of the Paris Agreement adopted under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change.

²⁸ According to the EU's generally accepted terminology, green policy refers to all sectoral efforts to promote sustainability, i.e. not limited to climate protection and nature conservation, but also including the development of sustainable economic and social models.

²⁹ GAZDAG 2011: 72–85.

Region Strategy for the management of extreme water events, the debate on the future of the common agricultural policy or sub-activities aimed at creating energy security, such as diversification, were identified as the key elements of the semester under the “Stronger Europe”.³⁰

From a more direct climate policy perspective, the Hungarian Presidency’s ideas and ambitions on water policy can be highlighted, such as “addressing extreme weather and hydrological phenomena from an integrated perspective, highlighting the role of the ecological services provided by water and the importance of international cooperation”,³¹ which are also aimed at stimulating scientific debate and legislative processes. Closely linked to this area is the launch of the Danube Region Strategy, through which an integrated approach has been adopted, with particular emphasis on sustainable transport and energy use, the restoration of water quality, the management of environmental risks and the importance of international cooperation. The work of the presidency has been successful in getting the strategy adopted, but the measure has also received negative criticism, citing sometimes conflicting content or lack of social consultation.³²

The deteriorating state of aquatic biodiversity was also highlighted in the presidency programme, with the following objectives: to assess and adopt the biodiversity strategy proposed by the Commission, to make biodiversity a priority for all sectors (e.g. agriculture, fisheries) and to “contribute to the 10th meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) on the conservation of biodiversity”.³³

The promotion of climate protection at international level was also a priority in the first half of 2011, through the implementation of decisions taken at the previous COP, the development of the EU position for the forthcoming conference and the Council conclusions on the EU decarbonisation plan up to 2050.³⁴

Fourthly, the presidency identified the development of an economic model based on resource efficiency as a flagship of the Europe 2020 strategy.³⁵ The Hungarian Presidency took forward the work started by Belgium, closely linked to the agreement on the “Territorial Agenda 2020 of the European Union” reached at the informal meeting of ministers responsible for territorial planning and development in Gödöllő on 19 May 2011.³⁶ A regional approach is followed throughout the document, looking at the impacts of climate change, biodiversity loss, geographical risks, and the different impacts on regions, with a strong emphasis on proposals for solutions based on municipal and rural regions.

Although policy issues of major concern to Hungary were among the Hungarian Presidency’s climate change objectives, a representative public opinion survey conducted after the Presidency found that only few people were aware of the Presidency’s activities.³⁷

³⁰ Government of Hungary 2010.

³¹ BARTHA 2010.

³² VASALI 2011: 52–64.

³³ Természetvédelem 2011.

³⁴ Természetvédelem 2011.

³⁵ European Commission 2010.

³⁶ EU2011.hu.

³⁷ Policy Solutions – Medián 2011.

This may, of course, also be due to the fact that climate and environmental protection was not a dominant issue for either the domestic political mainstream or the socio-economic establishment. The 2024 Presidency is likely to change this.

The current state of the policy, opportunities and challenges

As described in the first section, the current framework for European climate policy is the European Green Deal and its Action Programmes, presented in December 2019.³⁸ Ursula von der Leyen described the EGD as “Europe’s moment on the moon”, adding that “we don’t have all the answers yet, the journey is just beginning”.³⁹ The journey started with ambitious plans to deliver a “new growth strategy for a sustainable, cleaner, safer and healthier EU economy”, but the triple aim set out earlier has been slightly redefined, with new aspects given more attention. The main elements of the roadmap linked to the EGD are climate neutrality, i.e. achieving net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050, the transition to a circular economy and the restoration of biodiversity.⁴⁰ The action proposals cover all policy areas, such as sustainable industry and mobility, climate action or energy and resource efficient construction and modernisation. In addition, an important element is that climate leadership does not stop at the continent’s borders: the EU is stepping up its climate diplomacy to implement its own ambitions and to help its partners (such as China, Norway, the Republic of Korea or a larger group of African countries) to make a green transition together. The drivers of climate change are global in scale and do not stop at political borders.⁴¹

Close cooperation with third countries is essential for building the clean economy promoted by the EGD, but the EU is using a rather tough instrument to achieve this: by 2023, the EU will have a strong commitment to the EU’s clean economy. The EU’s Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) will enter into force on 1 October 2023, and will gradually introduce from 2026 a world-first tariff on imports of high-carbon products (steel, cement, aluminium, fertilisers, electricity, hydrogen, and indirectly emitting imports such as manufactured goods).⁴² This will also provide strong incentives for companies producing in non-EU countries to reduce emissions and prevent companies with European sites from relocating to third countries.⁴³ The latter is also of particular importance because the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) announced by the United States of America, allocates significant resources to stimulate investment in emissions reduction, climate protection and renewable energy, which could also trigger a “seduce” of European industrial players.

³⁸ Keeping it real, however, it is clear that there were also strong political interests behind the environmental and climate ambitions.

³⁹ LORY–McMAHON 2019.

⁴⁰ European Commission 2019.

⁴¹ TÓTH 2023b.

⁴² Regulation (EU) 2023/956 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 10 May 2023 establishing a carbon border adjustment mechanism.

⁴³ With European companies exporting many production units outside the continent’s borders due to strict EU regulations, the mechanism could also slow the upward trend in third country emissions.

The EU announced its own package at the World Economic Forum in Davos, partly to counterbalance its U.S. counterpart, but for the time being the funding is planned to be redirected from existing funds, which suggests that further steps must be taken.⁴⁴

It has been a turbulent period for the EU institutions since the EGD was announced, with new or updated and revised proposals being put forward every month to meet the 2050 climate targets. This is framed by the Fit for 55 package, which primarily aims to achieve a 55% reduction in net GHG emissions by 2030 through legislative proposals across a broad spectrum of policy. Key cornerstones include reform of the ETS, increasing the share of renewable energy from 32% to 40%,⁴⁵ introducing a carbon tax and fully decarbonising new cars and vans by 2035.⁴⁶ The latter proposal has led to objections from several Member States with large car industries (such as Germany, the Czech Republic, Italy, etc.), triggering a new agreement on the use of so-called e-fuels⁴⁷ in conventional internal combustion engines.⁴⁸

In addition to the above-mentioned areas and classic climate policy, the EGD has an agricultural dimension, including food safety, sustainable management (farm-to-fork strategy),⁴⁹ a circular economy with a strong emphasis on waste management,⁵⁰ and a biodiversity conservation dimension (Nature Restoration Law). The adoption and implementation of the draft law is of paramount importance, as assessments show that the state of nature in Europe is declining, with around 80% of habitats in poor condition: the disappearance of rare species is already threatening the continent, even though species diversity is critical for clean air and water, good quality soil and food, and human health.⁵¹ The state of biodiversity is essential to the future of human existence, and the continued depletion and destruction of the global ecosystem at current rates will fundamentally determine the future. For these reasons too, it is necessary to treat it as a priority issue, but a significant group of MEPs have attempted to boycott the decision. In the end, the Council and Parliament were able to agree on the details only after far-reaching compromises.⁵²

The European Commission's normative acts are often soft and general and sometimes contain targets that seem difficult to achieve. To ensure that these acts are used as a basis for decision-making by Member States and other stakeholders, the European Climate Law was adopted in 2021, creating an obligation for Member States to achieve climate

⁴⁴ TÓTH 2023c.

⁴⁵ Renewable energy is also helped by the addition of the so-called taxonomy regulation, which states that nuclear energy and natural gas are to be classified as sustainable energy sources, although this has been a matter of much debate among Member States (NAVRACSICS 2022).

⁴⁶ European Council s. a.

⁴⁷ E-fuels are made by synthesising carbon dioxide from the atmosphere and hydrogen from renewable energy to produce e-methane, e-methanol or e-kerosene, which can be used in a range of industries. The use of e-fuels, like their fossil counterparts, also produces emissions, but these are equal to the amount of carbon dioxide extracted from the air before production, so the equation adds up to zero (E-Fuel Alliance s. a.).

⁴⁸ POSANER 2023.

⁴⁹ European Commission s. a.

⁵⁰ European Commission 2020b.

⁵¹ Nemzeti Agrárgazdasági Kamara 2023.

⁵² European Parliament 2023.

neutrality by 2050.⁵³ The Climate Roadmap, in addition to increasing the target to be achieved by 2030 (to achieve a 55% reduction compared to 1990 emissions), includes a process definition for climate change targets for 2040. Closely related to this is the establishment of the European Scientific Advisory Board on Climate Change (ESABCC), which brings together 15 eminent scientists (including a Hungarian member, Vera Eory) to provide scientific input and support policy-making.⁵⁴ Although the European Commission will propose climate targets for 2040 before the European Parliament elections, the Advisory Panel has also published its own proposals,⁵⁵ which could indeed guide the Commission, despite the rather high – and higher than expected – 90–95% reduction target.⁵⁶ The report also explores issues such as the widespread use of renewable energy instead of importing fossil fuels, and the carbon budget already proposed by the Parliament, which sets a maximum emissions ceiling for the EU to “manage”. This science-based budget addresses the issue of “fair share”, which, unlike the existing methodology, sets an interval for the emissions target to be achieved, based on a cumulative average of several feasible options.⁵⁷

In addition to planning, implementation is also resource-intensive, and in recent years huge stones have been moved to provide the financial backing needed to make the transition to a green economy: currently, one third (€600,000 billion) of the seven-year EU budget and the Next Generation EU (the financial instrument set up to address the damage caused by the economic crisis following the coronavirus epidemic) (€1.8 billion) is available to finance the EGD targets. Special mention should also be made of the EGD’s Just Transition Mechanism, which targets regions where the transition to a climate-neutral economy starts from a disadvantaged position. As this situation affects many areas in the EU, around €100 billion will be mobilised over the 2021–2027 budget period to mitigate the socio-economic impacts of the transition through various sources such as the Just Transition Fund, InvestEU, REPowerEU or the European Investment Bank’s lending instrument.⁵⁸ For the future, it is necessary to highlight, at the proposal stage, the Social Climate Fund as a means of financing the green transition of households and small businesses, to be launched in parallel with the reform of the EU ETS. The Climate Fund is to be financed by auctioning allowances from the already extended ETS (75%) and by Member State contributions (25%).⁵⁹

At many points, it is clear that it is not really knowledge, the EU policy framework or lack of resources that is holding up implementation. It receives little publicity on few platforms, but one of the system’s cardinal flaws is in many cases the setting of EU-level and more general targets: e.g. for biodiversity conservation, the protection of natural

⁵³ Regulation (EU) 2021/1119 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 30 June 2021 establishing the framework for achieving climate neutrality and amending Regulations (EC) No 401/2009 and (EU) 2018/1999 (‘European Climate Law’).

⁵⁴ MASSAY-KOSUBEK 2023.

⁵⁵ European Scientific Advisory Board on Climate Change 2023.

⁵⁶ KOCZÓH 2023.

⁵⁷ GEDEN et al. 2023.

⁵⁸ EU Funding Overview 2020.

⁵⁹ HEINRICH 2023.

ecosystems and the restoration of degraded areas, which is welcome from Hungary's perspective, but the 30% restoration target by 2040 is difficult to achieve due to extensive agricultural activity with strong advocacy. Member States are drawing up national energy and climate plans based on their targets, but the starting position, timetables and often the will differ, putting them at a competitive disadvantage compared to slower movers. Furthermore, it is striking that the EGDs largely identify mitigation (decarbonisation, partnerships, etc.) courses of action with minimal emphasis on adaptation, i.e. adaptability.

It can be assumed that without the “sacrifice” of the Member States, no paradigm shift can be expected, but the coronavirus epidemic and the Russian–Ukrainian war are global events that have (re)awakened society to the need for change, whether in diplomatic relations, economic cooperation or even in the consumption habits of the population. Although the latter events have a greater direct impact on the energy sector, they also have a major indirect impact on climate protection and policy. There is more room for improvement at this point, but if the focus remains on profit, not only the many climate protection objectives but also social justice (which for the time being affects Europe less than other parts of the world) will become unattainable.

The impact of the policy on economic and social development

In the early 1990s, professional forums and events dealing with climate change, such as the Earth Summit in Rio, increasingly focused on environmental sustainability, although climate protection cannot be addressed solely from this perspective. As was pointed out ten years later at the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in 2002,⁶⁰ environmental change has an impact on the economy and society, and vice versa, the economic structure and social attitudes of a country shape its natural ecosystem.⁶¹ The three segments could even be depicted as interlocking cogs, in which an idealised system would require fair expectations of all three components to function “smoothly”. On the contrary, the accumulation of wealth and the pursuit of exploitative lifestyles in recent decades have not moved the cogs in this direction. Moreover, events affecting almost the whole international community, such as the coronavirus epidemic, the Russian–Ukrainian war and their consequences, have not been able to have a major impact on carbon production and consumption patterns (+5% and +2% in 2022 compared to the previous year).⁶² And to work “better”, a socio-economic paradigm shift is now essential.

The EGD, as the cornerstone of EU climate policy since 2019, is concerned with the development of regulations that affect all sectors of the economy, including the daily lives of European citizens. While the framework is still adapting to the new expectations,

⁶⁰ LA VIÑA et al. 2003: 53–70.

⁶¹ The economic and social aspects of the green transition are only touched upon in this section, with a few aspects being selected, and due to the scope of the topic, the relationship between the three segments could be the subject of a separate study, including even more indicators. Consequently, this part of the study focuses exclusively on social justice and the relationship between GHG emission reductions and GDP.

⁶² Eurostat 2023.

Member States need to intensify actions on mitigation and partly adaptation to reach the targets for the next 28 years. The EGD, also known as a growth strategy, is essentially bringing a new industrial revolution to the continent, which aims to reduce emissions and stimulate the economy by, among other things, supporting research, innovation, boosting competitiveness, reducing social inequalities and improving the quality of supply systems.⁶³

If a hierarchy between the three segments were to be defined, human action would be at the top of the pyramid, since both the economy and the natural environment are most vulnerable to it. This is why the social approach must be at the heart of the green transition, because if the population does not feel the need to change their lifestyles, the goals will – in the present context – only move further away. From a societal perspective, climate policy must clearly focus on adaptation as well as mitigation. A number of studies point to the need to raise social awareness, for example by encouraging responsible consumption through the moderation of needs.⁶⁴ This concept focuses on the maintenance of well-being rather than the deprivation of goods, for example through access to quality food, even from the organic economy, the development of social networks (transport, health, education) or the expansion of digitalisation. Adaptation also requires raising awareness and educating society to ensure that citizens enter the labour market with the skills needed to meet the new conditions. The green transition can undoubtedly improve the occupation rate of society, but the lack of adequate knowledge and skills can lead to an even greater competitive disadvantage for deprived regions.⁶⁵

In her dissertation, Orsolya Nagy analysed a number of EU regulations, standards, studies, appropriations, action plans, strategies and policies, and criticised the fact that these (legal) resources often contain too general principles and objectives, and that their main guiding principle is competitiveness. In her dissertation, she also points out that the time for this kind of governance is coming to an end. Her analysis has shown that many people do not dare to set concrete expectations and implement plans, and thus move in parallel with one another, and societies are becoming tired of this.⁶⁶

Because of the sometimes too general scope, the extent to which Member States move towards certain targets set in the EGD, such as the use of renewable energy sources or the reduction of GHG emissions, often varies from one Member State to another.⁶⁷ However, there has been a positive shift at Community level in both areas: wind and solar energy accounted for 22% of the EU's electricity generation mix (natural gas 20% and coal 16%)⁶⁸ and GHG emissions in the first quarter of 2023 were down by around 3% year-on-year. At EU level, however, a prosperous economy is not linked to emission reductions, as EU27 GDP fell by 1.2% in the period under review. At the Member State level, the picture is more positive: of the 21 EU countries that cut their emissions, only six (the Czech Republic, Estonia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Hungary and Poland) saw

⁶³ European Parliamentary Research Service 2022.

⁶⁴ DUBOIS-JESUS 2023.

⁶⁵ SANCHEZ-REAZA et al. 2023.

⁶⁶ NAGY 2017.

⁶⁷ TÓTH 2023D.

⁶⁸ EMBER 2023.

their GDP fall, meaning that 15 EU countries (Portugal, Croatia, Belgium, Malta, France, Spain, the Netherlands, Germany, Austria, Romania, Italy, Cyprus, Greece, Slovenia and Bulgaria) managed to increase their GDP in parallel with the reduction in emissions.⁶⁹

Of course, this is only one measure of the economic ratios of the green transition, and no definitive conclusions can be drawn from one set of data. Not to mention the economic-related crises of the last few years, among others, which also make it unrepresentative to rely solely on recent data, remembering the growth in coal production and consumption outlined earlier. However, the data highlighted are striking examples of how adaptation in times of crisis can be achieved with fewer resources. In any case, the implementation of EU climate policy requires a multi-faceted approach: environmental sustainability is achieved by integrating the economic and social aspects, taking account of the specific characteristics of each country (geographical, geological, climatic, biological, etc.), taking measures to change attitudes and investing financial resources. It is clear that the capital-based economic system does not allow for large-scale changes in consumption patterns, and that the key to the current system is moderation, without compromising the well-being of all players, and in accordance with fair action and values. All this must be brought together by a professionally based political governance that does not make its actions dependent on government cycles, nor does it base its survival solely on profit.

Hungary's interests in the future development of the policy

Climate change, sustainability and climate policy require a holistic approach and toolbox, but the set of solutions related to the issue cannot be identified with a Swiss army knife; the key to solving all problems is not concentrated in one place. This approach should be integrated into the work of the 2024 Hungarian Presidency, by putting a specific, relevant segment on the agenda.

The Spanish–Belgian–Hungarian trio of the EU Presidency starting in July 2023 identified a broad spectrum of (potential) policy priorities for the year and a half leading to a climate neutral future: in addition to the definition of the broad framework (improving the competitiveness of the economy through the green transition, while enforcing the legal framework), specific mention was made of biodiversity protection (including, for example, air, soil and water pollution), monitoring the implementation of the EU forest strategy, waste management and the development of sustainable agriculture. As climate and energy policies go hand in hand, the transformation of the energy system is also included in this part of the programme.⁷⁰ The context cannot be overlooked: social, health and cultural issues have been placed in the same chapter as climate issues, which suggests a lower emphasis within the hierarchy of Presidency priorities.

It goes without saying that successive presidencies also shape their own priorities on the basis of the achievements of their predecessor, with a view to continuity. Therefore

⁶⁹ Eurostat 2023.

⁷⁰ Council of the European Union 2023a.

the Hungarian leadership, which will take office in July 2024, will not be able to fully concretise its objectives for a long time. However, the guidelines have already been outlined, summarised in seven points: competitiveness, demographic challenges, enlargement, migration, common security and defence policy, cohesion policy, adoption of the annual budget.⁷¹ Competitiveness, which appears in several points of the study, is echoed here, and the expected environmental and climate change issues are best identified here: the European Green Deal, while addressing climate change and other environmental problems, states that it aims to transform the EU economy into a modern, resource-efficient and competitive economy.⁷²

Given the timing of the cycle, the Hungarian Presidency will also be responsible for negotiating the 2040 climate neutrality targets and shaping the EU's position for the UN climate conference,⁷³ but indirectly, its prominent role in the rethink of cohesion policy and the adoption of the 2025 budget will also influence the direction of EU climate policy. These key events will place a heavy burden on the Hungarian delegation but will also provide an excellent opportunity to channel national interests.

If I had to pick just one area, which in Hungary's case is the most striking impact of climate change, it is the state of natural waters. Irregularity of rainfall (drought and flash floods), the use of groundwater (even of drinking water quality)⁷⁴ for irrigation, high evaporation or deterioration of water quality are just some of the consequences of climate change that are increasingly affecting our country, or even the whole region or the continent.⁷⁵ Consequently, as a continuation and extension of the 2011 Hungarian Presidency priority, an ambitious package of water policy proposals could be put forward for discussion in the Presidency Programme, which would focus on adaptation alongside existing mitigation approaches, for example by promoting certain technologies (such as treated wastewater, although the use of this technology is still in its infancy in Hungary) and increasing social adaptability through campaigns. This is only a small segment of climate policy, but it would contribute to the smooth functioning of all three cogs mentioned above: if it is in society's interest to have water available in terms of quality and quantity, it could influence production patterns in agriculture and the food industry by regulating demand in such a way that products are preferred that are known to be produced in the way they are (for example, from organic farms⁷⁶).

Policy is also involved in creating the regulatory environment. The revision of the Water Framework Directive, adopted in 2000 and an essential element of EU water policy from an environmental point of view, has been a hot topic for years, although a 2019 study by the European Commission has declared the legislation to be adapted to the new circumstances, based on the opinions of the scientific community and society. The latter argues that implementation should be better rather than creating a new framework. The Hungarian

⁷¹ VARGA 2023.

⁷² DENNISON–ENGSTRÖM 2023.

⁷³ KOCZÓH 2023.

⁷⁴ ROTÁRNÉ SZALKAI et al. 2015: 6.

⁷⁵ DÉNES–KOVÁCS 2021: 41–50.

⁷⁶ Nébih 2022.

Presidency could also focus on implementing this demand, which could be linked to the adoption of the nature restoration law, which is also a priority of the Spanish Presidency.⁷⁷

Above all, the Hungarian Presidency should adopt a narrowed focus from July 2024 in order to be effective: the limited time available and the hectic situation after the European elections, putting an important issue on the agenda – with the good preparation that Hungary has in abundance from a water perspective through its experts – could be sufficient at least to launch and sustain the debate.

Based on the policy milestones, events, aspects and arguments presented in the study, it can be concluded in summary and in general terms, but also in relation to the Presidency, that it is worth considering not implementing the policy as planned as long as we compare countries with each other under general standards instead of taking their specificities into account; only after the specificities have been brought to the fore can we start to “build walls”, i.e. to define the content required to achieve the framework and objectives set by the EU in a country-specific way. This approach also avoids a ‘country-by-country’ narrative: there is no point in comparing Member States that started out at different times and with different capabilities to drive the economic, social and environmental gears. Another problem with planning, both in our country and in other Member States, is the lack of involvement of the different decision-making levels, whereas the implementation of green policy in general could be made really effective, fair and dynamic by channelling the different sectors and bodies and organisations. At the same time, still few actors see this system useful, especially if capital accumulation continues to be the basis for thinking and action.

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⁷⁷ Council of the European Union 2023b.

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