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**A MOST HARMFUL
PRESIDENCY**

**ORBÁN'S 'PEACE
MISSION' AND ITS
EFFECTS ON THE
EUROPEAN UNION**

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SUMMARY

It has been clear for more than a decade that Hungary's illiberal regime poses a threat to the European Union, to its proper functioning, and to its international reputation. European politicians warned the EU of the Orbán governments' disrespect of the community's fundamental values for 10 years, but there was never enough political will to take the necessary steps to protect the EU from Orbán. The fault lines between Brussels and Budapest seriously deepened further after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022: Hungary's profoundly different approach to the conflict (the claim that it is a 'proxy war', in which the United States attempts to defeat Russia; the emphasising of Ukraine's inability to win and Russia's inability to lose; and calling for an immediate ceasefire even if it means Russia's effective victory) alienated Budapest from its EU and NATO allies. It was under these circumstances that on 1 July, Hungary took over the rotating presidency of the Council of the European Union. The fears of what an Orbán led Council would mean for EU legislation were great prior to the start of the presidency. While Orbán started relatively well by visiting Ukrainian president Zelenskyy – his first visit to Kyiv in 10 years –, he soon after that departed on an international 'illiberal tour', meeting autocratic leaders around the world, acting as if his position as prime minister of the country of the Council presidency had endowed him with the mandate of representing the EU. EU leaders immediately distanced themselves from and condemned Orbán's actions, but it seems that even though Hungary could still be stripped of the presidency, there is still not enough political will within the EU to take that step that is considered too drastic by some. The EU should prepare, though: there is no reason to believe that the Hungarian government's policy is going to change for the remaining months of the presidency, and it is in the interest of both the EU institutions and the Member States to come up with joint and firm responses to the challenge that the Hungarian presidency presents for the European Union.

INTRODUCTION

The aftermath of a European Parliament (EP) election – not dissimilarly to any national election – always entails political turbulence: political groups form and reform themselves, newly elected parliamentarians keep trying to find their places, roles, and potential allies within the bureaucratic giant of the EP, and negotiations around the new European Commission keep the European public's eye busy for days or weeks. These are only a few of the multitude of major changes taking place in both Brussels and Strasbourg every five years, not to mention the political consequences of the elections in the Member States themselves. Under such politically volatile circumstances, the rotating Council presidency almost fades into the background. Officially, the role of the presidency of the Council is “planning and chairing meetings in the Council and its preparatory bodies (with the exception of the Foreign Affairs Council), and representing the Council, mediating and brokering compromises between the EU Member States and between EU institutions”[1]. While the role is unquestionably important, it is not particularly spectacular or eye-catching for the public, and many aspects of it are symbolic – which does not make it any less significant, although it is usually overshadowed by actual political power shifts. Yet, the Hungarian government and Prime Minister Viktor Orbán in particular managed to navigate the current Hungarian presidency into the spotlight of international attention over the course of days not through the presidency's official agenda, but through highly controversial actions to which the EU and the rest of the Member States could not turn a blind eye.

The following analysis takes a closer look at the first month of the Hungarian presidency of the Council of the European Union focusing on PM Orbán's 'peace mission' and its repercussions. After reviewing what the expectations and fears in the run-up to the Hungarian presidency were, the analysis examines how the Orbán government performed against that backdrop, how other EU members and the EU bodies perceived that performance, and how the European community could respond to the challenges the Hungarian presidency poses.

WALKING INTO A DISASTER WITH EYES WIDE OPEN?

Concerns about a Hungarian Council presidency began well before 1 July 2024. The problematic nature of the Orbán governments from an EU point of view has been clear for more than a decade: widespread and often passionate debates and arguments around controversial Hungarian legislation and government actions (on various topics from the mistreatment of asylum seekers to flawed public procurement processes, from governmental attacks on civil society to abuse of the states of emergency declared due to 'mass immigration', COVID-19, or Russia's war of aggression on Ukraine) have long been defining the Brussels-Budapest relation. Dozens of infringement procedures have been launched against Hungary over the years, and although that is not unique in comparison with other Member States' records, it is rather characteristic of the Orbán governments (the current and the former ones) that they do not seem willing to settle these issues. This is particularly true when it comes to topics politically delicate for Budapest, such as migration or the situation of the LGBTQI+ community. Therefore a number of proceedings conclude with the Commission referring Hungary to the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) – whose rulings Orbán tendentiously fails to comply with. As an example, it is worth taking a look at a recent CJEU ruling concerning Hungary's treatment of asylum seekers and the government's unwillingness to abide by previous decisions of the Court. In its press statement the CJEU stated: Hungary, "disregarding the principle of sincere cooperation, is deliberately evading the application of the EU common policy on international protection as a whole and the rules relating to the removal of illegally staying third-country nationals. That conduct constitutes a serious threat to the unity of EU law (...) Since this failure to fulfil obligations constitutes an unprecedented and exceptionally serious breach of EU law, the Court orders Hungary to pay a lump sum of 200 million euros and a penalty payment of 1 million euros per day of delay"[2].

In addition to that, there has been a substantial difference between the world views of the majority of the EU Member States' governments and their political elites, and that of Orbán for a long time: a fundamental disagreement on the nature of governance as well as on the role and significance of democracy and democratic processes in the European – and global – community. This became particularly apparent in 2014, when Orbán said in his speech at the 25th Bálványos Summer University and Student Camp (an annual gathering of the Hungarian political right – notably, in Romania) that "the new state we are building in Hungary is an illiberal state, not a liberal state. It does not deny the fundamental values of liberalism, such as freedom, or I could name some others, but it does not make this ideology a central element of the organisation of the state, but it contains a different, peculiar, national approach"[3]. Orbán, a forerunner of modern populist and far-right trends, marked the beginning of a new age in that speech, the age of illiberalism, which has since defined politics in Hungary, and, increasingly, in other countries of the world, too.

It would be futile to claim that European political actors could not realise at the time the potential threats posed by the prime minister of an EU Member State who openly diverges so much from the European consensus. In fact, Orbán's speech caused an uproar in Brussels and Strasbourg (particularly as it was far from being the first extremely worrying sign of the state of Hungarian democracy), as well as in international media. In September 2014, then-MEP and ALDE vice-chair Pavel Telička submitted a question for written answer to the European Commission in which he wrote "Infringement procedures, Commission investigations, European Parliament reports, and Court of Justice rulings do not seem to impress Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. He does not seem to realise that the basic rules governing EU membership are not compatible with 'ditching liberal democracy and building an illiberal state'"[4]. In its answer to Telička's question, the Commission ensured that it was vigilant whenever any measure potentially posing a systemic threat to the rule of law was taken and expressed its expectation towards Hungary to respect its obligations under European Community law. It claimed that "the Commission will use all the means at its disposal to ensure that Hungary – as well as any other Member State – complies with its obligations". Nevertheless, no actual step was taken against the Hungarian government, and, more importantly, no meaning- and fruitful discussion was launched within the European Union to prepare in case the situation in Hungary – or, in fact, in any Member State – worsened. As political analyst Áron Varga noted a few weeks later, following not only Orbán's infamous "illiberalism address", but also recent police raids against Hungarian NGOs: "Except for some critical articles and a written question to the European Commission tabled by Pavel Telička, deputy leader of the ALDE group, nothing important has happened since. Neither the European Union nor the international community have taken steps to stop Prime Minister Viktor Orbán taking further actions against the NGOs supported by the Norway NGO Grant programme."[5] Looking back now in 2024, it appears to be ominously prophetic (or rather 'Cassandric', as the warning was not taken seriously enough) that an article was written in the Sunday Times 10 years ago stating that the Hungarian Prime Minister was "turning into a little Putin", and noting that Hungary's Western allies are concerned about Hungary becoming Moscow's "Trojan horse" in the EU[6].

In a previous article[7], the authors of this analysis established that the challenges posed by the Hungarian Council presidency to the European Union and to its Member States were not unexpected: a widespread political discourse formed around the issue over the last year whether Hungary can be stripped of the presidency, or whether the presidency can be postponed, likely by calling upon the next country in line, Poland, to take over sooner. The discourse was fueled, among others, by the European Parliament, which adopted a resolution expressing its concerns about Hungary's ability to credibly fulfill the role of the presidency[8].

It is very important to understand that the Hungarian government did not become a source of problems for the European Union only since last year: it has been clear for more than a decade that the Orbán regime is incompatible with the European concept of a liberal democracy, and does not even intend to play by the European rules. Orbán has been openly waging a war (a 'freedom fight', as he puts it) against 'Brussels' for several years, and the EU is still unwilling to take serious action: just like there was not enough political will among the Member States' governments over the last year to prevent the Hungarian presidency, or even to prepare a joint strategy to minimise the damage it could cause, there had not been enough political will before either to take firm and effective measures not just in order to avert the deterioration of democracy in Hungary, but to also protect the EU and its values from a rogue government. As Varga wrote in his article cited above: "Neither the European Union nor the international community have taken steps to stop Prime Minister Viktor Orbán" – only that he wrote that ten years ago.

ORBÁN'S POSITION ON THE WAR IN UKRAINE

Despite the concerns outlined above, Hungary took over the presidency of the Council on 1 July. The next day, on 2 July, Orbán paid an unexpected visit to Kyiv to meet President Zelenskyy; his first visit to the Ukrainian capital in 10 years (Orbán attended former Ukrainian president Petro Poroshenko's inauguration in 2014). The scope of this article does not allow for a more detailed analysis of the history of Hungarian-Ukrainian relations, the developments in that relationship since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, or how Orbán and his Fidesz party saw the opportunity to build their 2022 parliamentary election campaign, based largely on fearmongering, on the war. Nevertheless, it is worth recalling how different the Hungarian government's approach to the war has been from that of the rest of the EU Member States, and what position the Hungarian diplomacy, embodied by the Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade Péter Szijjártó, has taken.

First, according to the Orbán government, the war in Ukraine is a proxy war: it is supposedly in the United States' interest to defeat Russia which is why the US forces its 'pro-war' stance upon NATO, on the EU, and on their Member States, preventing peace talks and the possibility of a solution of the conflict through dialogue. In a radio interview this summer Orbán explained "...the Western world, led by the United States, was trying to defeat Russia without getting directly involved in the conflict by >>leaving it to the Ukrainians to fight the war<< (...) The West regarded this as an opportunity to weaken and then defeat Russia, instead of striving to isolate the conflict and curb the fallout of the war, which is the position represented by Hungary..."[9]. That idea of the United States fuelling the conflict in Ukraine was not new, though; on 21 March 2022, approximately a month after the Russian invasion, Orbán held a closed-door meeting in the Parliament for senior parliamentary officials, including opposition MPs, as obliged by law before European Council meetings (the Council took place on 24-25 March, and adopted resolutions on the Russian military aggression against Ukraine[10]).

At the meeting, Orbán explained his view of the war in a global context, and elaborated that “this current conflict is about the US wanting to return to a unipolar world order, and that in doing so >>they do not care about Central Europe, they do not care about Europe either<< (...) the Americans want to cut Europe off from cheap Russian energy, which in turn will make European products more expensive and give the US a competitive advantage in global markets. [Orbán] also said that the Americans know that he does not share the US view of world order, so “>>there is a distrust towards Hungary to begin with<<”[11].

Second, the Hungarian government has long been communicating that it considers Ukraine unable to win the war, and that Russia cannot be defeated. This is clearly not in line with the position of Hungary's Western allies. If one stresses only Ukraine's inability to win, and the impossibility of Russia to be defeated, they in fact propagate the idea of Russian victory. The 'Western' position has long been clear: Russia must not be allowed to win the war in order to discourage the use of violence and military force in the settlement of international conflicts anywhere. When in December 2023, US president Biden pleaded with Republicans to support further military aid to Ukraine, he argued the US “could not let Putin win”[12] because it would leave Moscow in a position to attack NATO allies. Other Western allies echoed Biden's plea: “I have a clear strategic objective: Russia cannot win in Ukraine. If Russia wins in Ukraine, there will be no security in Europe”[13] French president Macron said this May, and Polish president Duda also claimed that in case Russia achieved military victory in Ukraine Putin could decide to invade other countries, too[14]. It is not difficult to see how the Hungarian government's position differs from the mainstream 'Western' line of communication.

Third, according to Orbán, peace must be brokered in Ukraine as soon as possible. For the superficial observer the message of peace may sound appealing. However, the Hungarian government has never been made clear on what conditions any peace talks between Russia and Ukraine could or should begin. An immediate ceasefire would mean that Kyiv has to give up on some 18%[15] of Ukrainian land. Even more controversial and contradictory, the Hungarian government calls for an armistice and claims that it respects Ukraine's territorial integrity, even though both objectives are not compatible with each other. An immediate ceasefire would allow Moscow to stabilise its political rule and military positions in the occupied territories, and could also lead to the quick depletion of Western military aid to Kyiv, therefore it could create a situation where Russia has a chance to gather strength to continue its invasion at a later date from a more advantageous position against a weakened and less supported Ukraine. It is understandable why such solution appears to be unacceptable not only for Kyiv, but also for those supporting Ukraine's struggle against the invaders.

The Hungarian government, however, uses its peace narrative for political purposes: it differentiates between 'pro-peace' and 'pro-war' forces, and while virtually all of Hungary's official allies (the EU, NATO, and their Member States) belong to the latter group, the former one consists of political actors like China, Türkiye, members of the Organisation of Turkic States, or the member parties of Fidesz's new group in the European Parliament, the Patriots for Europe. So even though Hungary cannot offer any tangible contribution to the peace process in Ukraine, it actively and tendentiously attacks and condemns acts – and the actors carrying them out – in support of Ukraine.

ORBÁN'S PEACE MISSION

Against this backdrop, Orbán's trip to Kyiv was a surprise to everyone, including the EU, its Member States, and NATO. The timing of the visit was clearly not a coincidence: even though the prime minister of the country fulfilling the role of the Council presidency does not have any elevated role in the community, at a symbolic level, it did have an added value that Orbán arrived in Kyiv the day after Hungary took over the presidency. With the extremely troubled history of both Hungary and the rest of the EU, and Hungary and Ukraine[16], some understood the visit as a sign from the Hungarian government indicating that – at least for the time of the Hungarian presidency – the country might take a position that is slightly more aligned with that of its allies, and that we might see some improvement in Hungarian-Ukrainian relations, too. As Euronews reported "...following talks in Kyiv on Tuesday, Orbán appeared to open the door to a new phase of bilateral relations, saying >>the time had come<< for such an official visit. >>We are trying to leave the disputes of the past behind us and focus on the period ahead,<< Orbán said in brief comments to journalists following the talks. >>We would like relations between our two countries to be much better<<"[17] It is also true, though, that the vast majority of the international commentary noted how little Hungary can offer to the peace process with Orbán's 'immediate ceasefire' plan, which we detailed above; Balkan Insight's article on the matter, for example, acknowledges that Orbán was "playing to the gallery" with the trip, but it recalls that President Zelenskyy had already dismissed the immediate ceasefire option before "as merely playing into Russia's hands"[18]. But before any further speculations could have been made about the purpose and the short-, mid-, or long-term effects of the Kyiv trip, Orbán flew to Moscow to meet President Putin, which, along with the Hungarian PM's trips that followed, not only put the Zelenskyy-meeting in an entirely different context, but turned the entire Hungarian presidency upside-down.

Orbán had an extremely stuffed schedule in the first half of July: after visiting Zelenskyy on the 2nd, he flew to Moscow to meet Putin on the 5th, then attended the summit of the Organisation of Turkic States in Shusha, Azerbaijan, on the 6th, followed by a trip to Beijing on the 8th, from where he travelled to the Washington NATO summit on the 9th. At the summit, he had a separate meeting with Turkish president Erdogan on the 10th, after which he flew to Florida to meet former US president Trump at his Mar-a-Lago home on the 12th. Knowing Orbán's history, preferences and political alliances there was nothing surprising in his choice of people to meet: aside from the Zelenskyy meeting and the NATO summit, this was an 'illiberal round trip', a series of meetings with hard-liner autocrats, with leaders tendentiously disrespecting the rule of law, and representing values fundamentally different from those of Hungary's official allies. These are the political actors Orbán regards as 'pro-peace', and as potential allies in his attempt to reach a ceasefire in Ukraine even if it means an effective Russian victory. The timing of his 'peace mission', however, was very much deliberate: as in the case of his meeting with Zelenskyy, it had a symbolic significance that he toured his illiberal allies with his suspiciously Russia-friendly peace plan as the prime minister of the country that is holding the presidency of the Council. And even though the leader of the country of presidency has no special mandate within the EU, instead of attempting to make sure that he is not seen as a representative of the community, he actively contributed to the image that he was something more, something bigger, something more powerful than what he actually was. In Moscow, standing beside Putin at their joint press conference, Orbán did not refute the Russian President's words when he said the Hungarian PM was representing the Council presidency; Orbán often posted photos and videos of his 'peace mission' using the presidency's logo in them. Minister Sziijártó blurred the line further between Hungary's current special role within the EU and the prime minister's 'peace mission' when he shared a video on his official Facebook page in which he claimed that the 1st week of the presidency showed everyone that the Hungarian presidency "will be a peace mission over the next six months"[19].

Not surprisingly, Orbán's 'peace mission' does not seem to have brought any form of truce closer in Ukraine; the Hungarian government simply does not have the clout to put real pressure on either of the belligerent parties in any direction, nor on the major global powers that may have the chance of effectively influencing the course of the war. If the Hungarian prime minister's meeting with Putin had led to the de-escalation of the war, or had resulted in the Russian President expressing his openness to withdraw his troops from Ukraine, the European – and global – assessment of Orbán's peace-making efforts would be drastically different. However, the visit had no such effect; moreover, only a few days after the meeting of the two leaders Russia carried out its deadliest and most brutal missile attack in several months against Kyiv targets, including a major children's hospital, killing dozens of Ukrainian civilians. It seems that the only direct beneficiary of the meeting was President Putin, who could also blur the lines between Orbán's 'peace mission' and the Hungarian Council presidency stating "Given that Hungary has held the Presidency of the Council of the European Union since July 1, Mr Orbán and I exchanged views on the state of affairs in relations between Russia and the European Union, which are currently at their lowest point. We also talked about the tentative principles of a future security architecture in Europe, also tentative"[20].

Putin's gains from meeting a European head of government, the prime minister of the country of Council presidency in particular, are clear: not only can he downplay the level of his isolation to his domestic audience, but he can also demonstrate the lack of unity within the EU and NATO in connection with the approach to Russia and to the war in Ukraine. Why the visit was worth it for Orbán is a much more complicated question without one clear answer, but a probable theory is that the Hungarian prime minister speculates that some sort of truce or armistice will take place in the Russian-Ukrainian war in the relatively near future, and once that happens, he will be able to position himself as having had a major role in the process[21]. If that happened before the spring of 2026, Orbán's narrative of himself as the 'maker of peace' could be central to Fidesz's campaign in the next Hungarian parliamentary elections, too.

A NOT TOO WARM RECEPTION

Nevertheless, regardless of what Orbán's motives were, his 'peace mission' clearly shocked and outraged EU leaders and senior officials, and immediate attempts were taken in the direction of creating a counter-narrative to that of Orbán and Putin, which deliberately confused the Hungarian PM's tour with Hungary's Council presidency. Virtually all reactions coming from high circles of the EU emphasised the same: Orbán has absolutely no right or mandate to represent the European Union abroad, and his 'peace mission' is neither approved by EU leadership, nor is it in line with the community's foreign policy. According to the statement of the EU's diplomatic service "Prime Minister Orbán has not received any mandate from the EU Council to visit Moscow. The EU position on Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine is reflected in many European Council conclusions. That position excludes official contacts between the EU and President Putin. The Hungarian Prime Minister is thus not representing the EU in any form"[22]; "The EU rotating presidency has no mandate to engage with Russia on behalf of the EU"[23], President of the European Council Charles Michel posted on X (former Twitter); on the same platform, Commission President Von der Leyen posted "Hungarian PM Viktor Orbán is visiting Moscow: Appeasement will not stop Putin. Only unity and determination will pave the path to a comprehensive, just and lasting peace in Ukraine"[24]. Social media messages were not the only reactions, though: the European Commission and a number of national governments of EU Member States decided to boycott – in one way or another – the informal meetings hosted by the Hungarian Council presidency as a response to Hungary's disruptive diplomatic behaviour.

On 11 July, six EU Member States (Estonia, Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Sweden) announced that they would not send their ministers to the meetings organized by Hungary as part of its Council presidency[25]; on 15 July, Von der Leyen decided that the Commission will only delegate senior civil servants (not commissioners) to the informal meetings of the Council[26]; on 16 July, Dutch prime minister Schoof told the press that the Netherlands will decide on a meeting-by-meeting basis whether to participate in the Hungarian presidency's events[27]; on 18 July, Denmark joined the boycott of the 6 countries above[28].

The Hungarian government set seven points of priority to the Council presidency; these are improving the EU's competitiveness; reinforcing European defence policy; developing a consistent and merit-based enlargement policy; stemming illegal migration; shaping the future of cohesion policy; developing a farmer-centred agricultural policy; and addressing demographic challenges[29]. In a previous article[30] we established how the setting of at least some of these priorities can serve the Hungarian government's interests, and how they can possibly do so even at the expense of the interests of the EU. However, it would be a mistake not to take the issues raised by the Hungarian presidency's priorities seriously as the answers potentially given to the challenges in these fields can fundamentally define the present and the future of the European Union. With his 'peace mission' and the overwhelming political objection it has triggered from EU leaders Orbán has virtually cut the branch the Hungarian presidency was sitting on: if the Hungarian government's aim really was to achieve advancement in the presidency's fields of priority it certainly has a much more difficult task in the current shocked, alienated and distrustful European political environment as it would have if Orbán showed at least some signs of alignment with the EU's mainstream (at least in the field of foreign policy) instead of doubling down on his particularist policy. As the Hungarian prime minister's 'illiberal tour' completely overshadowed the first month of the presidency, and it is likely to have given it a lasting interpretational framework for its entire duration, the question arises what Orbán's actual priority might be: to have a successful Council presidency, or to have the opportunity to abuse his position of being the prime minister of the country of presidency. The discrepancy between the Hungarian PM's actions and the presidency's priorities is probably the most blatant in the case of European defence policy. The presidency's list of priorities sets out that "Beyond defence policy alliances and cooperation, the European Union must play a greater role in guaranteeing its own security by strengthening its resilience and capacity to act"[31]. What Orbán did during his 'peace mission', and what the Hungarian government has been doing for two and half years vetoing joint decisions in connection with foreign- and defence policy issues[32], such as the war in Ukraine, again and again, did not only threaten existing defence policy alliances and cooperation, but also directly hurt the EU's resilience and capacity to act by disrupting EU unity.

Notably, once again (just like before the Hungarian presidency even began), speculation about the possibility of stripping Hungary of the presidency arose, and one way of that could be the advancement of the Article 7 proceeding, of which Hungary has been a subject since 2018. On 15 July, 63 MEPs signed a letter calling upon the heads of EU institutions to do their “utmost to suspend Hungary’s voting rights in the Council according to the procedure set out in Article 7 of the Treaty on the European Union”[33]. Over the last 6 years, though, there has never been enough political will in the European Council to pursue the process and seek a vote, the Article 7 process against Hungary is still in its 1st phase, and it is highly unlikely for that to change even against the backdrop of Orbán’s illiberal tour, labelled a ‘peace mission’. The schedule of the presidency could also be altered: president of the European Council Charles Michel could file a motion on the basis of the relevant treaty article[34] to change the rotating presidency’s calendar. The next Member State in line for the presidency is Poland, which should take over from Hungary in January 2025, but a simple qualified majority vote in the European Council could easily change the Polish presidency’s starting date to August or September 2024. But again, there does not seem to be sufficient political will for such a drastic move. At the time of writing, the Hungarian presidency seems to be getting away with Orbán’s extremely controversial acts for the cost of some partial boycotts and written concerns.

THE EU SHOULD PREPARE

Although the exact ways Orbán would abuse his role as the prime minister of the country holding the presidency of the Council could not have been seen before 1 July, it has long been clear that the Hungarian government does not intend to, and often does not even pretend to intend to meet the standards and respect the values of the European Union. The EU cannot afford to distance itself from the ‘Hungary problem’: Hungary is a member of the community, and its actions have repercussions for the EU institutions and for the Member States, too. This is particularly so when Hungary occupies the special position of the Council presidency. We know that European political actors have long been aware – for more than a decade, as we elaborated in the first section of the article – of the potential threats posed by Hungary’s illiberal regime to the community. We know that there are methods and tools by which the Hungarian presidency could have been prevented, but there was never enough political will to use them.

We know that it is still a possibility to strip Hungary of the presidency, but it still appears to be a measure regarded as too drastic by EU leaders. Instead, Brussels and European national governments come up with ad-hoc, misaligned measures and statements to respond to the challenge that is Orbán’s disruptive foreign policy. These self-evidently have less influence on the Hungarian government than a proper, joint response would have, and they make it quite apparent for the public that there is division within the EU even regarding the protection of its fundamental values. There are mechanisms that could be used, but there is no political agreement on whether they should be used or not, and if so, then to what extent; at the same time, some governments boycott the events of the Hungarian presidency, some do not, some boycott only some of them. Some express deep concerns, some remain silent. When we discuss how much Orbán’s foreign policy plays into Moscow’s hands, we must add that the lack of a firm, unified reaction from the EU’s side vastly amplifies that effect.

There is no reason to believe that the remaining months of the Hungarian presidency would bring something fundamentally different from what we saw through July. The intensity of Orbán's diplomatic activity could moderate, but it is worth remembering that according to Szijjártó the Hungarian presidency "will be a peace mission over the next six months". Even if we – reluctantly – accept that there is not enough political will among EU leaders and the heads of EU Member States and governments to strip Hungary of the presidency, or to push the Article 7 procedure forward to suspend Hungary's voting right in the Council, preparations could and should be made so that the next time a swift and joint EU26 response could be given to the Orbán challenge. There may be a form or level of boycott of Council presidency events which every Member State would be ready to join; there can be joint symbolic acts (certain gestures of support towards Ukraine, for instance) the Member States and/or the institutions can carry out together to counteract the Hungarian government's divergent messaging; or at least there could be prepared statements and aligned channels of communication so that when the EU must publicly react to a disgraceful act such as Orbán's meeting with Putin the whole community's unified voice could be heard. These are symbolic gestures, but it is the presidency itself, and its abuse by the Hungarian prime minister that shows how crucial symbols can be.

FOOTNOTES

[1] European Council – Council of the European Union (2016)

[2] CJEU (2024)

[3] Orbán (2014)

[4] Telička (2014)

[5] Varga (2014)

[6] Sunday Times (2014)

[7] Ranschburg - Schlanger (2024)

[8] European Parliament (2023)

[9] The Budapest Times (2024)

[10] European Council (2022)

[11] Direkt36 (2022)

[12] Reuters (2023)

[13] Le Monde (2024)

[14] Bloomberg (2024)

[15] Center for Preventive Action (2024)

[16] Hungarian-Ukrainian relations have suffered greatly since Ukraine's Russian invasion in 2022 due to Hungary's unwillingness to clearly take a side, and to treat Russia as the aggressor, but they hadn't been very good beforehand either. The Hungarian party had long been upset about the treatment of minority Hungarians living in Ukraine's Transcarpathia region, and accused Kyiv (often rightfully) of infringing their rights to use their native Hungarian language in public administration and in education. This was – at least officially – the main factor behind Hungary hindering Ukraine's accession to NATO, and behind blocking ministerial-level meetings between NATO and Ukraine since 2018.

[17] Euronews (2024)

[18] Balkan Insight (2024)

[19] Szijjártó (2024)

[20] Putin (2024)

[21] Orbán's plan also gambles on the re-election of Donald Trump as president of the United States this November, of whom the Hungarian PM often claims that he would bring peace to Ukraine very quickly. (It is not a coincidence that the slogan of the Hungarian Council presidency is "Make Europe Great Again", which rhymes with Trump's slogan of "Make America Great Again".) Similarly to his own, he never specified what Trump's peace plan would look like, but his devoted support of the former – and probably future – US President could potentially elevate Hungary's position in the illiberal international in case the Republicans won the elections. However, as Hegedűs (2024) observes "...a striking characteristic of the strategy is that it hardly allows for a plan B and thus represents a very risky gamble for the Hungarian leader. Obviously, he is putting all his eggs in one basket, the return of Trump, the alternative being a humiliated, ridiculed, weakened and sanctioned Hungary if his bet doesn't pay off."

[22] EEAS (2024)

[23] Michel (2024)

[24] Von der Leyen (2024)

[25] Euractiv (2024)

[26] Mamer (2024)

[27] DutchNews (2024)

[28] Reuters (2024)

[29] Hungarian Presidency (2024)

[30] Ranschburg - Schlanger (2024)

[31] Hungarian Presidency (2024)

[32] Just a couple of recent examples: Hungary vetoed EU aid package for Ukraine in December 2023 (Foreign Policy 2023); it vetoed the issuing of a joint statement condemning Israel's rejection of Palestinian statehood (Euronews 2024/II); it blocked a joint EU statement expressing concerns about the elections in Venezuela (Politico 2024)

[33] Terras (2024)

[34] TFEU (2016)

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Zoltán Ranschburg is a public policy expert and senior analyst at the Republikon Institute. He graduated from the ELTE Faculty of Humanities in 2011 with a degree in Philosophy and Aesthetics, and in 2017 he received his Master of Public Administration from the CEU School of Public Policy.

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About the project region

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The European Dialogue of the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom has offices in Brussels, Madrid and Prague. By networking EU experts, civil society and decision-makers, the European Dialogue seeks to promote an open dialogue and develop liberal political solutions to European challenges. Together with our liberal partners, formats and campaigns are developed to promote the rule of law, free markets and human rights. In addition, the European Dialogue coordinates EU co-financed projects in the areas of democracy promotion, development cooperation and human rights protection.

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