



A schizophrenic presidency at halftime

The first half of Hungary's time in the spotlight of EU politics has passed. It was marred by squabbles over the media law and the ongoing debate about the constitution – in other words domestic issues that ideally should not have dominated coverage about Hungary at a time when it seeks to influence the progress and direction of European public policy. Despite the politically debilitating effect of the prime minister's combative rhetoric, the bureaucratic aspect of the presidency appears to be functioning all right. Too bad we won't be able to reap its benefits.

There is an unverified legend we've heard firsthand from an alleged witness: According to the story, a very pro-European prime minister flew together on his nation's airplane with the President of the Commission. When they arrived at their destination, thus the story, the President of the Commission tried to leave the plane first – whether by virtue of the coincidence of being nearer to the door or purposefully is unclear – but was pushed aside back by the prime minister, who wanted to be seen as being the first to leave the plane. Regardless of its veracity, the story is a perfect metaphor: even for a pro-European, the nation always trumps Europe.

And the Hungarian PM Viktor Orbán is not even very pro-European, in fact he hews closer to the EU's more euro-sceptic wing. So it is hardly surprising that he used his time at the helm of the institution to cater to his domestic audience. While this fortunately did not compel him to hinder the public policy work going on behind the scenes, it appears to have put off key segments of the European audience. In response, Hungary has been “rewarded” with some stinging diplomatic defeats.

Two presidencies

If someone had just observed the nitty-gritty details of policy work coordinated by the Hungarian presidency and completely ignored the news, that person might have gained the impression that things are going splendidly. If on the other hand one would have done the reverse, that is she had only watched the news but ignored the minutiae of Brussels policy-making – and unfortunately for Hungary that is the realistic and more frequent scenario – then one's impression of the Hungarian EU presidency would be that it's a disaster, full of superfluous confrontations and unprovoked Hungarian verbal attacks against the EU.

The team of Foreign Minister János Martonyi and his state secretary for European affairs, Enikő Győri, has been quietly and assiduously working behind the scenes to ensure that at the public policy level the Hungarian presidency realises the ambitious and widely respected goals it has set itself upon assuming office. They could be forgiven for thinking that their

earnest efforts are undermined by national politics, which has in parallel chosen to pick as many conflicts as seems humanly possible to squeeze into a six months period.

Galling rhetoric

The prime minister appears to have decided that being the member of a club that would actually have us is no fun. He hasn't been a euro-enthusiast for a while now, famously quipping already back in 1999 that there is life outside the EU. Still, apparently it took the elevation to the rotating presidency to bring out the full-fledged euro-sceptic in Orbán.

It started with his combative approach at his appearance in Strasbourg and continued with his – patently false – insistence that MEPs were attacking Hungary and that there was an attempt to dominate Hungary from abroad, including and especially Europe. Apart from the implicit comparison of Brussels to Moscow under the communist regime, he also recently made a by now infamous remark stating that “We don't believe in the EU, we believe in Hungary,” as if the two were mutually exclusive. It is telling that those defending the remark argued that this was not a rejection of the EU as such, but that PM merely pointed out that he does not subscribe to the ideological beliefs that fuel integration and is only committed to the Union because it serves our interests. While integration clearly only makes sense if it is not antithetical to Hungarian interests, the assumption here is also that an ideological commitment to integration is not a Hungarian interest.

Baby steps

While the PM was busy making sure that just about every Hungarian citizen found out how critical he is of the EU, the public policy team was busy convincing European policy-makers to accept Hungarian proposals for the realisation of the presidency's objectives. As the table below shows, their record was mixed, but considering how the macro-political environment impeded their efforts, the results are in fact not bad.

Objective	Assessment
Establishing a permanent stability mechanism for securing the euro, as well as strengthening economic policy coordination	At the 15 March ECOFIN session the Hungarian presidency Managed to secure an agreement between Member States about the 'six-pack' on economic governance . This is a significant success . At the same time, it appears that the European Parliament will not ratify the package during the Hungarian presidency , one of the reasons for which is that the Hungarian government has limited lobbying power in that institution and, moreover, pursues a

Objective	Assessment
	wrong-headed consultation strategy.
Creating an European Roma Integration Strategy	The European Parliament endorsed the corresponding report. The Council is expected to approve it in June. The adoption of the strategy is a success for Hungary , though it'd be a mistake to overemphasise the usefulness of the strategy in accelerating the integration of Roma.
Advancing CAP reform	The conclusions drafted by the presidency concerning the key issue of CAP's future were adopted by a qualified majority in the Council. This is a partial success. However, Hungary failed to line up all Member States behind the cause of reinforcing CAP.
Abolishing physical barriers impeding the functioning of the internal market	The Council approved the proposed schedule, which is in line with the formulated objective.
Adoption of the Danube Region Strategy	The Council is expected to adopt the strategy in June. In addition to the Roma Strategy, this may serve as the second major symbolic success of the Hungarian EU presidency.
Expanding the Schengen Zone to include Romania and Bulgaria	The Hungarian presidency will not be able to realise this goal because Bulgaria is ill-prepared. As a result, the possibility for ethnic Hungarians to cross into Hungary without a passport check will be delayed by months.
Concluding the accession talks with Croatia	Though this has not been officially announced, informal sources suggest that the Hungarian presidency will not be able to realise this objective.
Organisation of the second Eastern Partnership Summit meeting	The summit will be held during the Polish presidency. This is unequivocally a diplomatic failure (and also a display of the strength of Polish lobby).

Small is powerful

This is by no means trivial. The European Union rarely moves forward in a grand sweep. Instead, most of its success in terms of coordinating members comes in the form of myriads of small, incremental rules and policies that increasingly regulate a vast array of issues pertaining to our everyday lives. Much of what the EU does is too boring and lacking in ambition for the press to take notice – cumulatively, however, the sets of rules that emerge from this tediously slow approach constitute a massive corpus of laws. While occasionally the EU does land big coups, the fact is that much of what it has achieved would not have been possible had it bundled its successful acts together and attempted to pass them as part

of a huge package. Seen from this perspective, these apparently less exciting achievements are in fact precisely what makes the EU move forward.

Politics rules

But the assessment of a rotating presidency is a battle that is inherently political. And the prime minister is nothing if not an exceptional politician. On Europe, however, his domestic victory, such as it may be, is a double-edged sword. Orbán may think that the swipes he took at the EU in general, and specific opponents therein in particular, made him look strong and decisive in the eyes of domestic voters. And for all we know he may be right in thinking that. But Hungary is not an island unto itself – in fact, Hungary, in light of its geographic and economic intertwinement with Europe, is *especially* not an island.

Which is to say that in the long run the question will probably arise whether making enemies who'll remember was worth the friends who probably won't last. Of course, elections reign supreme in a politician's mind, and Orbán must consider his voters here more carefully than Brussels bureaucrats. It is true that many politicians walk a tight rope in reconciling their European commitments with the short-term desires of their domestic political audiences. Some have decided to treat the EU as a nuisance, while others have embraced the challenge of driving integration forward and convincing their compatriots that that is in fact their interest. The schizophrenic Hungarian presidency has often followed the approach of the former, but in the meanwhile it has been in fact friendly towards some of the key European projects behind the scenes. While that may suit Orbán just fine, it is not clear if it indeed benefits Hungary in the long run.