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Hungary's unorthodox leadership:

**A provocative political presidency yet with
some significant policy achievements**

Róbert László

Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán made no secret of his desire for a presidency that would be remembered for a long time to come. That will likely be the case but, years from now, we will hardly recall its policy achievements. Instead, it will be remembered for its unorthodox understanding of the role, symbolised by a 'diplomatic' tour that yielded no tangible results. The Hungarian government used the attention and symbolic power that comes with the presidency to provoke the European mainstream, to make gestures towards its international ideological partners, and to try to present the Hungarian premier as a successful and globally respected leader. For the future, the EU institutions must find ways to increase the costs of what was essentially trolling so that disruptive actors are not tempted to do it themselves in the future.



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A troll at the head of the table

In recent years, the Orbán government has become increasingly isolated, with its ability to assert its interests within the EU reduced to a minimum. This is due to the state of the rule of law in Hungary, systemic corruption and the government's pro-Kremlin orientation. Most EU Member State leaders and institutions have been increasingly critical of the Orbán regime's political leadership, highlighting its incompatibility with fundamental European values. Hungary's reputation has also been further damaged by its persistent 'roadblock strategy' that has often stalled EU decision-making.

Earlier, there was even discussion about potentially restricting the Hungarian presidency, though this did not ultimately happen. However, several Member States – particularly the Baltics and some Nordic countries – along with the European Commission, announced a partial boycott of informal Council meetings. This tense atmosphere cast a shadow over the entire six-month term. Two of its key manifestations were the cancellation of the Commission's visit to Hungary at the beginning of the presidency and the postponement of the Hungarian presidency's presentation of its programme to the European Parliament until October – by which point the presidency was already in its fourth month. During the debate itself, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen engaged in an unprecedentedly [sharp confrontation](#) with Orbán.

Beyond these tensions, conflicts were further fuelled by the Orbán government's deliberate use of the presidency to challenge and troll (i.e. disrupt and provoke) the EU mainstream, elevate its own political weight and push grand political messages – even though this role is primarily meant for coordination between EU institutions, to be done within the framework set by the trio of successive presidencies. Contrary to this traditional function, the Orbán government launched its presidency under the slogan 'Make Europe Great Again', openly mimicking Donald Trump's now infamous campaign slogan. The EU mainstream saw a troll in the form of the Hungarian Prime Minister at the head of the table.

This perception shifted – albeit temporarily – during the European Political Community (EPC) and the informal Council summits in Budapest in early November, which were undeniably Orbán's true moments in the spotlight. Just two days earlier, Trump had been re-elected and the German government had collapsed. While there had been uncertainty over whether all invited leaders would attend, in the end, not a single European leader missed the opportunity to engage in talks amid the rapidly changing geopolitical landscape. During the presidency, this was the only occasion when Orbán

made a grand conciliatory gesture, declaring that while political battles would be fought in Brussels, everyone should simply enjoy Hungarian hospitality in Budapest.

The 'peace missions' did not aim to bring peace any closer

However, the presidency was not characterised by avoiding conflicts. A prime example of the 'troll' politics was delivered right in the first week of Hungary's EU presidency when Orbán embarked on a diplomatic tour, visiting Volodymyr Zelenskyy, Vladimir Putin, Xi Jinping and the then-presidential candidate Donald Trump in rapid succession. The official goal of the meetings was to promote peace, but the Hungarian prime minister really sought to enhance his own political weight. He aimed to present himself as a significant global political figure both domestically and internationally, provoke the European mainstream and make gestures to his international ideological partners. The so-called peace mission – which the Orbán government organised on a bilateral basis but deliberately confused with the presidency – sparked sharp reactions. EU leaders criticised Orbán for behaving as though he were negotiating a truce between Russia and Ukraine on the EU's behalf. While this was never explicitly claimed in official government communications, the presidency logo was used prominently, implying that Hungary had an EU mandate, which was certainly not the case. Putin even addressed Orbán as the rotating leader of the EU, a remark that Orbán did not correct.

The diplomatic tour brought no tangible results; the Hungarian side could only present the fact that the meetings took place and the empty demand for peace, but it was certainly useful in making Orbán's significance appear greater than it actually was, both internationally and domestically. The provocative mission was also a gesture towards – and thus an open investment into deeper political ties to – Donald Trump, who in his campaign promised to end the war in 24 hours if elected. From this political standpoint – having paved the way for Trump – the diplomatic tour can be seen as a personal success for Orbán.

Another source of foreign policy tension was also that after the October election in Georgia, Orbán was the first to congratulate the new pro-Russian president and then visited the country even before the official election results were announced. Although this trip no longer featured the EU presidency logo, the diplomatic scandal was unavoidable, as observers pointed out that the elections were not fair and most EU Member States did not recognise their result. After this, no one was surprised when the Hungarian government vetoed sanctions targeting certain Georgian police officers who had been involved in violent actions against protesters.

In December, the government attempted to bask in diplomatic glory, similar to the beginning of the presidency but it fell far short, despite Donald Trump's election. Although a personal Orbán-Trump meeting did not take place, the communication between their teams was visibly active. Meanwhile, Orbán held a phone call with Putin and had the opportunity to meet Zelensky in Brussels. The Hungarian side tried again to frame these bilateral negotiations as a 'peace mission' but these were inherently less high profile, and this time they did not misuse the presidency logo.

By the end of the year, the Hungarian prime minister's ambitions had become significantly more restrained. Orbán repeatedly claimed that he had called for a Christmas ceasefire and a prisoner exchange in Ukraine. However, at the closing press conference of the Brussels European Council on 19 December, he unexpectedly admitted that he had only framed these issues as mere goals, [stating](#) that peace negotiations were the job of 'the big boys'. In reality, rather than a ceasefire, Kyiv suffered heavy bombing over Christmas (as had been the case following Orbán's July tour). Although a prisoner exchange did take place, it was facilitated by Saudi mediation rather than any Hungarian initiative.

Key policy outcomes: Advancing Western Balkans integration, full Schengen accession for Romania and Bulgaria, and the Budapest Declaration on EU Competitiveness

While the Hungarian government publicly engaged in enough conflict for a Greek drama, behind the scenes, the bureaucratic apparatus worked diligently and humbly, striving to fulfil the role of an 'honest broker' as Council president. Undoubtedly, Hungary's presidency achieved important policy outcomes – even if it did not always play the leading role in making them happen.

The Hungarian presidency initially outlined seven priorities: competitiveness, agricultural policy, enlargement, defence policy, migration, cohesion policy, and demography. Significant progress was made in the first three areas, although to a varying extent.

Competitiveness was a key topic for the Hungarian presidency, with the Orbán government aiming to really shape the European discourse. Even before the presidency began, the government repeatedly emphasised that the EU's competitiveness needed to be strengthened due to high energy prices, a lack of investment and the competitive advantage of the United States and China. In this context, Member States adopted the [Budapest Declaration](#), intended to boost the EU's competitiveness.

However, the presidency's success-driven narrative is nuanced by the fact that the EU had already put forward concrete proposals or existing legislation in several of these areas. The competitiveness plan's foundations had been set out a year earlier by two former Italian prime ministers, Enrico Letta and Mario Draghi through their individual reports on how to increase the EU's competitiveness. Finally, despite the Hungarian prime minister's strong preference, the [concept of 'connectivity'](#) was not included in the document – unsurprisingly, as Europe views China's expansion far more cautiously than Hungary does.

The Hungarian presidency devoted significant energy in accelerating the Western Balkans' integration, achieving notable successes. The accession processes of three countries in the region reached important milestones: two intergovernmental conferences were held with Albania, opening the first two clusters of negotiation chapters; Montenegro closed one cluster; and Serbia received the green light to develop its position for opening the competitiveness cluster. The latter is considered a particularly significant achievement, as before the Hungarian presidency, 14 countries had opposed advancing this process. Consequently, these three countries now have target dates for concluding their accession negotiations – Montenegro aims for the end of 2026, while Albania and Serbia are targeting the end of 2027. However, no substantial progress was made regarding North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Ukraine, and Moldova.

The successes in Western Balkans enlargement are still less tangible than the fact that, since the beginning of 2025, border checks have been scrapped at the internal EU borders with Romania and Bulgaria. The Hungarian government considers this a success of its own making, although the key to the solution lay with the Austrian government. Domestic political developments in Austria in 2024 made it possible for the country to lift its previous veto – something that had been anticipated even before the Hungarian presidency. Nonetheless, Hungary skilfully seized the opportunity, announcing the decision following a ministerial-level meeting with Bulgaria, Romania and Austria. Both countries had already been part of the Schengen area for air and sea travel since 31 March 2024, with the land border extension taking effect on 1 January 2025.

A major achievement at the end of the presidency was the adoption of the Council resolution on the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) for the period after 2027. This issue had been on the agendas of previous presidencies but no consensus had been reached due to opposition from the Romanian government. In December, however, Bucharest finally agreed to the document, which was then adopted by the Member States without debate.

Contrary to the presidency's plans, Member States failed to reach a common position on several important matters, including the European Defence Industry Program (EDIP), the Combating Child Sexual Abuse in the Online Space (CSA) dossier, the European pharmaceutical dossier, and the patent package.

Although not Hungary's priorities, two important Ukraine-related decisions were adopted towards the end of the presidency: the 15th sanctions package against Russia and an agreement on the G7 loan framework for Ukraine financed by frozen Russian assets. However, the Hungarian government managed to remove several Russian politicians and public figures from the sanctions list, including Patriarch Kirill, and abstained from the vote on the second, along with Malta. Although the Hungarian government tried to avoid overemphasising these issues, President von der Leyen specifically highlighted the adoption of the sanctions package as the greatest achievement of the Hungarian presidency during the presidency's closing press conference in December.

No unfreezing of EU funds

No progress was made, however, on the issue most crucial for Hungary: unfreezing suspended EU funds. The Hungarian government could have used the presidency to rebuild trust, but as previously mentioned, it instead used the heightened attention to do the exact opposite.

Universities, which were placed under the control of public trust funds chaired by people close to the government, still do not receive EU funds for participation in the Erasmus+ and Horizon Europe programmes. The failure related to the rule of law procedure has resulted in the loss of EUR 1.04 billion and poses a serious threat to Hungary's access to the EUR 9.5 billion Recovery Fund, which must be done by the end of August 2026. No progress was made in establishing EU-compliant asylum regulations. As a result, by January 2025, the daily fine imposed on Hungary due to a European Court of Justice ruling amounted to a total of EUR 400 million. This can be deducted from any Hungarian payment claims.

The government is unlikely to meet the conditions for the funds, as the Orbán regime's authoritarian governing style and systemic corruption, which are fundamental for maintaining the political system, are incompatible with European Commission and Member States' expectations.

Countering troll politics: Strengthening EU resilience and public engagement

As Orbán openly stated during the year-end press conference in December, he intended to run not a bureaucratic but a so-called political presidency – and he delivered on that. Right at the launch of the presidency, he set the tone with a ‘diplomatic’ tour and, from then on, the presidency’s events consistently resonated with a provocative tone – and if there is one thing that will be remembered from these six months, it will be this. Meanwhile, the actual timing of Romania and Bulgaria’s entry into the Schengen Area, or the milestones in the Western Balkans enlargement process, will soon fade into obscurity.

Eurosceptic and anti-EU rhetoric continue to rise and like-minded actors are gaining strength. ‘Troll politics’, built on provocation, is spreading, making the EU more vulnerable to external challenges, should they come from the US or from Russia and China. The EU institutions must find ways to increase the costs of trolling so that disruptive actors find it less rewarding and ultimately lose more than they gain. Institutional mechanisms need to be developed to bypass and isolate such actors.

However, change must go beyond what happens in negotiation rooms. If many citizens only hear about the EU when their own leaders criticize it, mass support for the values of European integration will remain on shaky ground. The EU institutions, particularly the Commission, must serve as political counterweights, offering clear and consistent counter-narratives directly to European voters. However, the responsibility for countering disruptive actors, messages and tactics can no longer rest solely with the Commission. Member States must also step up and leverage their own political influence.