

## **Safeguarding Sovereignty and Security: Hungary's Strategic Leadership in the 2024 EU Presidency**

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### **Abstract**

*The present article on the Hungarian EU Presidency focuses on national sovereignty, highlighting the legal provisions and Hungary's claim to autonomy in the areas of immigration and energy policy. While national interests take the front stage, the Hungarian Presidency supports a more flexible approach to EU solidarity, especially in relation to migration reform. Orbán positions Hungary as a top advocate of institutional autonomy inside the EU in his speeches, using rhetorical devices including metonymy, amplification, and historical framing. His leadership underlines Hungary's major responsibility in enhancing regional stability, competitiveness, and European security, therefore defining the 2024 presidency as a pivotal stage in determining EU direction.*

**Keywords:** Hungary, solidarity, institutional balance, migration, energy security, sovereignty.

### **Introduction: Crisis and Sovereignty in Hungary's 2011 EU Presidency**

Under extreme economic hardship, as the EU worked through the consequences of the 2008 financial crisis, Viktor Orbán oversaw Hungary's rotating EU presidency in 2011. Deep recessions, national debt crises, and unstable banking were features of this time. Orbán's government underlined the need to strengthen the euro area through austere fiscal measures, primarily supporting the Six-Pack, which implemented tough financial constraints to solve weaknesses inside the eurozone. Hungary actively backed important financial aid programmes, particularly the European Financial Stability Facility (EFSF), which gave failing nations, including Greece, Ireland, and Spain, necessary help. Orbán supported EU-wide economic monitoring and selective measures meant to align with macroeconomic stability even while he argued for keeping Hungary's budgetary sovereignty. Orbán balanced his opposition to EU centralisation with support for collective actions vital to maintaining the Union's stability, as political scientist Ryszard Legutko

(2016) noted, managing the conflict between national sovereignty and the need for EU-wide remedies.

The geopolitical difficulties presented by the Arab Spring put more strain on Orbán's presidency, so Hungary stressed migration control and external border security. Foreshadowing its eventual severe migration policy, the Hungarian government argued for strong control of the EU's borders while expecting a flood of refugees resulting from regional turmoil. This strategy highlighted Hungary's dedication to European stability and regional security in response to growing migration challenges, establishing Hungary as a main supporter of strong EU border control policies (Schöpflin 2015).

Following the Fukushima accident, the Orbán presidency negotiated global worries about nuclear safety and energy security by supporting EU-wide stress tests across all nuclear stations to help to lower increased safety risks. Orbán reconciled national interests with European security concerns even if he firmly supported nuclear energy. His government started discussing energy diversification by emphasising the need to lower Europe's dependence on unstable outside energy sources to strengthen the EU's long-term energy resilience.

Orbán prioritised the Eastern Partnership as a cornerstone of his foreign policy, enhancing the EU's engagement with six post-Soviet states such as Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. The initiative aimed to foster political association and economic ties with these nations, thereby contributing to stability along the EU's eastern borders. In light of Russia's expanding influence, the Orbán presidency strategically reinforced political resilience in these countries, supporting the EU's goal of securing its eastern flank. This policy aligns with Hungary's objectives to bolster regional stability and mitigate external pressures.

Orbán's 2011 presidency, grounded in national sovereignty, security, and pragmatic governance, continues to shape his leadership and Hungary's approach to the 2024 EU presidency. His consistent focus on migration control, energy independence, and regulatory sovereignty reflects his broader European vision. The emphasis on external border control during the Arab Spring and energy security after Fukushima solidified Hungary's stance within EU politics. Orbán's approach to balancing national autonomy with shared European interests has positioned him as a leading advocate for sovereignty within the evolving complexities of EU governance.

This article examines how the Hungarian Prime Minister articulates the theme of national sovereignty in the context of international migration. Viktor Orbán is a European politician who sees international migration as a threat. Populist politicians in various other European countries are doing the same thing (Spier 2006, Demirkol 2022). They thus create the idea that irregular

migrants threaten national security (Huysmans 2000). Migration is thus securitized (Ibrahim 2005), when migrants may not have the security potential that populist leaders attribute.

### **Hungary's Strategic Role in 2024 Presidency**

Hungary's second EU presidency in 2024 coincides with the rollout of two major EU initiatives, the European Green Deal and the Digital Compass 2030, aimed at advancing climate and digital transformation across the Union. With its goal of climate neutrality by 2050, the Green Deal requires extensive cross-sector integration involving energy, transport, and industry, marking a substantial shift in EU governance. Hungary invokes Article 194(2) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) as a legal check against what it views as an overreach in EU competencies, especially in energy policy. This article grants Member States autonomy in energy policy decisions. It allows Hungary to emphasise nuclear energy as a cornerstone of its energy security, even if it challenges the EU's broader climate targets. This stance aligns with theories of differentiated integration, as discussed by Schimmelfennig and Winzen (2020), where Member States maintain sovereignty in key policy areas.

The Digital Compass 2030 outlines the EU's infrastructure modernisation and technological sovereignty goals, guiding Hungary's presidency within the broader digital transformation agenda. It highlights the principle of proportionality, aligning with Hungary's demand for autonomy in managing its pace of digital technology adoption under the multi-speed integration model. This approach allows for varied timelines and strategies across Member States, particularly in bridging the digital divide. Hungary's emphasis on subsidiarity, ensuring that Member States retain control over key aspects of their digital development, has significant implications for EU governance in the digital domain.

Reforms of the Common European Asylum System (CEAS) and the Dublin Regulation have been top priorities for the Hungarian presidency on its migration policy agenda. Initially, the CEAS was meant to harmonise immigration rules throughout the EU, but it exposed major flaws during the migration crisis. Among the initiatives, the Hungarian government advocates a fairer distribution of responsibilities, more cooperation with non-EU countries, and stronger external border restrictions. Hungary also wants amendments to the Dublin Regulation to help to alleviate the heavy burden of refugee applications directed at front-line countries. These projects support

Hungary's overall objective of motivating EU Member States to take a coordinated and balanced approach to migration management.

The current discussions on a new migration and asylum pact underscore Hungary's emphasis on EU autonomy. Hungary opposes the concept of compulsory solidarity, which mandates the distribution of asylum seekers across all Member States. Instead, it promotes a flexible notion of solidarity, allowing states to contribute through financial or logistical support rather than compulsory relocation. This stance highlights Hungary's primary objective, safeguarding national autonomy while participating in EU solidarity initiatives. It underscores the enduring tension between preserving sovereignty and embracing collective European responsibility.

Regarding energy security, the Hungarian presidency is closely linked to the more enormous reaction of the EU to the continuing situation in Ukraine. Hungary's annual agreement with Gazprom, guaranteeing 4.5 billion cubic meters of natural gas, highlights its reliance on Russian energy. This reliance complicates its position in the EU's energy diversification initiatives since the Union, motivated by geopolitical and environmental concerns, aims to reduce its reliance on Russian energy. Hungary struggles to balance maintaining national energy security with negotiating EU sanctions. It has regularly called on the energy solidarity mechanism under Regulation (EU) 2017/1938, supporting a flexible diversification plan honouring Member States' particular needs. This strategy shows Hungary's attempt to strike a compromise between current energy deals with Russia and the EU's objective of strengthening energy resilience against outside shocks.

Hungary's second presidency of the Council of the EU is a unique example of strategic interaction with EU legislative and political frameworks to advance national sovereignty in migratory governance and energy policy domains. The careful interpretation of Article 199(2) TFEU and energy solidarity clauses reveals Hungary's dedication to including a wide spectrum of EU members. This presidency underscores the ongoing challenge of reconciling national autonomy with EU-wide objectives in the complex geopolitical environment, marked by the interconnected climate, digitisation, and migration issues. Hungary's multifaceted strategy underscores the evolving nature of EU governance as Member States gradually establish their autonomy within the common institutional framework, thereby reflecting broader discussions regarding the EU's future trajectory.

## Orbán's Rhetoric: Migration, Security, Competitiveness, Enlargement

During the Strasbourg press conference, focusing on migration, security, competitiveness, and enlargement, Viktor Orbán (2024a) presented Hungary's strategic priorities for its EU presidency on November 8, 2024. His address uses a sophisticated rhetorical strategy combining ethos, historical background, escalation, contrast, and geopolitical framing. Stating, "*we are undertaking this responsibility for the second time... and I, personally, am leading this work for the second time as well,*" he emphasises his part and Hungary's consistent leadership to support continuity. Emphasising "*the second time*" helps him uphold his beliefs and displays him as a consistent leader ready to meet challenging geopolitical issues.

Building on the foundation of trust, Orbán employs optimism as a rhetorical device, noting that "*after all, optimism is important.*" This approach is a discursive strategy, enabling him to introduce serious current challenges while softening their impact. By framing his message with hope, he engages the audience and sets a balanced tone for addressing complex issues, from geopolitical uncertainty to economic crises. This optimistic stance portrays him as pragmatic and forward-looking, acknowledging difficulties while focusing on promising possibilities.

Orbán's speech is primarily historical. Emphasising Hungary's continuous tenacity in negotiating difficult circumstances and his experience, he compared the present obstacles in 2024 with the first EU presidency in 2011. The first presidency is positioned within the global crisis by the reference to events such as "*the aftermath of the financial crisis, the consequences of the Arab Spring, and the Fukushima disaster*", which emphasises that crises are part of a larger pattern for Hungary or the EU, rather than isolated events. Furthermore, this historical comparison strengthens Orbán's leadership since it helps him foresee the rather more complicated problems of the present. By contrasting historical events with the present geopolitical scene, including the Ukraine crisis and the developing issues in the Middle East and Africa, he underlines that "*the situation in the EU today is much more serious than in 2011*". He stresses Hungary's indispensable role in handling these urgent issues.

Orbán transitions from past crises to the current geopolitical landscape through rhetorical escalation. Statements like, "*we are also feeling the consequences, and all international conflicts today risk escalation*", build the urgency by highlighting tensions in Ukraine, the Middle East, and Africa. This progression amplifies the seriousness of these issues, positioning them as existential threats to European stability. By gradually increasing the stakes, Orbán shifts from historical reflection to a pressing crisis narrative, framing

his leadership and Hungary's presidency as essential responses to these escalating challenges.

Orbán appeals to authority and contrasts to underline his warnings of geopolitical unrest and economic risks across Europe. By declaring that "*Europe is facing a slow agony*" and "*Europe could die by losing its markets*", he puts these claims alongside well-known leaders such as Mario Draghi and Emmanuel Macron. This strategy lends credibility to his view by linking it to issues of importance to prominent European leaders. When he says, "*compared to Mario Draghi and Emmanuel Macron, I am a moderate prime minister*," he frames himself subtly as a calm surrogate. By keeping a cool voice, Orbán presents himself as a reasonable alternative for people reluctant to express overly alarmist views.

Orbán also uses the modesty topos, gently juggling assertiveness with humility. "*We are as big as big we are, and the Germans and the French are so big that they can solve a problem*," he says, appreciating Hungary's relative scale to great nations like Germany and France. This strategy positions Hungary as a decisive EU decision-maker while underlining its constraints. Though ultimate duty rests with more prominent countries, Orbán effectively increases Hungary's role as a significant contributor to tackling EU problems by combining modesty with a proactive posture.

In his speech, Orbán strongly urges Hungary to drive change within the EU, declaring, "*the European Union must change. Moreover, we want to be the catalyst for that change through the work of our Presidency*." He casts the Hungarian government as an active force tackling Europe's challenges, portraying Hungary's presidency as crucial for reform amid mounting political and economic instability. His pragmatic approach positions Hungary as a constructive participant in EU decision-making, noting, "*we can raise problems, we can make proposals, and in the end it will be up to the European institutions and the big states to decide*."

Orbán presents a causative argument that "*illegal migration in Europe has led to the strengthening of antisemitism, increased violence against women, and the growth of homophobia*," thereby connecting the EU's lax migration policy with broader societal issues. By associating these specific social concerns with uncontrolled migration, he frames migration governance as a matter that extends beyond politics or security, highlighting the importance of stricter migration control as essential to the well-being of society.

Orbán underscores Serbia's critical role in EU enlargement by declaring, "*without Serbia, no enlargement will be successful*," framing Serbia as essential for Western Balkan stability. By positioning Serbia as central to Europe's future, he argues that its integration is crucial for regional and EU-wide stability. From an average accession candidate, this presentation

transforms Serbia into a pillar of the expansion effort. Using forceful language, he supports his position by saying that *“whoever believes it is possible” “is chasing illusions,”* therefore underlining his belief that Serbia’s participation is essential to reach the strategic goals of the EU.

Inspired by the euro summits of the eurozone, Orbán’s idea for regular Schengen summits emphasises his support of multilateral migration and border management. Declaring that *“just like the countries in the euro area, the leaders of the Schengen area countries should also meet regularly,”* he conforms to his suggestion with accepted EU policies, underlining its practicality and immediacy. This call underlines the need for coordinated EU action to protect the Schengen system from fragmentation, establishing Hungary as a major leader in promoting required reforms all over Europe.

### **Strategic Rhetoric in Action and Viktor Orbán’s Leadership**

The speech delivered on October 9, 2024 (Orbán 2024b) shows a startling change in tone compared to the more pragmatic and politically driven language used on October 8, 2024. Orbán presents himself as a leader alerting Europe of an approaching catastrophe by speaking to the European Parliament with a more aggressive and urgent tone. He accomplishes this using analogies like *“to sound the alarm”* and calling to action aimed at every European resident, not only those seated in the audience. Using this rhetorical device helps to draw attention to the European crisis under progress.

Apart from the allegory of the alarm, Orbán intensifies the urgency by personifying Europe as a vulnerable organism in need of direction and protection. This personification pulls the audience into a story of existential threat that turns the debate from pragmatic politics to an emotional call for action to stop Europe’s death. Such rhetorical tactics point to a change from the technical, action-oriented speech on October 8 to the more passionate, forceful tone of the speech meant to inspire support for Orbán’s vision of European reform.

Enumeration is a rhetorical device used to highlight Hungary’s preparedness and degree of success during its EU presidency. Orbán presents Hungary as a competent and powerful EU leader using particular numbers such as *“585 Council working group meetings,” “24 ambassadorial meetings,”* and *“8 formal and 12 informal meetings.”* This enumeration operates on two levels; it highlights Hungary’s endeavours and accomplishments, dispelling any notion of passivity or inefficiency while symbolically emphasising Hungary’s leadership, supported by concrete outcomes. The extensive compilation of accomplishments illustrates a sense of organisation and authority,

establishing Hungary as a paradigm of operational readiness and efficacy while implicitly comparing it with EU institutions that may seem less efficient.

The use of metonymy constitutes an essential rhetorical device, mainly when referring to European institutions such as the “*Council*”, “*European Parliament*”, and “*Commission*.” Orbán positions Hungary as more than a mere participant in this system, portraying the country as a mediator and defender of institutional sovereignty. By safeguarding institutional sovereignty, Hungary ensures that the balance of power between the EU institutions is maintained and prevents any of the institutions from overstepping their powers. This role strengthens the stability and effectiveness of European governance, while Hungary actively contributes to protecting the EU’s fundamental principles. For example, when Orbán says that “*the Hungarian presidency will defend the Council’s treaty-based rights*”, he does not only deal with procedural or administrative details. Instead, he is symbolically defending the sovereignty of the Council, thereby underlining Hungary’s commitment to preserving the autonomy and authority of the EU institutions.

Hungary’s stance is further reinforced by Orbán’s speech on Europe’s economic challenges, as he stresses the urgency of tackling the energy crisis and its impact on European competitiveness. To underline the seriousness of the problem, he cites specific figures in which European businesses pay “*electricity prices two to three times higher than in the United States*” and gas prices “*four to five times higher*.” By underscoring the critical need for solutions to guarantee Europe’s economic stability, the amplification changes the conversation on energy policy from an abstract concept to a concrete and urgent call for reform.

The migration debate in Orbán’s speech also draws on metaphor and personification to frame migration as a significant and persistent threat to Europe. He describes migration as a pressure that “*has burdened Europe for years*,” transforming it into a tangible force weighing on the continent. This personification of migration as a burden evokes an emotional response, heightens the sense of urgency and frames migration as an existential threat to Europe’s security and stability. This metaphor evokes the story of a Europe under siege, which requires immediate and decisive action to protect its borders and preserve its integrity.

In addition to metaphorically framing migration as a burden, Orbán contrasts past policy failures with his proposed solution of external migration hotspots. He reflects on the ineffectiveness of previous initiatives, stating, “*I have seen many initiatives, all of which have proven unsuccessful*”, and juxtaposes this with his assertion that only external hotspots can effectively manage migration flows. This juxtaposition of failed solutions and Orbán’s



proposed remedy positions his approach as the only viable solution, reinforcing the narrative that Hungary is leading the way in addressing Europe's migration challenges.

The speech also invokes moral and ethical ideals, particularly in his discussion of Europe as the "*community of free and equal nations*". This personification elevates Europe from a mere political entity to an aspirational ideal, imbuing Hungary's role in the EU with a sense of moral responsibility. Orbán's vision of Europe as "*God-fearing and dignity-protecting*" further personifies the continent as a defender of higher moral values, aligning Hungary's leadership with these ethical principles.

In his closing appeal, Orbán invokes the metaphor of Europe as the "*homeland of homelands*" and the "*democracy of democracies*", framing Europe not merely as a political union but as the embodiment of democratic governance and moral integrity. This idealistic language transforms Europe into a symbol of collective ideals, with Hungary positioned as a critical player in achieving this vision. The rallying call to "*make Europe great again*" is an emotive and direct call to action, positioning Hungary's presidency as central to Europe's future success.

## **Conclusion**

The way Viktor Orbán leads the Hungarian EU presidency in 2024 shows how national objectives are strategically linked to the European agenda. With an emphasis on sovereignty, his approach supports Hungary's right to retain control over important policy areas, including immigration and energy. Orbán affirms Hungary's desire to preserve national autonomy by using legal mechanisms and resisting EU centralisation, thus supporting the Union's shared objectives. His administration emphasises a careful balance between national sovereignty and collective European action, a balance that has gained importance in an increasingly complicated global arena.

The position adopted on energy policy and migration reform reveals Orbán's capacity to negotiate divisive problems inside the EU. His demand for a flexible approach to EU solidarity reflects his larger objective of safeguarding national interests and supporting European stability, particularly in migration policy. This complex strategy enables Hungary to advocate for its solutions, such as outside hotspots to manage migration, while opposing forced policies to compromise national prerogatives of choice. Its discourse constantly highlights Hungary's major influence in establishing more pragmatic and environmentally friendly EU policies.

The rhetorical devices, such as metonymy, amplification and historical framing, reveal a deliberate effort to position Hungary as a critical factor in the EU's governance. By invoking the authority of European institutions and drawing on Hungary's past experience, Orbán builds credibility and trust, portraying Hungary as a capable and important actor in addressing the pressing challenges Europe is currently facing. His rhetoric underlines Hungary's key role in safeguarding institutional sovereignty and leading the debate on the future of European governance, especially in areas such as security and competitiveness.

Hungary is demonstrating during Orbán's presidency that it is a vibrant member of the EU, preserving national sovereignty and fervently supporting the choices taken by the political community of Europe. His leadership shows a more inclination for member states to exercise their autonomy inside a unified EU framework, transforming the Union's governance. As Orbán's emphasis on sovereignty, security, and pragmatic transformation will probably shape European governance in the future, Hungary's presidency in 2024 becomes a crucial topic in the continuous discussion on the future course of the EU.

### Corpus Resources:

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