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Recharging Europe: the Hungarian Presidency of the Visegrad Group

“Renew Europe” is the slogan of the Hungarian V4 presidency, which started on July 1, 2021. It will last until June 30, 2022. The activities of the Hungarian presidency are to be based on three pillars: stability, reopening, and cooperation.

Previous presidency 2017-2018. The last time Hungary held the presidency was from July 1, 2017 to June 30, 2018. Hungarian diplomacy prided itself on the total of over 220 meetings organized at various levels in the twelve months of the previous presidency, from heads of state to prime ministers, speakers of parliaments, and other experts. When in June 2017 at the Royal Castle in Warsaw Viktor Orbán was taking over the presidency from Beata Szydło, the then prime minister of the Republic of Poland, he declared that “the future of Europe lies in the Visegrad Group”, and the head of diplomacy, Péter Szijjártó, indicated that “The Visegrad Group has become a global brand”.

The presidency’s priorities in 2017-2018 were based on four slogans corresponding to areas of strengthening cooperation: European Visegrad, regional Visegrad, digital Visegrad and global Visegrad. These slogans were: strengthening regional cooperation, infrastructure investment, increasing competitiveness through the use of new technologies (based, among others, on 5G technology), as well as increasing the importance of the V4 countries in the international field. The Hungarian presidency was held in an election year as the elections to the Hungarian National Assembly took place in April 2018. The same will happen during the current presidency. The then presidency culminated in the development of the V4 common position on the migration crisis, which was then presented at the European Council summit in Sofia (June 27-28, 2018). This indicated the rejection of any model aimed at allowing a mechanism for the relocation of migrants. The joint arrangements also concerned the new budget perspective, the cohesion fund, and the agricultural policy.

The Hungarian presidency of 2017-2018 was interesting because for the first time it clearly showed that it is possible to tighten cooperation in clearly defined areas, focusing on achieving tangible results, while not taking up threads on which Visegrad partners hold different positions.

Challenges 2021-2022. Hungary’s current presidency will be based on three pillars. The first is stability, i.e., the coordination of the common positions of the V4 states within the European Union (consultations before the summits of the Council of Europe are a permanent forum). We are talking about such fields of cooperation as, inter alia, debate on the future of Europe, the Multiannual Financial Framework, the Next Generation EU fund, the cohesion fund, and security. The latter includes the reform of both the EU’s migration policy (New Pact on Migration and Asylum) and the Schengen system. An important component will also be cooperation in the military arena, mainly in the preparation of the Visegrad Battlegroup to take on combat duty as part of the European Battle Group in the first half of 2023. The V4 countries are to strive to strengthen the position of national parliaments, depart from the vision of the “united states” of Europe, and the return of the EU institutions to competences clearly defined in the Treaties. At this point, it should be noted that these goals are consistent with those proposed by the Fidesz-KDNP coalition during the 2019 election campaign to the European Parliament.

The second pillar is reopening in the economic and social sphere. This is to stimulate this part of Europe to act after the slowdown caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus pandemic. In this regard, the cooperation of the V4 countries is to involve joint actions to counter tax fraud, building further investment attractiveness of the region, including by opposing any tax increases (including some global taxes). The Visegrad countries are to cooperate within the framework of the European Green Deal, as well as the recently adopted Fit for 55 strategy. The common goal of coordinating the V4 positions is to recognize nuclear energy as a non-emission source of energy, and to bring about solutions that will prevent the costs of energy transformation from being shifted to poorer EU countries (and thus to consumers). It is also an extremely important issue from the Hungarian perspective due to the importance of the expansion of the nuclear power plant in Paks. Interestingly, a joint working group in the field of hydrogen energy

is to be established under the Hungarian presidency, the aim of which will be, inter alia, monitoring of EU hydrogen projects.

The third pillar of the Hungarian presidency will be partnership aimed at strengthening the global importance of the international project that is the Visegrad Group. This goal is to be achieved through a series of meetings in the V4 + format. International cooperation of the Visegrad Group is usually the most important area of the Hungarian presidency, as was the case in 2017-2018.

During the Hungarian presidency, the Visegrad countries are to tighten cooperation with two EU countries that will hold the presidency of the Council of the European Union during the same period: Slovenia (July 1, 2021 to December 31, 2021) and France (January 1, 2022 to June 30, 2022). At least seven meetings (at various levels of representation) are to involve Germany, the most important economic partner of the V4 countries. Five meetings have been planned with representatives of United Kingdom, with which the V4 should build a strong dialogue in the new conditions of cooperation – i.e., already outside the EU structures.

Traditionally, Hungary places a strong emphasis on the meetings of the V4 + Western Balkans (which is also a continuation of the assumptions of the Polish presidency). There are seven gatherings planned here at different levels of representation. Meetings with non-European countries were also planned, namely: V4 + Morocco, V4 + Central Asian countries (at the level of foreign ministers), V4 + Republic of Korea (four meetings), V4 + Japan (also four meetings), and V4 + Israel (also four meetings).

The presidency program stated that “the Hungarian presidency will continue the dialogue with other global partners such as Turkey, China, Jordan, Lebanon, and Brazil”. This dialogue was planned at the level of the political directors of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Conclusions. The goals of the Hungarian presidency are ambitious, and the formulated program goes beyond the framework of the region of the Visegrad countries. The component related to the summits in the “V4 +” format with non-EU countries, especially China, will be particularly important. Hungary is the only country that does not consider the expansion policy of the People’s Republic of China in the region as a threat, moreover, the importance of China in Hungary (with the participation of the Hungarian authorities) is still growing, which may raise doubts (for example in the field of possible infiltration of Central Europe by the Chinese authorities).

The very slogan of the presidency is interesting, which can be translated in various ways, not only as “let’s renew Europe,” but also, for example, as “let’s recharge Europe.” The form of this leitmotif is somewhat reminiscent of a political manifesto and seems to be part of the ongoing discussion on the creation of a new political group in the European Parliament, supported by Viktor Orbán. Many provisions from the Hungarian presidency’s program are identical to the political declaration of this political project.

There is no doubt that whether the Hungarian presidency program will be successful depends on two factors – on the one hand, the course of a possible fourth wave of coronavirus, and on the other, the results of the parliamentary elections in Hungary, which should take place in April 2022 – hence the largest number of meetings is scheduled in the period up to April 2022. At the same time, Viktor Orbán will certainly want to use the presidency of the Visegrad Group in the election campaign, showing that Hungary is one of the most important, if not the most important, country in the region.