

Hungary must seize the historic opportunity before it



By Edit Herczog MEP

Is it destined to succeed or fail? Based on public statements, defined priorities, statistics on administrative preparedness, the domestic and foreign political climate – especially the global economic trends – it would be too early today to even form a prognosis on how the international public opinion is going to evaluate the upcoming Hungarian Presidency of the European Council in the middle of 2011, and also, how we Hungarians are going to look back on these six months. In this article I am going to argue that if the government works alongside a clearly defined strategy, and the strictly scheduled implementation is coupled with careful diplomacy, then there is a good chance that the entire Central-Eastern European region is going to benefit from the Hungarian presidency. However, to achieve this, the Hungarian government will require not only a deep understanding of the European integration logic, and a joint strategy, but also, a willingness for consensus within the Hungarian political arena.

It is becoming more and more obvious to the general public that the Hungarian presidency will not only have a positive impact on the economy (for example, the preparation of the 2014-2020 budget is going to take place during this period), but it also might strengthen the political image of Hungary for many years to come, and thus might lead to a more stable position during EU negotiations. So, what are the opportunities for the region and the European economic recovery for the Hungarian Presidency?

Central-Eastern Europe can contribute to combating the European economic crisis and thus benefit from the actions aimed at emerging from the crisis, if it realises as soon as possible that EU membership is an advantage, rather than a disadvantage. It is not only about the joint spending of 1% of Europe's GDP – this is just the icing on the cake – the cake itself is the European internal market, and we can be a part of it.

As a politician in the field of energy, I welcome the fact that energy security plays an important role among the presidential priorities, and that Hungary is planning to increase the Central-European cohesion and cooperation in the field of joint energy infrastructure, even though the steps taken towards these objectives may still be immature and delayed. From this aspect it is of great importance that Budapest started negotiations with Warsaw in time, since Poland is going to continue the work started by Hungary in the second half of 2011. However, in my opinion, in order to pacify the European public, it would be better to discuss concrete plans and steps, based on a joint Central-Eastern European strategy.

The issue of the impending extension of the Schengen area, the acceleration of the West-Balkan accession cannot

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be avoided, since these are going to take place during the Hungarian Presidency. The accession of Romania and Bulgaria to the Schengen area could strengthen the common interests and joint approach of the CEE countries.

It is also important that the government is committed to the review of the European Roma strategy. As a result of the contradictory events in France, Roma integration came once again into the spotlight; if there is success in accelerating this issue, it might give a strong character to the Hungarian presidency. A balanced European growth is impossible without the elimination of the social exclusion of millions of European citizens. Politically, it would be of great benefit if the first steps were taken during the presidency of a CEE country. From this aspect, it would already be a step ahead, if the Council applied the content of the Parliament's resolution of March 2010.

An even more important question is, whether Hungary will be able – in this relatively short period of time – to start processes that utilise global changes to generate European growth. There is a revolution in production. Global economy today is all about achieving the cheapest and most reliable energy supply, and producing goods with modern, innovative methods. Therefore, economic governance has to create a balance between competition and cooperation that serves a globally competitive European economy. What is clear today is that the future economy uses low carbon technologies, and is digital and mobile. Hungary has to work hard during its presidency to impress this upon its strategic partners, the other CEE countries lagging behind in this field, since this is their only chance to contribute to Europe's growth, and realise their full potentials. Otherwise, in spite of all the benefits provided by legislation, the idea of a one-speed Europe will remain a dream.