

# Bringing added value

**Zita Gurmai** believes the upcoming Hungarian and Polish presidencies will arrive at just the right time for the EU's central and eastern European countries

It's going to be an interesting year for the EU, and most certainly for Hungary, as it looks to close the work of the Spanish-Belgian-Hungarian EU council presidency trio over the first half of 2011. It is expected to be an intense six month period. The Hungarian presidency considers regional cooperation with and among the central, east and south-east European countries as a strategic issue for the EU. We believe that our central European presidency will bring added value to the common policies affecting the area. Therefore, Hungary intends to work actively on the promotion of four key initiatives for the region.

The first is the issue of enlargement. It is highly possible that Croatia will close its negotiations during the Hungarian presidency and will sign the accession treaty shortly afterwards. Hungary is deeply committed to Croatia's accession and we will work closely with our partners so the country can integrate into our community smoothly. Meanwhile, Serbia is also expected to finish completing the country's accession questionnaire during the first half of 2011. Hungary will pay special attention to these enlargements, as we believe that the EU is the main guarantor of peace, stability, and prosperity in the region.

The second key issue for the central and eastern European region is Roma integration. During its presidency, Hungary intends to come up with a comprehensive and complex Roma integration plan. It will be a crucial programme, not only for central and eastern Europe, but also for western Europe. As a socialist MEP, I can only hope that the Hungarian right-wing government will come up with a real, plausible and effective plan. My doubts however stem from the fact that the Hungarian government has not shown itself a champion of human rights on the domestic scale.

The third issue for the region is neighbourhood policy, particularly the eastern partnership framework. The government intends to work on the realisation of the concrete projects of the eastern partnership. Many of these projects will be bilateral, such as visa agreements and free trade agreements. One of the most important political events of the presidency will be the eastern partnership summit.

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The last key issue for the region to tackle is the Danube strategy. It is the single most important macro-regional strategy for central and eastern Europe, which involves energy policy, infrastructure policy, economic development, tourism, the environment and other crucial issues. The greatest challenge for the Hungarian government is to overcome the biggest difficulty of the Danube strategy: it is not supposed to have a separate budget or a separate infrastructural framework, nor is it supposed to create new legislation. Hence, the Danube strategy is a political project that the Hungarian government will have to pilot very carefully, for the benefit of the whole region.

Six years after the reunification of Europe, often central and eastern Europe still seems to be forgotten in EU discourse and in debates. What's more, the current crisis isn't an ideal environment for regional development policies and common thinking. The future of the EU lies in the preservation of regional identities and at the same time in the promotion of better cooperation in crucial matters. Hopefully, Hungary can propose a valuable vision that can be carried on by the following Polish presidency. It is my belief, therefore, that the year 2011 will be of significant importance for the region. ★