

POLICY PROPOSAL - 2021 No.8

HOW DO WE ACHIEVE CLIMATE NEUTRALITY?

The recommendations of the Equilibrium
Institute on Hungary's new climate targets
for 2030

Future for Hungary ▶▶

— Equilibrium Institute

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

01

One of the most important goals of the European Union – and thus of Hungary as an EU Member State – is to achieve full climate neutrality by 2050. In 2020, the Hungarian National Assembly adopted the Act on Climate Protection. This law sets the goal that by 2030 Hungary will reduce its emissions by 40% as compared to the 1990 level, and that by 2050 it will attain full climate neutrality.

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However, the way this commitment is structured implies that too large a slice of the total emissions reduction will be left to the period after 2030. In other words, all the efforts spared up to that point will have to be made up for by an increased pace in the efforts thereafter, with a concomitantly increased cost to society. Furthermore, such slow progress would also prevent us from attaining a strong position ahead of others in the new climate-neutral global economic system of the future. That is why Hungary needs new and stricter, but at the same time also realistic, climate targets for 2030. In addition to distributing the burdens of attaining full climate neutrality until 2050 more equally over time, this new set of targets should also make it possible to comply with the increasingly strict EU targets.

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Our emissions reduction trajectory over the next three decades could take either of the following three forms: 1) nose-heavy (a greater portion of the efforts fall into the first half of the next three decades); 2. steady (we reduce our emissions at an even rate over the next thirty years); 3) bottom-heavy (for the time being, the vast majority of emissions reduction is slated to take place after 2030). Our current trajectory clearly falls into the third category.

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The new Hungarian climate targets need to be both more ambitious and more realistic. We recommend three new alternative climate targets for Hungary to achieve by 2030: 1. a minimum target (a net of minus 45% by 2030); 2. a steady progress target (a net of minus 55% by 2030); and an 3. ambitious target (a net of minus 60% by 2030).

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The main problem with the minimum objective is that it puts too great a burden on the post-2030 period. While the steady and ambitious trajectories, respectively, would both imply outperforming our current commitments to the EU, they would at the



same time also distribute the burdens over the next three decades more equally and thus serve Hungarian interests more effectively as compared to a bottom-heavy trajectory. The choice between these three potential trajectories is not merely an issue for experts to decide – it is also a political choice: in addition to technological possibilities, the route ultimately chosen also depends to a significant extent on whether it is possible to line up the necessary social support behind more daring emissions reduction commitments.

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The most urgent tasks confront us in the building sector, which is responsible for a third of Hungarian emissions. Several decades of immense new investments will be needed here. Most of these investments need to go into the renovation of the existing building stock, since the vast majority of buildings that stand today will continue to be around in 2050. It is also advisable to distribute the emissions reductions over time more evenly because of the finite capacities in the construction industry. That is why when it comes to buildings, a nose-heavy trajectory is definitely called for: it is worth starting the renovation of the building stock as early as possible and with the greatest momentum attainable.

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We will also need far more renewable energy sources in the transportation, housing, and energy sectors. We cannot afford to continue to forgo the opportunities inherent in wind energy. With respect to carbon capturing, the most pressing issue is to start expanding forests again and to increase the pace of reforestation.

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Whichever trajectory we choose, the Hungarian climate law will only be capable of achieving the targets it commits to if the more daring undertakings are accompanied by some safeguards, to wit: 1. a carbon budget; 2. a detailed strategy for the realisation of the targets set for 2030; 3. a legally established annual reporting and evaluation cycle, as well as an action plan for managing potential lags in the implementation; 4. a climate council made up of independent experts, which would enjoy a public law status and the commensurate authorities to evaluate the progress made, draft projections, organise social dialogue and issue new climate protection proposals; 5. a definitive emissions target for 2040; 6. the development of an effective and real system of social consultation and the reconciliation of interests.

1. WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?

Hungary is also a party to one of the most important efforts facing the European Union and the world, namely the common climate struggle. The **most important long-term objective of the European Union in this area is to attain climate neutrality by 2050.**

It is with this in mind that the Hungarian National Assembly adopted the **Act on Climate Protection** on 3 June 2020, which posits that:

01 “Hungary will achieve full climate neutrality by 2050.”

02 “By 2030, Hungary will reduce its emission of greenhouse gasses by at least 40% as compared to the 1990 level.”

For one, this undertaking is not sufficiently ambitious. Second, it does not provide for the actual realisation of Hungarian climate objectives. Based on our current undertakings, if we wish to attain full climate neutrality by 2050 we would leave **far too great a portion of the necessary reductions until after 2030.** Furthermore, we will also be unable to comply with the stricter EU requirements anticipated in the near future. This would relegate us into a disadvantageous position for two reasons.

1. An objective that is not sufficiently ambitious in the near future will leave us with a disproportionate burden in the two decades after 2030. In other words, we will have to make up for the efforts we have spared ourselves today by locking ourselves into a high-speed pace in the future, with even greater sacrifices.

2. Slowness implies wasted opportunities: decarbonisation and the transition to a green economy are predicated on a fundamental economic/technological turn, the scope of which can only be compared to the industrial and the digital revolutions. **The winners of this process will be those who attain strong positions in the greener future before others do** – those, by contrast, who are settling to follow the trend will be inevitably left behind and may find themselves among the losers of the process.

That is why in the medium and long-run it is in Hungary’s fundamental self-interest to increase the pace of its own transition, in terms of both, making sure that the burdens are distributed more proportionally over time and increasing the country’s long-term competitiveness. In the following, we will formulate proposals for **the principles and methods whereby we can establish new, stricter and at the same more realistic climate goals for 2030.**

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2. WHAT SHOULD THE NEW HUNGARIAN CLIMATE TARGETS BE FOR 2030?

The **current climate goal for 2030** – in other words a gross¹ 40% reduction in emissions is **insufficient** because:

already in 2019 the goal was set at a level of minus gross 32% and a net of 36%, and what's more, the impending shutdown of the Máttra Power Plant, which is responsible for 6.5% of domestic emissions, will in itself go a long way towards realising this goal.

it will contribute too little to achieving Hungarian climate neutrality by 2050, and as a result it foreshadows a severely disproportionate distribution of the economic and social burdens that stem from this transition. If we only plan to achieve minus 40% by 2030, then in the decade ahead we only need to reduce our emissions by an average of 0.5% per year, while in the two decades after 2030 the pace of reduction needs to surge to almost 5% annually.

in the absence of a proper institutional system and control mechanisms, the climate law does not proffer robust safeguards for either, a proper implementation of the targets or their monitoring and evaluation.

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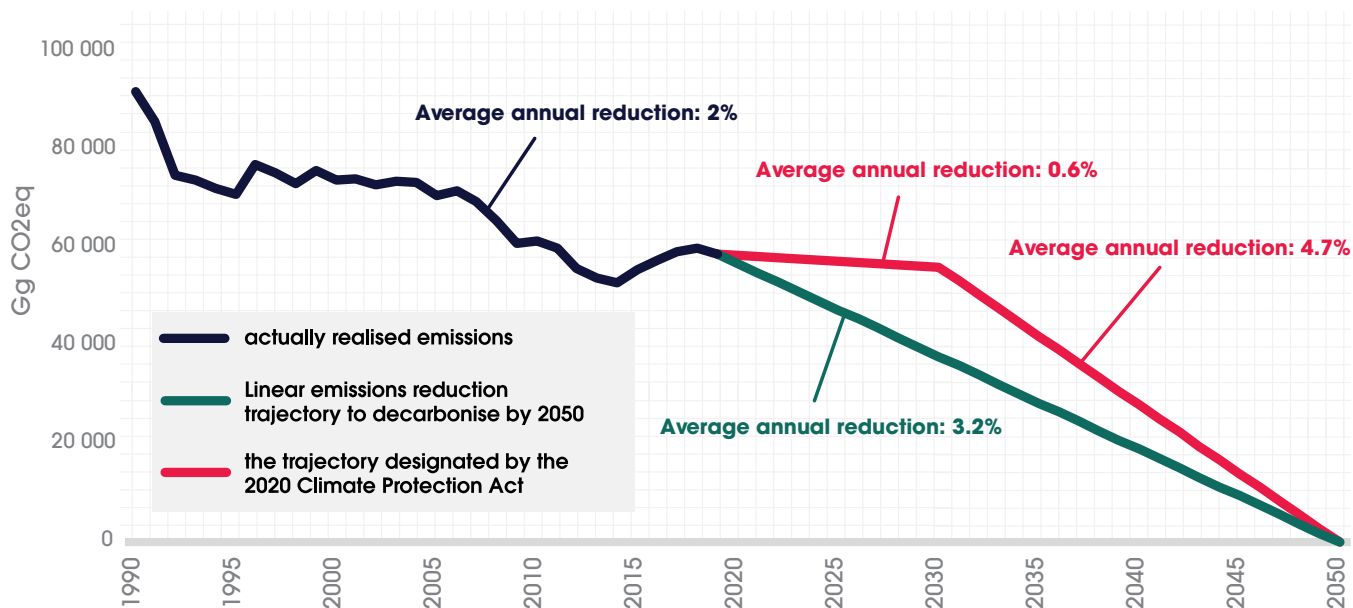


Chart 1: The emissions reduction trajectory set out in the National Climate Target adopted in 2020 (Gg CO₂eq)

¹ In climate policy, we talk about “net” targets, when the greenhouse gases absorbed by sinks (forests/fields) are included in the target (i.e. subtracted from total emissions), and “gross” targets, when only the amount of greenhouse gases emitted is taken into account. Unless specifically stated, national targets are always expressed in net terms.

If we leave too much to be done until after 2030, then the need for a rapid pace thereafter, along with the corollary radical changes – **practically the transition to a “climate war economy”** – would impose a massive cost on society and could simultaneously threaten the realisation of both, **climate neutrality and political stability.**

Our emissions reduction trajectory over the next three decades can be either of the following:

01 NOSE-HEAVY

(a greater share of the efforts needed over the next three decades will be exerted during the first half of the period in question)



02 STEADY

(we will reduce our emissions at a steady rate over the next three decades)



03 BOTTOM-HEAVY

(the vast majority of the reduction in emissions will take place in the period after 2030).

Although our current trajectory falls into the third category, the new Hungarian climate targets should actually be simultaneously more ambitious and more realistic. In planning, it is also worth considering that the optimal trajectory may differ between sectors, depending on the technological possibilities and the baseline situation in the given sector. **The most important goal is to ensure that we do not place an unbearable burden on Hungary after 2030 in order to maximise our comfort today.**

The new emissions reduction trajectory depends on three factors:

01 Political will

02 Technological prospects

03 The evolution of the economic situation and conditions in Hungary

It is impossible to predict how the political will is going to shape up, **but the guiding principle should be an effort to secure the broadest consensus conceivable:** A key precondition for ensuring that the burdens of transition can be borne by society is that the fundamental goals of the climate struggle are not subject to everyday partisan bickering.

3. THE EQUILIBRIUM INSTITUTE'S RECCOMENDATIONS ON THE NEW HUNGARIAN CLIMATE TARGETS FOR 2030

Setting the targets for 2030 is fundamentally a political question. It primarily depends on the political support for launching a rigorous reduction in our emissions rather than delaying more decisive action until later.

At the same time, however, a political decision also involves strategic calculations, as well as an assessment of the mid to long-term economic costs and the trends in the energy sector.

I 3.1. BY 2030 INSTEAD OF 40% WE NEED A NEW EMISSIONS REDUCTION TARGET BETWEEN -45% AND -60%

For a safer emissions reduction trajectory and a more balanced distribution of the burdens over time, we need to select the new climate target from one of three distinct scenarios that differ in terms of their ambition:

although it is still somewhat slower than a completely even trajectory, in other words it is slightly bottom-heavy. Nevertheless, from a political communications perspective, this seems to be the most favourable since the European Union has also adopted the 55% target.

01 MINIMUM TARGET

Minimum target (net minus 45% by 2030): this trajectory would still leave us with too much of a burden on the post-2030 period, but as compared to the current 40% it would reduce the pressure on the next generations with relatively little investment today.

03 AMBITIOUS TARGET

Ambitious target (net minus 60% by 2030): this plan is far more ambitious, and it would make the emissions reduction trajectory nose-heavy, albeit only slightly so. From a political perspective, it is riskier, but in terms of achieving climate neutrality and the balanced distribution of the burdens over time, it is the most desirable target.

02 STEADY TARGET

Steady target (net minus 55% by 2030): this trajectory is closer to an even distribution of reductions over time,

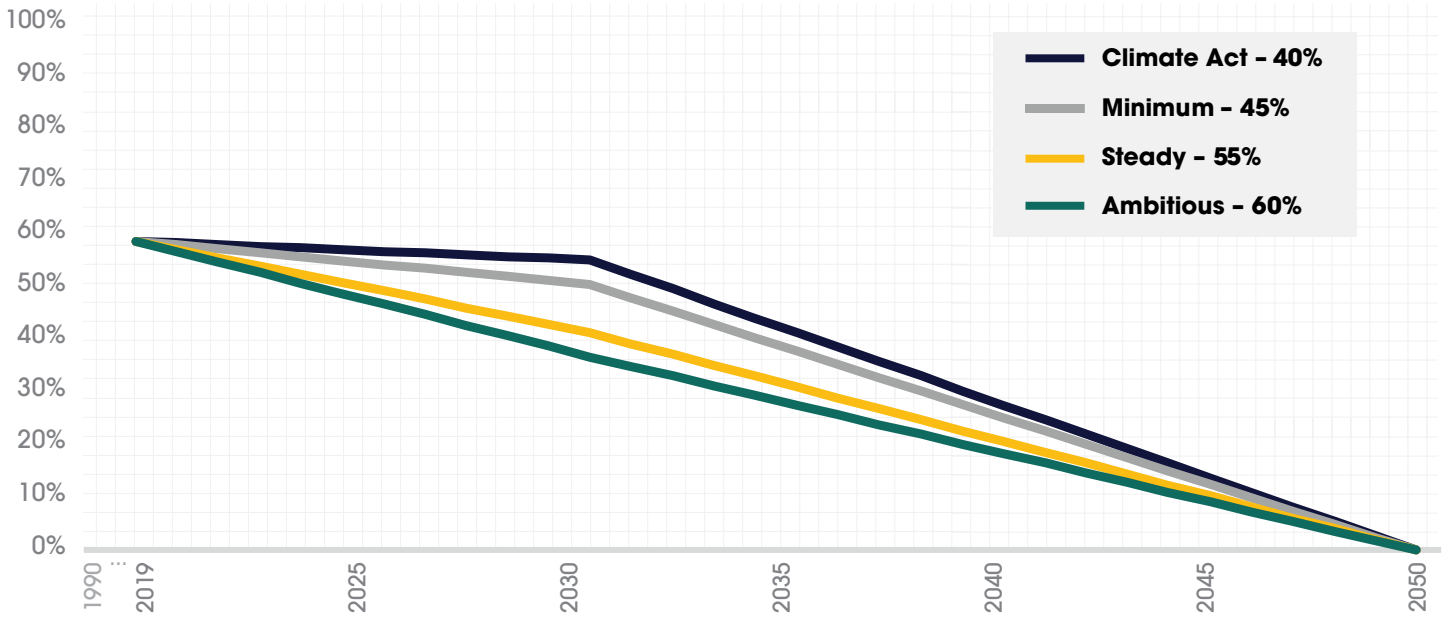


Chart 2: Potential emissions reduction trajectories until 2030 (million t CO₂eq)

3.2. 5+1 AREAS OF INTERVENTION

There are 5+1 areas where we can accelerate the pace of emissions reductions: in energy production, the building sector, transportation, waste management, agriculture, and increased carbon-dioxide capturing capacities.

▶ **BY 2030 WE SHOULD INCREASE HUNGARIAN WIND POWER CAPACITY FROM 3.5 TO 100 KILOWATTS/KM²!**

Unlike solar energy, wind power is not a subsidised form of energy production in Hungary today. In fact, the safety distance regulations that apply to new wind power plants are so prohibitive that they practically make it impossible to build new power plants. It is hence no accident that while wind power capacity per square kilometre stands at 150kW in Germany, for example, in Hungary the corresponding figure is a mere 3.5kW.

By 2030, we have to increase our wind power plant capacity to 100 kW/km²! In total, this would yield a roughly 10,000MW capacity – still far below the German level, but well in excess of the 6500 kW/km² of solar energy anticipated at that point.

▶ **LET'S PERFORM THE DEEP RENOVATION OF OVER 100,000 FLATS EACH YEAR!**

In terms of reducing emissions, the housing sector is one of the areas where the need for intervention is most pressing. Because of the vast number of buildings that need such renovation, we need to hurry if we wish to make all of them carbon neutral by 2050: By 2030 we expect that there will be a total of 3.5 million flats in Hungary, the overwhelming majority of which already exist today – these need to be renovated by 2050.

Improving the energy efficiency of buildings and developing their capacity to produce renewable energy would not only reduce emissions in the building sector narrowly understood but would also do the same in energy production.

“In terms of reducing emissions, the housing sector is one of the areas where the need for intervention is most pressing.”



Today, a mere 1% of the total building stock is being renovated, but an even greater problem is that hardly any of them undergo deep renovation, that is the type of investments that render a building completely or almost completely devoid of carbon-dioxide emissions.

To achieve carbon neutrality by 2050, we need to perform the deep renovation of over 100,000 flats each year as compared to the annually 4,000-5,000 that undergo this process today.

▶ BY 2030, 30% OF THE EXISTING BUILDING STOCK NEEDS TO UNDERGO DEEP RENOVATION!

The Long-Term Renovation Strategy adopted in 2021 envisions a bottom-heavy trajectory, with the pace of deep renovations increasing to 3% annually only by 2030.

An annual target of 100,000, by contrast, would imply that the target value for the share of all flats that will undergo deep renovation by 2030 would have to be increased to at least 30%.

▶ LET'S SUPPORT THE INTRODUCTION OF A FAIR CARBON TAX IN THE EU!

If we want to sufficiently reduce emissions from transportation by 2030 to meet our target values, then incentivising the electric transition in transportation will not be enough on its own. We also need measures that reduce the volume of motor vehicle traffic.

One of the most evident tools for incentivising the use of alternatives (cars with lower fuel consumption, mass transportation or bicycles) to high-emissions transportation solutions is the introduction of a carbon tax, which is subject to a growing political consensus.

Hungary, too, needs to support the introduction of a carbon tax within the EU. That is how the urban air pollution which causes the death of some 13,000 Hungarians each year could be substantially reduced, even as some estimates suggest that a carbon tax could yield as much as 1,000bn forints in additional tax revenue each year.

At the same time, however, a climate tax can only be acceptable and sustainable if the poorer segments of society, who tend to use outdated and often high-consumption automobiles, do not end up being the main losers in financial terms. That is why the Hungarian state must provide for proper compensation or targeted social policy interventions to ensure that the price of this transition is not borne by the poor.

“A climate tax can only be acceptable and sustainable if the poorer segments of society, who tend to use outdated and often high-consumption automobiles, do not end up being the main losers in financial terms.”

▶ LET'S REDUCE EMISSIONS FROM TRAFFIC BY COUNTER-INCENTIVISING INNER CITY AUTOMOBILE USE AND PARKING!

Another instrument for scaling back the use of automobiles where they are not strictly necessary is the introduction of restrictions in the most polluted geographic areas, primarily the residential areas of large cities.

Similarly to major cities in Western Europe, we need to designate “clean zones” in Hungary, in other words protected areas in the inner city where the most-polluting cars can either not enter at all or may do so only in return for the payment of high fees!

Let's introduce a system of parking fees that sets different prices based on sustainability considerations! The accepted method in several major European cities (such as for example Madrid and London) is to ask lighter, smaller, and less-polluting cars to pay less for parking than their large and/or more-polluting counterparts.

▶ **LET'S INCREASE THE RECYCLING RATE IN MUNICIPAL WASTE TREATMENT TO 55% BY 2030!**

The treatment of solid waste is responsible for the largest share of emissions stemming from waste management. Fortunately, however, we have registered a 17% drop in emissions in this sector as compared to the corresponding value in 2009, which primarily owes to improvements in waste management: less waste is being deposited, while as a result of the separate collection of green waste and paper, the share of organic waste, too, has been reduced.

In the area of waste management, we could further reduce the emissions in this sector by complying with the EU's waste management targets. The most important among these is **the 55% reuse and recycling rate for municipal waste**, as well as the separate collection of bio-waste starting in 2024.

▶ **LET'S GET RID OF THE STATE SUBSIDIES FOR RAISING BEEF CATTLE!**

Emissions from agriculture have increased by 30% since 2009. The increase owes primarily to the surge in the use of artificial fertilisers and the proliferation of beef cattle. Although agriculture is generally regarded as one of the sectors that will be more difficult to decarbonise – and one where the real breakthroughs are expected after 2030 – **we already have the option of substantially reducing emissions in this decade.**

Above all, **we need to abolish state subsidies for raising beef cattle**, which will help halt the significant increase in ammonia emissions that have been registered over the last years concomitantly with the growth in the size of the beef cattle stock.

▶ **LET'S ADOPT STRICTER RULES CONCERNING THE USE OF ARTIFICIAL FERTILISERS!**

EU projections show that various measures concerning the uses of fertilisers – such as increasing efficiency or mandating high organic fertilisers quotas – can reduce the

use of artificial fertilisers by 20% by 2030.

Correspondingly, **in Hungary, too, we need to incentivise the reduction in emissions by adopting stricter rules governing the use of ammonia-based fertilisers, which contribute massively to agricultural emissions; this could even include raising the prices of artificial fertilisers.**

▶ **LET'S INCREASE CARBON-DIOXIDE CAPTURING BY 1 MILLION TONNES PER YEAR!**

The most important tools of carbon-capturing are forests, aquatic habitats, and inhabited areas, which themselves are also emitters, as well as farmlands, which also act as both carbon capturers and emitters. **The National Clean Development Strategy of 2021 estimates that Hungary's carbon capturing capacity will diminish by roughly 1-1.5 million tonnes per annum up to 2030.**

In order to achieve the targets we have outlined here, we in fact need to **increase capturing capacities by a rate of 1 million tonnes per year – and hence we need to adjust the relevant strategy to reflect this.**

▶ **LET'S INCREASE OUR FOREST AREAS BY 2.5% ANNUALLY!**

The most important instrument for the needed increase in carbon-dioxide capturing capacity is the radical increase in the size of the forested areas. As opposed to the current target value of 1% per year, **we need to increase the size of forested areas in Hungary by 2.5% annually!**

The most important instrument for the needed increase in carbon-dioxide capturing capacity is the radical increase in the size of the forested areas.

There is plenty of land in Hungary that is suitable for planting forests – we should **primarily use these to plant**



trees with a longer life-span (thus, for example, acorn rather than locust trees)! If we transform agricultural subsidies in a way that makes planting forests more profitable than the other potential uses of the land, the owners will be glad to plant new forests.

In recompense for delaying the harvesting of mature trees, the owners should receive regular payment for the capturing services provided by their forests! This would need to be repaid when the forest is ultimately harvested, but it would still yield regular income for the forest owner for decades.

Targets	Current target as of 2019	Minimum target	Steady target	Ambitious target
% reduction by 2030 as compared to the 1990 level	-36%	-45%	-55%	-60%
LULUCF	-5,568	-5,568	-6,000	-6,500
Energy production	14,275	10,754	9,000	8,000
Industry	12,926	12,926	10,000	8,900
Transportation	14,702	13,232	12,500	11,700
Housing, heating fuels	9,893	7,893	7,000	6,500
Agriculture	8,687	7,818	7,000	6,800
Waste	3,437	3,093	1,500	1,000
Other	512	512	450	440
Total	58,864	50,660	41,450	36,840

Table 1: Sectoral emissions for each target (million tonnes; estimate)

I 3.3. LET'S PUT INSTITUTIONAL SAFEGUARDS IN PLACE TO ENSURE THAT WE ACHIEVE THE 2030 CLIMATE TARGETS!

Setting a new system of targets only makes sense if we **create an institutional framework which ensures that the targets are actually realised**, and which can further guarantee the routine implementation of the necessary adjustments and corrections that arise over time.

▶ REGULAR REVIEW OF THE CLIMATE POLICY TARGETS!

Most European climate laws include special procedures which specify how often and in response to which circumstances the climate targets adopted need to be reviewed. Such institutional safeguards are lacking in the Hungarian climate law, however, and the National Energy and Climate Plan, which lacks the force of law, cannot fill this role.

The Hungarian climate law also needs to regulate expressly and in a way that enhances accountability how often and in what form the Hungarian National Assembly needs to review – and if necessary adjust – the national climate targets. This is necessary to ensure that we adjust to changing circumstances, technological progress or in response to potential new EU or international obligations.

▶ CARBON BUDGETING!

The Hungarian Climate Act only specifies **numerical emissions reduction targets for the period between 2030 and 2050**. What it fails to specify, however, is how much emissions need to be reduced in the intervening years.

A more stable and transparent solution would be the **introduction of an annual carbon budget**: specific amounts of emissions reductions must be set for each year until the target date, and subsequently the implementation must be reviewed every year. The main benefit of a carbon budget is that it allows for an early detection of divergences from the

designated reduction pathway and thus makes it possible to react timely and effectively to any deviations from the targets.

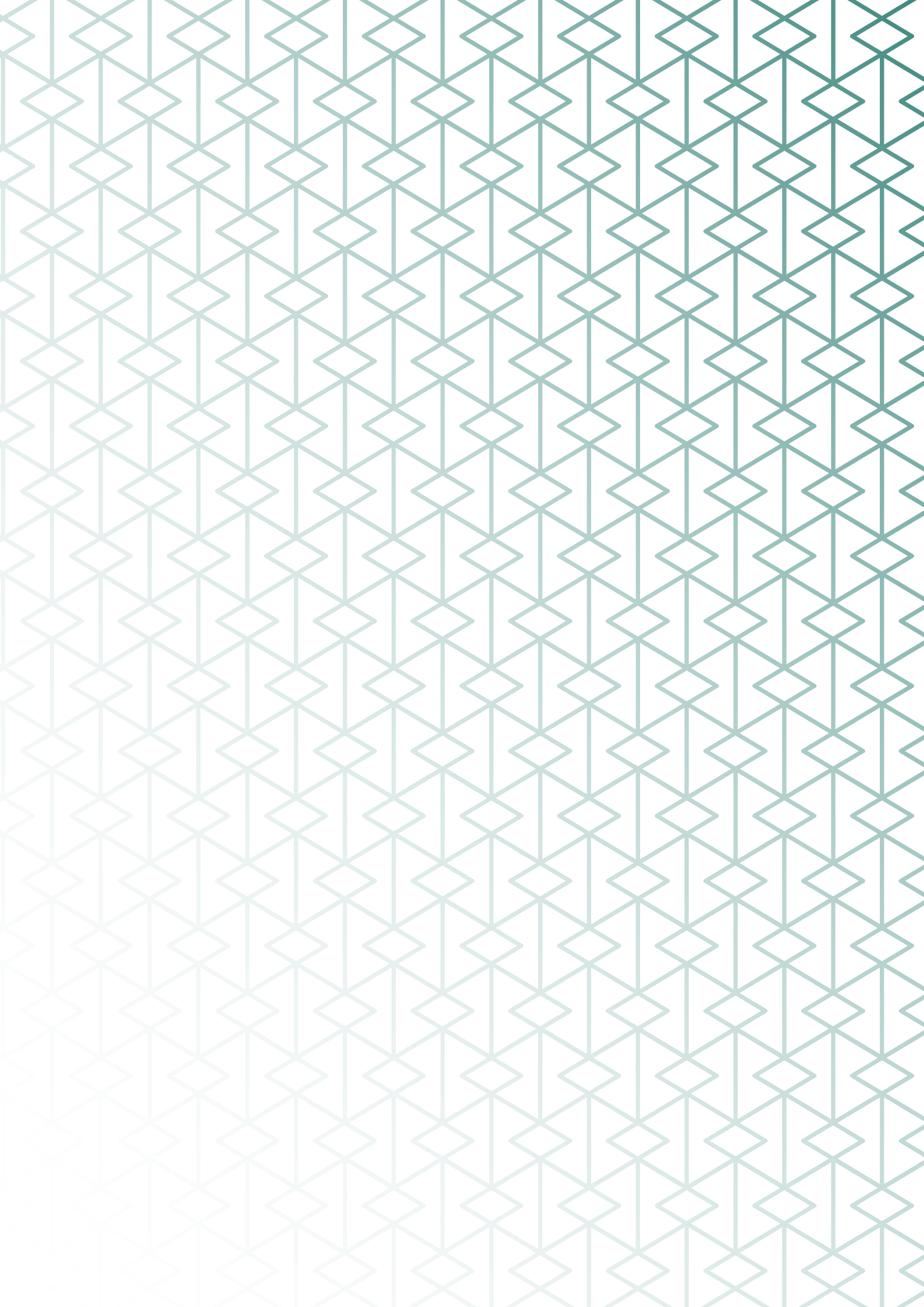
▶ AN INDEPENDENT CLIMATE COUNCIL!

The Hungarian Climate Act **fails to specify an institutional framework for realising the climate targets**, and when it does define responsibilities, those apply to the government only.

Most Western European climate laws, by contrast, provide for the creation of **independent expert organisations, so-called climate councils**, made up of 5-15 members. These are responsible for tracking emissions and the measures taken to reduce them, proposing new measures, as well as offering an expert opinion on the relevant measures proposed by the government. The climate councils have their own administrative staff and budgets, which allows them to have studies drafted and to write high-quality reports. It is also important for them to have their own **independent authority to express their opinions and to launch consultations when those are necessary**.

Hungary, too, needs to create an independent climate council endowed with a public law status and actual powers. This council needs to continuously track and review the implementation of the climate objectives!

“The main benefit of a carbon budget is that it allows for an early detection of divergences from the designated reduction pathway and thus makes it possible.”



THE EQUILIBRIUM INSTITUTE'S RECOMMENDATIONS

AREA	RECOMMENDATION
REPLANNING	Let's set new and more ambitious national climate targets for 2030, based on a broad social consensus, as soon as possible!
	Let's increase the emissions-reduction target from -40% by 2030 to a figure between -45% and -60%!
ENERGY SECTOR	Let's increase Hungarian wind power plant capacity from 3.5 to 100 kilowatts/km2 by 2030!
BUILDING SECTOR	We need to perform deep renovation on at least 100,000 flats each year!
	Thirty percent of the existing building stock needs to undergo deep renovation by 2030!
TRANSPORTATION	We need to support the introduction of a fair carbon tax within the EU!
	Let's reduce emissions from transportation by disincentivising inner-city automobile use and parking!
WASTE	Let's increase the recycling rate in municipal waste treatment to 55% by 2030!

ON THE NEW HUNGARIAN CLIMATE TARGETS FOR 2030

AREA	RECOMMENDATION
AGRICULTURE	Let's end the subsidies for beef cattle breeding!
	Let's enact stricter rules for the use of artificial fertilisers!
CARBON-DIOXIDE CAPTURING	Let's increase our carbon-dioxide capturing capacities by 1 million tonnes per year!
	Let's increase our forested areas by 2.5% annually!
INSTITUTIONAL SAFE-GUARDS	A regular review of climate policy targets!
	Carbon budgeting!
	Let's create an independent climate council for planning emissions re-ductions, monitoring the process and providing an external review of its implementation!

ABOUT US

The Equilibrium Institute is Hungary's largest independent, future-oriented policy think tank.

In line with the vision of Hungary's future presented in our publication entitled Hungary 2030, the Equilibrium Institute works on creating a smart and environmentally cleaner nation rooted in a strong community. To this end, we write widely appealing and practical policy proposals that serve the development of our country, and we discuss these jointly with the best domestic and international experts.

Our goal is to ensure that the current and future political, economic, and cultural decision-makers learn about our recommendations, come to agree with them and implement them.

The staff members of the Equilibrium Institute and the members of its Advisory Board are renowned experts in Hungary who are considered to be among the best researchers and analysts in their respective fields. The work of the Institute is helped by more than 30 experts, including economists, sociologists, political scientists, lawyers, urbanists, and climate researchers.

OUR EXPERTS



TAMÁS BOROS

Executive director and co-founder of the Equilibrium Institute

He serves as a member of the Scientific Council of a leading European think tank, the Brussels-based Foundation for European Progressive Studies (FEPS). He is the co-founder and co-owner of Policy Solutions, a consultancy and research institute. He is a recurring guest on a variety of political talk shows and often comments about public affairs for leading international media. He previously worked for the European Commission and the Hungarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs as an expert on communication and EU affairs. His research focuses on Hungarian and EU political communication and populism.



GÁBOR FILIPPOV

Director of Research

Previously he worked as an expert advisor in the Hungarian National Assembly and then as a political analyst and senior analyst at the Hungarian Progressive Institute. His analyses and op-eds have been published by numerous domestic and international media outlets, and he is frequently invited to talk about politics on television and radio shows. His research focuses on the European and the Hungarian far-right, on the histories of anti-Semitism and Islamophobia and their present-day manifestations, as well as the workings of contemporary authoritarian regimes.



DÓRA CSERNUS

Senior Climate and Environmental Policy Expert

As an expert in environmental issues, she has worked for the Ministry of Environment and Water, the Office of the Parliamentary Commissioner for Future Generations and the Ministry of Public Administration and Justice, representing the Hungarian position in different EU, UN, and OECD fora. She later worked as Director for International Policy Development at Klímapolitika Research and Consultancy Ltd, and as an independent expert in climate and environmental issues. Her main focus is on climate policy, air-quality control and water policy.



ZSOLT BECSEY

Senior Economist

Zsolt Becsey started his career as an economic planner at the Ministry for National Economy, then worked as an economic analyst and later as a modeller at the Central Bank of Hungary. His areas of interest are industrial policy, input-output analysis, macroeconomics, SME policy, and competitiveness.



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