

PRIORITIES AND ACTIONS OF THE PRESIDENCY OF THE COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION HELD BY ROMANIA

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Abstract

The paper captures aspects related to the program during the presidency of the Council of the European Union held by our country, from 1 January to 30 June 2019. It is known that the Presidency of the EU Council is ensured by rotation, every 6 months, among the Member States, each Member State having the obligation to exercise it by chairing meetings organised at all levels within the Council. The Member States holding the Presidency work together in groups of three, entitled "trios", a system introduced by the Lisbon Treaty.

Romania took over the EU Council Presidency in a trio with Finland and Croatia, setting together a series of common goals. Our country has set itself the goal of an efficient, results-oriented presidency, with activities to be integrated into the joint effort to pursue the EU consolidation objective. The program of Romania was part of a larger plan, resulting from the consultation of the three states of the trio, having as main lines of work: "Europe of convergence", "Europe of security", "Europe - a global actor", "Europe of common values".

Keywords: *representation, presidency, trios, priorities, effectiveness, coherence, convergence, common goals*

Aspects involved by holding the EU Council Presidency

In the Union's unique institutional configuration, the Council of the European Union is one of the seven European institutions stipulated in Article 13 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU), together with the European Parliament, the European Council, the European Commission, the Court of Justice of the European Union, the European Central Bank, the Court of Accounts. The institutional framework of the Union "aims at promoting its values, pursuing its objectives, supporting its interests, those of its citizens and Member States, as well as ensuring the coherence, effectiveness and continuity of its policies and actions"[1].

The Presidency of the Council of the European Union is ensured by rotation, every 6 months, among the EU Member States, each Member State having the obligation to exercise the Presidency, in turn, by chairing meetings held at all levels

within the Council (ministerial, ambassador and expert level), contributing to ensuring the continuity of the EU actions. Therefore, the Council's decisions are the result of the aggregation of the interests of the Member States, in a process in which it must maintain a permanent dialogue with the other institutions participating in the legislative process, namely the European Commission and the Parliament.

In general, the Presidency has two main missions [2]:

- planning and conducting meetings within the various formations of the Council (with the exception of the Foreign Affairs Council) and its preparatory groups, which include standing committees, such as the Committee of Permanent Representatives (Coreper), and work groups and committees dealing with extremely precise issues;
- representation of the Council in its relations with the other EU institutions, in particular with the European Commission and Parliament. Its role is to try to reach an agreement on the legislative files through trilogues, informal negotiation meetings and through meetings of the Conciliation Committee.

The Presidency cooperates closely with the President of the European Council and with the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. It has been judged that the Presidency of the EU Council should act as an honest and neutral intermediary, being responsible for advancing the work of the Council regarding EU legislation, ensuring the continuity of the EU agenda, of certain well-organized legislative processes and the cooperation between the Member States.

The Member States holding the Presidency work together in groups of three, entitled "trios", a system introduced by the Lisbon Treaty in 2009. The trio sets long-term goals and prepares a common agenda, determining the major issues and aspects to be addressed by the Council over a period of 18 months. Based on this program, each of the 3 countries prepares its own program, in more detail, for the following 6 months [3]. The current trio consists of the Romanian, Finnish and Croatian Presidencies.

What the Romanian Presidency to the EU Council has meant

The Romanian presidency of the Council of the European Union followed the Austrian presidency, which began on 1 July 2018, and precedes the Finnish presidency,

beginning on 1 July 2019. It is the first presidency of the European Union Council provided by Romania, and during Romania's mandate the elections for the European Parliament were held.

During the six months, in the logo of the Romanian Presidency to the Council, the European Union is represented by a wolf, an animal known in the myths of most cultures, with a special role also in the Romanian mythology. The wolf also represents an indication that the EU has dedicated itself to the protection of biodiversity. The logo presents a dynamic and confident European Union, dedicated to the common values of the Member States. The motto was "Cohesion, a common European value" [4].

Romania took over the EU Council Presidency in a trio with Finland and Croatia, setting together a series of common goals. When taking over the mandate, Romania has assumed the progress of the European project towards a more coherent, more cohesive and unitary Europe, both internally, at Member State level, among the Member States, at regional level, at local level, as well as externally [5].

From the beginning, Romania has set itself the goal of an efficient, results-oriented presidency, with activities to be integrated into the joint effort to pursue EU's consolidation objective. The premise is that a sound European justice policy contributes to the security and economic growth for the benefit of the citizens and the business environment. The guiding principles concerned: the respect for common values, the fundamental rights and freedoms and the rule of law; the respect for the different traditions and legal systems of the Member States; further strengthening of the mutual trust between the justice systems of the Member States [6].

The program of Romania was part of a larger plan, resulting from the consultation of the three states of the trio, having as main lines of work: "Europe of convergence", "Europe of security", "Europe - a global actor", "Europe of common values"[7].

Within the first pillar, "Europe of convergence", Romania's Presidency at the Council of the European Union aimed to ensure the European convergence and cohesion in order to achieve a sustainable and fair development for all citizens and Member States by increasing competitiveness and reducing development gaps, promoting connectivity and digitalization, stimulating entrepreneurship and

strengthening the European industrial policy [8]. In this regard, a first main objective was to advance the negotiation process regarding the Multiannual Financial Framework 2021-2027.

In April, the President of the Committee on Economic and Monetary Affairs (ECON) of the European Parliament, Roberto Gualtieri, stated that under the Romanian Presidency at the Council of the European Union “we managed to achieve something that many believed impossible, namely we managed to complete a huge number of legislative files, which were in danger, as we did not have much time to finalize them and there were many important open files: Invest EU and other very important files in the field of financial services” [9].

Regarding the second pillar, Romania’s Presidency at the EU Council aimed at strengthening a safer Europe by increasing cohesion between Member States in order to meet the new security challenges that threaten the safety of citizens and by supporting cooperation initiatives in the field. Also in this direction, further attention was paid to the issues of increasing cooperation between Member States and increasing the interoperability of the EU security systems, protecting the safety of citizens [10]. Another area of interest was migration, through a broad approach of the action within the EU, contributing to the facilitation of the dialogue between the Member States in order to identify solutions for an effective and sustainable EU migration and asylum policy.

Romania has supported, during its mandate of the Presidency of the European Union Council, the further consolidation of the EU global role by promoting the enlargement policy. This priority was based on the action of the Union in the neighborhood, on the continuation of the process of implementation of the Global Strategy, by providing the necessary resources at Union level and by implementing the global commitments of the European Union [11].

According to the fourth priority, the aim was to stimulate the solidarity and cohesion of the Union, which is achievable by formulating and promoting policies regarding the fight against discrimination, equal opportunities and equal treatment for women and men, and also by involving citizens, and in particular young people, in the European debates [12].

In the first two months after taking over the EU Presidency, Romania promoted 90 legislative files that bring great benefits to the life of all Europeans (80 closed files and 10 common interpretations on the EU long-term budget) [13].

It was appreciated that the Romanian Presidency in the leadership of the EU Council has obtained the increase of financial resources regarding the Horizon Europe Framework Program to extend the participation in this program and reduce the pay gap for researchers at the European Union level.

The balance shows that it was “an extremely dense period from the point of view of the legislative activity at European level, considering that the start of the campaign for the European elections determined to fit in a well-defined calendar of negotiations with the European Parliament” [14]. Thus, the revision of the Natural Gas Directive, considered an extremely difficult and complex file for the Member States and for European energy security, was completed. The Romanian Presidency has played an essential role in these negotiations, which guarantee that the rules of the Energy Union will apply in the case of gas pipes to and from third-countries. The revision of the Natural Gas Directive aimed at establishing a stable, transparent, non-discriminatory regulatory framework, for a greater coherence in the relationship with third-countries.

Another contribution is related to the Single Market Copyright Directive, as the new regulations will lead to the realization of a functional copyright market, with economic and social benefits for both creators and consumers.

In the six months of the mandate, the negotiations were completed and several European regulations were adopted, which ensure better working conditions for citizens, such as: the Regulation for the establishment of a European Labor Authority or the Directive on the transparency and predictability of working conditions. These regulations will bring certain benefits to the Romanian workers: the limitation of the probation periods to six months; the possibility to request, after at least six months of seniority with the same employer, a job with more predictable and safer conditions; the right to receive free training, based on the Union or national law.

Moreover, it should be reminded that on 23-26 May 2019 the elections for the European Parliament were held, Romania supporting the creation of a free and fair election environment.

On June 13, Romania symbolically handed over to Finland the presidency of the Council of the European Union. Our country will hold the presidency of the Council of the European Union in 14 years.

The parliamentary dimension of the Romanian Presidency at the EU Council

The Parliament of Romania, as a representative of the Romanian society as a whole and the sole legislative authority of the country, supported the program of the Presidency of Romania at the Council of the European Union, a program centered on the citizen, all efforts focusing mainly on the advance of the legislative and non-legislative files that bring tangible results for European citizens, thus leading to a stronger, more democratic Union, closer to its citizens.

These aspects were included in the “Declaration on the parliamentary dimension of the rotating presidency of the EU Council that Romania will exercise between 1 January and 30 June 2019”, a document through which the national Parliament has expressed its support for the Romanian Presidency to the European Union Council, during the six months of the mandate, “in order to ensure economic, social and territorial convergence and cohesion for the purpose of a sustainable and equitable development for all Member States, by promoting connectivity, digitization, implementation of regional cooperation projects, stimulating entrepreneurship”[15].

It is also worth mentioning that, by means of the Declaration, the Parliament encouraged the Government of Romania to make constant efforts to adopt balanced measures to maintain the unity between the Member States of the European Union and to implement the Union’s strategy and priorities.

At the level of the Romanian Parliament, a series of meetings and conferences were organized meant to support the implementation of the general objectives related to the priorities of the Romanian Presidency at the leadership of the EU Council:

The Meeting of the Presidents of the Conference of Organizations Specialized in Community and European Affairs (COSAC) 20-21 January 2019; the Conference for Stability, Coordination and Economic Governance in the European Union 18-19 February 2019; the Meeting of the Europol Joint Parliamentary Control Group (JPSG) 24-25 February 2019; the Inter-parliamentary Conference on the Foreign Policy and

Common Security and the Common Security and Defense Policy (CFSP/CSDP) 7-8 March 2019; The meeting dedicated to the Common Agricultural Policy and Cohesion Policy 19-20 March 2019; the Conference on the Future of the Union 1-2 April 2019; the Plenary session of the LXI Conference of the parliamentary bodies specialized in the issues of the Union of the parliaments of the European Union (COSAC Plenary) 23-25 June 2019.

The Declaration from Sibiu of the 27 European leaders (9 May 2019)

The declaration from Sibiu is a document that includes the ten commitments made by the Heads of State and Government of the European Union, meant to provide further stability and prosperity for the nearly 500 million inhabitants of the European Union. The document, whose purpose is to strengthen European unity and cooperation between the Member States, was adopted at the informal Summit of the Heads of State or Government of the European Union, organized in Sibiu on Europe Day itself. It is, from a historical point of view, the first meeting of the European Council that Romania had the chance to host. As announced, EU leaders were to attend a summit that would shape the future of the EU after Brexit.

The summit was hosted by the President of Romania, Klaus Iohannis, and the meeting was chaired by the President of the European Council, Donald Tusk. Also, there were present: the President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, and the President of the European Parliament, Antonio Tajani. 36 official delegates and 400 high-ranking guests attended the Summit. Despite some existing controversies generated by the issue of migration, the cohesion policy, the rule of law and Brexit, the 27 European leaders who participated in the Summit of the European Council signed the Declaration from Sibiu.

The document can be considered as a preamble to the future Strategic Agenda for the period 2019-2024, which will be adopted at the next summit of the European Council. The Strategic Agenda includes topics such as defending citizens and freedoms, protecting the norms of the rule of law, shaping the European economic model and intensifying the role of the European Union at global level. The 27 Member States, through the signature of the Heads of State or Government who participated in

the Sibiu Summit, have committed to protect a single Europe - from east to west and from north to south, without leaving room for divisions that are contrary to the common European interest.

The second commitment contained in the Declaration refers to the unity among the Member States, the solidarity between them and mutual support. Thus, it is hoped that Europe's position will be unequivocal in its relations with third-states and with other global partners, and that solutions will be common, based on dialogue, in a spirit of understanding and respect [16].

Another important aspect is the protection of democracy and the rule of law, mentioning that "The inalienable rights and fundamental freedoms of all European citizens have been acquired with great difficulty and we will always cherish them properly. We will defend our common values and principles enshrined in the Treaties"[17].

It is reiterated the wish for the Union to remain a major player at global level, paying greater attention to the needs of citizens, trying to bring the institutions from Brussels closer to them, to the concerns and hopes of all residents of the Member States.

In addition, the principle of equity is also discussed, which must be applied not only to the labor market, but also to social services, economy, etc. Thus, the cohesion policy represents the instrument that can reduce the disparities between Member States to a greater extent, putting people first.

As it results from the document, it is up to the Member States to equip themselves with the most appropriate means of achieving the ambitions of the Union and to protect the future of the next generations of Europeans, by investing in young people and by building strategies that respond to the most pressing challenges of the 21st century.

The European leaders state that "Europe will be a responsible global leader"[18]. The present challenges that the European Union faces have a general impact, affecting all citizens. That is why it is imperative that European leaders continue to collaborate with the Union's partners at an international level "to maintain and develop the international rule-based order, to fully exploit new business opportunities and to tackle

global issues together, such as environmental conservation and fight climate change”[19].

We must admit that the moment when the Declaration from Sibiu was signed by the 27 heads of state or government from the European Union was a strategically chosen one, almost three weeks prior to the European Parliamentary elections, when it was necessary to restate in front of the citizens the ideas of unity, solidarity, cooperation and cohesion within the European continent. In this way, the European leaders wanted to give a consistent response to the criticisms brought to the Union and its institutions lately.

It is noticeable that this political Declaration represents a compromise, in which there is a common or shared ambition. Not all European leaders agreed with all the details, there are voices claiming that many would have wanted something else, in one form or another. It is certain that a stronger language, clearer commitments would have been desired at a time that is very difficult for Europe [20].

The ten-point Declaration, already compared to a “Decalogue” by the press”[21], has been widely analyzed and criticized by various international publications. The Belgian publication “Le Soir” mentioned that the Sibiu Summit was not one about the future of Europe, as proposed, but one about “the ambitions of Europe”, while France 24 detailed that “reunited without Great Britain, the European leaders have signed a declaration on the future of Europe on Thursday and have defined a list of ten commitments”[22].

Conclusions

Through this first mandate, held by Romania, which officially ends on June 30th, our country has assumed “the progress of the European project towards a more coherent, more cohesive and unitary Europe, both internally, at the level of the Member States, among the Member States, at a regional level, locally, as well as externally”[23]. The statistics that have been at the basis for the preparation of the balance presented by the leadership of the Romanian Government show that the Romanian diplomats, technicians and politicians have had twice as good results as other Member States. In the 6 months, Romania was able to complete the political negotiations in order to adopt

new laws in a hundred cases, which is more than double the number of files closed by other states.

Regarding the Declaration from Sibiu, signed on the occasion of the informal Summit of the European Council, it mentions “a single Europe - from east to west and from north to south”. Otherwise, as Euractiv writes, the statement is “less concrete and substantial than the traditional conclusions of a summit”[24], and emphasizes issues that the EU must focus on in the near future, rather than indicate solutions and ways of action.

In the next period it remains to be seen whether the spirit of unity proclaimed in Sibiu by the 27 European leaders is indestructible or it represents just an attempt to hide the dissatisfaction and controversies that has existed among the Member States in recent years.

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