

Recommendations for the Romanian EU Council Presidency 2019

In the first half of 2019, Romania will hold for the first time since joining the EU in 2007 the rotating presidency of the EU Council. This role places the country at the forefront of the EU leadership board and entails that for a period of six months, Romania coordinates all working meetings of the Council, is responsible for the day to day work of the European Union and has to establish policy priorities. The rotating presidency represents an important administrative and human resources exercise, but above all an extraordinary challenge for the country involved to demonstrate and boost its European image and expertise.

Preparations need to begin early. Presidencies are grouped together in 'trios' and need to present their priorities for the 18-month period with at least half a year before the first country assumes its role. This means that Romania, Finland and Croatia (which will exercise their mandates in this order) will have to start coordinating on their priorities as early as mid-2017.

Presidencies chair over 180 Council working groups and once Romania assumes this role it will have to be able to send competent ministers, representatives, chairs, spokespersons and experts to a plethora of meetings, negotiations, European Parliament debates, EU inter-institutional discussions, informal events and more. This will require manpower, expertise, a firm and clear mandate and, above all, superlative coordination between the delegates.

Europuls considers this moment to be a **maturity test** for Romania as a country that aspires for a leadership role in Eastern Europe, characterized by a dynamic and growing economy, a rich culture and a strong belief for the European project. Romania can benefit greatly from a well-organised presidency, from gaining prestige to convincing or influencing other EU members to pursue the policies it desires.

The starting position of the country does benefit from one of the most pro-European populations in the Union and, so far, an absence of Eurosceptic or nationalist political parties in the Parliament. The positive attitude voters have in Romania towards Europe should give Romanian politicians a strong mandate to push for further integration and better reforms of the European Union.

At the same time, the Romanian EU Council Presidency needs to be an honest and impartial broker between the other member states, able to come up with new solutions to old

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problems. It should avoid becoming entrenched in old positions (like on CAP, or Kosovo or cohesion) and bring fresh ideas to the table, something which would greatly benefit its prestige.

Should Romania fail to at least ensure a stable and coherent EU Council presidency, it will most likely be subjected to strong criticism and portrayed as a marginal, poor and weak member state or, worse, be seen as helping those who would see Europe divided again.

Below are three main types of recommendations Europuls has for the Romanian authorities and other actors, in order to start a debate for the coming years.

1. Start looking for priorities – but don't decide just yet!

Given the short time for which a country actually holds the presidency, it's virtually impossible to achieve completion on a file. Thus the 'trio' system was introduced. This formula provides the setting for continuous cooperation and implies talks are to be held between the countries that precede (Bulgaria, Austria) and succeed (Germany, Portugal, Slovenia) in holding the Presidency.

Even with excellent coordination, most countries can at best push 3 main themes and often are remembered solely for one. Still, ensuring a legacy for their mandate can be fruitful and beneficial both for the state as a whole but also for the politicians and people involved in the exercise.



At the same time, it's realistically impossible to predict the state of the EU in 2019. With the UK exit looming, whispers about treaty change in the air, numerous threats pushing citizens to vote in fear, it might be that Romania will simply just have to survive solving the dossiers it inherits from the previous presidencies.

Preparation is however essential. Below we present a number of possible priorities that Europuls considers both characteristic for Romania but also important for the Union as a whole. As time passes and discussions begin with the other countries, Romanian authorities will have to decide on what are to become the flagships for our 2019 EU Council term.

- **Security in the East** – Encompassing the Black Sea Region, the Eastern Partnership countries or simply focusing on the Republic of Moldova and its European path, it is clear that Romania needs a strong, united and active European Union involved in its Eastern and South Eastern borders. If Romania doesn't insist on this aspect, then it's doubtful others to follow will (Bulgaria and Finland might be willing allies though).
- **Clean, sustainable and secure energy** – A border country with a growing economy, Romania needs to fight for the completion of the European Energy market, for ensuring EU energy security and for achieving better and more significant anti-climate change goals (like cutting emissions by 40%) for 2030. Estonia (2nd half 2017) Portugal (1st half 2021) might also be good partners to discuss an increase in European energy interconnectivity.
- **Fight to keep the EU together** – It is likely that by 2019 more nationalist/anti-EU forces will make it to national parliaments, Russia will represent a bigger threat, and politicians clamouring for less Europe or for a Union of different speeds will be in power. Romania needs, without a doubt (and as shown by the will of its population), more Europe, to be at the core of a reformed EU and should therefore fight in the EU Council and outside against any internal or external divisive forces.
- **Promote democratic reforms in its region** – In Moldova, Ukraine but also the Western Balkans (where Croatia and Slovenia would make ideal partners), Romania needs stronger democracies. It can also offer itself to become a voice for the Union towards these highly strategic countries.
- **Safeguard cohesion and agricultural policies** – With so much of its economy benefitting from these policies, Romania cannot afford to see them diminished after 2020. At the same time, it should not simply oppose flatly any changes, but show flexibility and innovation in meeting the member states who wish to do away with these policies half way. One option could be to change the current grant system to one more similar to the European Fund for Strategic Investment.
- **Re-launch the Danube Strategy (EUSDR)** – Romania needs the EU to be more active (and allocate more resources) on everything Danube-related, including the transformation of the river in a major transportation artery for the whole of Europe.
- **Be the agenda setter for the post-2020 period** – By 2019, the Europe 2020

Strategy for jobs and growth and the Multi-Annual Financial Framework 2014-2020 (MFF) will be nearing their end. This implies that all major, long-term policy priorities for the EU will have to be reformulated. While it is true that the new European Commission, created following the 2019 European elections (and after the end of Romania's mandate), will be the one publishing the priorities Romania, Finland and Croatia are given some important 18 months in which they push for their priorities to be at the head of the new 'Europe 2030' strategy or inside the budgetary estimates for the 2020-2030 MFF.

- **Become an EU champion for a key subject!** – Romania needs to be well known for a key policy in the EU. An issue where it can have an advantage, show a good track record or has gained unique experience, like anti-corruption, the ICT sector and the Digital Agenda or the Eastern Partnership could become a flagship for the Presidency and turn, beyond 2019, into a positive reputation! Europuls believes that assuming a key responsibility like this could also open the way to other advantages, for example enhancing the country's international 'brand' or hosting a European agency dealing with the topic.

POLICY – NOT POLITICS

It is likely that between now (September 2016) and June 2019, more than one political party will rotate in government in Romania. The changes which elections can bring mean both a shift in policy priorities and the staffing of the administration. This is normal, but can pose a risk for Romania's credibility and the coherence of its EU Council Presidency.

From the moment talks start with Finland and Croatia, Romania's line should remain stable and the people representing it in these talks below minister level should also remain the same. Replacing staff half-way through, changing priorities, reshaping external messages for internal political reasons could severely damage the image and negotiating potential of the country.

May-June 2019 will bring about European elections and at the end of the year presidential elections in Romania and it might be that some politicians or parties will seek to use the increased visibility of the country during the presidency to campaign for themselves or attack their rivals in the European Parliament or the media of other member states. They should not.

Within the RO2019 Project, Europuls and FDSC have in mind to propose to all major Romanian political parties to agree to a **"Pact for a Stable EU Council Presidency"**. If signed, this pact would ensure that all parties, regardless of general policy priorities, will strive for a stable and successful EU Council Presidency, being aware that a successful term will be highly beneficial for the entire country.

2. Create capacities and prioritize expertise!

An EU Council Presidency is reliant, above all, on the representatives from the Member State chairing all required meetings. Be it ministers or civil servants, diplomats or experts recruited on specific policy topics, they will be required to be fluent in 'Euro babble' – the lingo of the institutions. Being fluent in English and French (and dare we hope, sometimes German and Italian) would certainly help the ability of these representatives to do their job well.



As we previously mentioned, the representatives need to have a high degree of **coordination**. The department or team inside the Government preparing the 2019 moment needs to create adequate mechanisms through which all those who will speak in any way on behalf of the Romanian EU Council Presidency will be sure to be on the same page.

Staffing represents yet another challenge, with most member states going through the exercise of seeing an average of 50% additional staff coming to their

Representation to the EU (the usual headquarters for a presidency). Romania will have to identify and attract professionals both from inside and outside the public system and, to put it frankly, **political nominations without any professional expertise would represent a huge mistake**.

Unlike other exercises Romania has undertaken at EU level, ensuring that all the people involved in the Presidency are properly **qualified and trained** is of crucial importance. In addition, their contacts from inside the Romanian administration should, by 2019, have a clear understanding of the EU, its institutions and policies. Failure to do so will put an immense strain on Brussels colleagues, putting forward the perfect ingredients for a disastrous presidency.

Europuls recommends that expertise is also sought among **member states which joined the EU in 2004** and have since held the EU Council Presidency. Other good practice examples should be sought amongst the countries which chaired the EU Council right before or after European elections. Former presidency staff and civil servants from countries like Poland (2011), the Czech Republic (2009), or Lithuania (2013), but also Greece and Italy (2014), have faced numerous challenges and had to deal with much of what Romania will now face. Romanians need to learn from them and others on what to expect during

the first six months of 2019. At the same time, this would entail the added benefit that such dialogue can foster further **support for our policy proposals** from those still involved with the representation of their state in the Council.

Last but not least, Romanian authorities need to involve in their preparation the entire Romanian **public sphere**. Civil society actors, regional organisations, researchers, think tanks and in general social and economic partners should also be consulted on priorities. This adds the greater challenge that many of them do not actually have the needed understanding of what a EU Council Presidency is or does. It also adds the chance that many of these actors are part of European networks of NGOs, represented in the European Economic and Social Committee and can transmit or even negotiate with counterparts from other member states the topics of interest for Romania.



3. Use the moment to promote Romania's image in Europe!

The six months when a country holds the presidency provide it, above everything else, with increased visibility in the European Union and beyond. The logo of the Presidency, the name of the country, its ministers and particularities become a permanent part of the work of the EU institutions. Many institutions and agencies, European political parties, think tanks or other organisations hold meetings in the country's capital and the Romanian Presidency itself will have to host a great number of events in Bucharest.

Romania's name will be more present than ever and the moment needs to be capitalized to its full. Active efforts should be made by Romanian authorities to coordinate in advance all image vectors, both outside and inside the country.

- **Be ever-present in the European Parliament** – Members of the European Parliament are allowed to host **two exhibitions per mandate**. It would be good if Romanian MEPs coordinate amongst themselves and reserve already a slot (or prepare demands for derogations from the rule) so that in **every week** of the six months dedicated to the presidency, MEPs, stakeholders, lobbyists, civil servants, business representatives and visitors will have the chance to attend

an exhibition or event on Romania in the European Parliament. For example, food tastings during the Polish presidency left a vivid memory for many other member state representatives.

- **Activate Romanian networks in other EU capitals** – Most if not all EU capitals have flourishing Romanian communities, some represented by active NGOs. As part of the presidency efforts, these networks need to be contacted, informed about the opportunity of the 2019 moment so they can already begin planning events, exhibitions, shows, concerts and other activities to mark the Romanian Presidency and, if possible, **promote its policy priorities** at a bilateral level.
- **Have local organisations invite their European partners over** – In addition to all the European leaders, ministers, parliamentarians and diplomats visiting Romania during the presidency, it would be equally important to invite other stakeholders as well. Romanian trade associations and business federations, social actors, think tanks and other civil actors should be invited (and helped if needed) to host their counterparts

from other member states. **Romania as a whole, and not just Bucharest, should become the ‘go-to’ destination in the first six months of 2019.**



4. Conclusion

This policy brief is meant as a short debate-starter and there are many issues still to be discussed in the future. What is important at this point is that debate does start. Romania and the Romanian authorities need to define their **priorities**, to find and develop their **capacities** and to prepare the promotion of the country's **image**. The most important policy recommendation which can be made is **to remain flexible, yet resilient**. The European Union is living, unfortunately, through what can only be called ‘interesting times’, with migration, war, terrorism, nationalism, economic instability and other threats likely to emerge by 2019. Romania needs to be ready to face them head on, and provide solid leadership for the entire Union when it assumes the Presidency of the EU Council.

ABOUT

Europuls – Centre for European Expertise

EUROPULS – Centre for European Expertise is a non-profit organization founded by a group of Romanian professionals in EU affairs. Its main goal is to promote the process of European integration in Romania and contribute to the creation of a real European public sphere. Europuls aims to promote debates on European topics through articles and studies but also by organizing debates, workshops and conferences which are attended by European commissioners, MEPs, political leaders, civil society representatives, researchers, business representatives, experts and journalists.

Europuls is the founder and main organiser of EUROSFAT, the main annual European affairs forum in Romania.

Europuls, founded on March 15, 2010 is registered in Romania and Belgium and is fully independent from any political body.

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