



## **The Romanian Turn in European Presidency**

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For the first time since joining the bloc in 2007, Romania has taken over the rotating European Union (EU) Presidency from Austria in January 2019. It assumes significance as Romania is in driver's seat at a time when Brexit looms around the corner, a new budget for the bloc has to be negotiated and elections to the EU parliament are also due in May 2019. Trouble has also been brewing for Romania internally as well on issues of corruption, judicial reform and domestic political turmoil. Against this background, this paper looks at the significance of Romanian Presidency of the EU for the country as well as for the larger European politics.

### **EU's Concerns and Expectations**

Romania is a beleaguered state that has repeatedly faced charges over corruption in the country and on matters of rule of law. When the country joined the European Union, it had put considerable effort in promoting European values and the core symbol of the country's pro-EU orientation was its fight against corruption. However, the political will to tackle corruption at the highest level of politics slowly began to fade two years ago with the electoral success of the Social Democratic Party (PSD). The country was rocked by massive protests in August, 2018 over corruption charges against the government. Further, the PSD's planned overhaul of Romania's judiciary which the government says is aimed at clamping down on "abuses" by judges and magistrates have not been well received by the EU. It has also been argued that the PSD has been unable to arrest the trend of polarization in Romania despite its focus on stability.<sup>1</sup> The Social Democrat led government in Romania had to face and win a no confidence vote just days before it took over the EU's rotating presidency. To be able to steer the bloc, domestic consolidation is a necessary pre-requisite, but one that has eluded Romania so far.

The domestic turbulence led to creation of doubts if Romania was ready to lead EU, the most significant among which were concerns expressed by Romanian President Klaus Iohannis,

from which he later backtracked. There have been reports of differences between the President and the Prime Minister in Romania giving rise to fear of domestic infighting. The Romanian Presidential elections are also due in 2019. EU has maintained a watchful eye. At the official launch of the presidency, EU and Romanian leaders traded concerns over the latter's plan to overhaul the judiciary. EU wants Romania to scrap the judicial reforms and the Commission's President Jean Claude Juncker remarked that there could be "no compromise" in the fight against corruption.<sup>2</sup> There are also widespread concerns of Romania drifting towards populism.

On 9 May 2019, Romania is expected to hold an informal European Council meeting in Sibiu to discuss about future plans of the EU. It will be their first meeting following Brexit (if it happens) and last meeting before the European Parliament elections slated for 23-26 May, 2019. Much hype has been created around the Sibiu Summit as being a potential landmark in terms of deciding about future strategic priorities of the EU but with elections to the European Parliament around the corner, actual gains from the summit might be below expectations on issues such as managing migration and deciding on a long term budget also known as Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF).

### **An Opportunity for Romania**

The Romanian Presidency of the EU comes at a difficult time when there are tensions domestically and EU is undergoing a period of turmoil. It is set to oversee a difficult and complicated tenure involving Brexit, elections to a new European Parliament and a new budget. It is also a time when EU as an institution has come under the onslaught of populist leaders and eurosceptics. The Balkan countries have been on the sidelines of EU policy making ever since the eastward enlargement of EU happened in 2004 and 2007. The perception among the Central and Eastern European countries has been that they have been at the periphery of rule making in the EU. Holding EU Presidency 12 years after it became a part of the EU seemingly offers Romania an opportunity to lead EU from the front in deciding key issues concerning Europe. It will allow the country a chance to push forward its demand of joining the Schengen agreement.<sup>3</sup>

Romania has put a brave foot forward while assuming the Presidency of the Council, and it has reiterated its commitment to a stronger Europe.<sup>4</sup> Ambassador Ion Gâlea stressed that his country will build on the achievements of Bulgaria and Austria, especially towards the Euro-Balkan Perspective, migration, security and the new European financial framework.<sup>5</sup> The presidency programme focuses on four main priorities: Europe of convergence, a safer Europe, Europe as a strong global actor and Europe of common values.<sup>6</sup> At a time when EU's unity as a bloc is being tested, ensuring a stable presidency remains an important task for Romania. Despite domestic complexities, the country's corruption record and the impending challenges of managing migration, enhancing security and fostering cohesion in Europe in the current political situation, it is expected that the Romanian leadership will ensure that it helms the bloc successfully to boost its image domestically as well as internationally.

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Disclaimer: The views expressed are that of the Researcher and not of the Council.*

**Endnotes:**

<sup>1</sup> ECFR (2019), “Romania Presidency of the EU: Good Policy, bad politics”, Accessed on 14 January 2019, URL: [https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary\\_romania\\_presidency\\_of\\_the\\_eu\\_good\\_policy\\_bad\\_politics](https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_romania_presidency_of_the_eu_good_policy_bad_politics)

<sup>2</sup> Channel News Asia (2019), “Corruption warning as Romania takes over EU Presidency”, Accessed on 12 January 2019, URL: <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/world/corruption-warning-as-romania-takes-over-eu-presidency-11109170>

<sup>3</sup> It has persistently asked the EU states to rethink their stance on Romania joining the Schengen area and allow for free mobility.

<sup>4</sup> Romania 2019.EU, “Speech by President of Romania, Klaus Iohannis, at the official opening ceremony of the Romanian Presidency of the Council of the European Union”, Accessed on 15 January 2019, URL: <https://www.romania2019.eu/2019/01/10/speech-by-president-of-romania-klaus-iohannis-at-the-official-opening-ceremony-of-the-romanian-presidency-of-the-council-of-the-european-union/>

<sup>5</sup>European Parliament (2018), “Priorities dossiers under the Romanian EU Council Presidency” Accessed on 15 January 2019, URL:

[http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2018/630313/EPRS\\_BRI\(2018\)630313\\_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2018/630313/EPRS_BRI(2018)630313_EN.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> European Council (2019), “The Presidency of the Council of the EU”, Accessed on 13 January, 2019, URL: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/council-eu/presidency-council-eu/>