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IIEA Briefing on the Romanian Presidency

JANUARY 2019

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Romania Assumes its first Presidency

On 1 January 2019, Romania assumed the Presidency of the Council of the European Union, which it will hold until 30 June 2019. This is Romania's first Presidency since joining the European Union in 2007. While every incoming Presidency has a number of pressing issues to deal with, Romania will be charged with the momentous tasks of overseeing the United Kingdom's expected departure from the EU on 29 March 2019; adapting to the outcome of the European Parliament elections, which take place in May 2019; and progressing the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) negotiations for the period of 2021-2027, which will determine how the EU's money will be spent in the coming years. All of these issues will be running concurrently as Romania attempts to implement its ambitious set of priorities.

While assuming the Presidency of the Council of the EU for the first time should be a moment of celebration for Romania, much of the media coverage and commentary thus far has focused on the ongoing tension between the Romanian government and the European Commission. Relations between the EU institutions and Romania

have become increasingly strained as the government has sought to push through controversial judicial reforms limiting the powers of anti-corruption agencies and offering amnesty to politicians facing corruption charges.¹

The already tense situation was not helped by comments made to German newspaper *Die Welt* by European Commission President, Jean-Claude Juncker, who said that although Romania was "technically well-prepared" to host the Presidency, he had some doubts about the ability of the government to "listen to others and to put their own concerns in the background."² President of the European Council, Donald Tusk, for his part, wished Romania well and said that he was confident the government would deliver an excellent Presidency.

The Presidency of the Council of the EU

The Presidency of the Council of the European Union rotates between the EU's Member State governments every six months. Due to the relatively short time-frame of the term, each Presidency belongs to a Presidency Trio—a grouping of three countries that coordinate their priorities over an 18-month period. Finland will take over

from Romania in July 2019 and the Presidency Trio will be completed by Croatia in January 2020, which will also assume its first Presidency since accession.

The role of the rotating Presidency has been diminished somewhat following the creation of both a permanent President of the European Council and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy by the Lisbon Treaty. Paul Schmidt of the Austrian Society for European Politics notes that rotating presidencies have even less room to manoeuvre considering the increased importance of the Eurogroup and the amplified role that the European Parliament now plays.³

Despite all of this, the Presidency of the EU still plays an important role in setting the agenda for the Union. This was apparent during the last Presidency Trio where Estonia prioritised digital issues, Bulgaria focused on the EU's relations with the Western Balkans and Austria gave priority to security and addressing illegal migration. In recent times, however, even the Presidency's role in agenda-setting has come under threat from President Tusk's Leaders' Agenda, which has sought to bring EU leaders together informally to discuss major issues such as Eurozone reform, migration and the future financing of the Union.

Romania's Presidency Priorities

Romania's Presidency priorities are split into four pillars: (i) A Europe of convergence; (ii) A safer Europe; (iii) Europe as a stronger global actor; and (iv) A Europe of common values.⁴

A Europe of convergence

During its Presidency, Romania aims to focus on furthering convergence and cohesion in Europe—an issue of national interest for the country. Romania hopes to achieve this by progressing the MFF negotiations, enhancing the social dimension of the EU, deepening

the Economic and Monetary Union and promoting research and innovation in an effort to boost economic competitiveness.

A safer Europe

To achieve a safer Europe, Romania proposes further cooperation among Member States in terms of the interoperability of EU security systems, particularly with regard to the resilience of the EU when it comes to potential cyber-attacks. Romania also intends to facilitate the operationalisation of the European Public Prosecutors Office. Also under their 'safer Europe' pillar, Romania prioritises "giving further attention to migration issues," particularly in terms of promoting further cooperation between the EU and countries of origin and transit. Lastly, Romania says it hopes to facilitate further dialogue among EU Member States to find solutions for "an effective and sustainable migration and asylum policy."

Europe as a stronger global actor

Romania plans to support the consolidation of the EU as a global actor by pushing for the strengthening of the EU's security and defence capabilities and by harnessing the Strategic EU-NATO Partnership. The further development of actions in the field of Common Security and Defence Policy is also a priority, as well as the further utilisation of existing mechanisms, such as Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and the European Defence Fund. Picking up the mantle from the recent Bulgarian Presidency of January-July 2018, Romania is also committed to advancing the EU's enlargement agenda, and is particularly focused on commemorating 10 years of the Eastern Partnership and on reaffirming the importance of the Black Sea region for the EU.

A Europe of common values

By "stimulating the solidarity and cohesion of the EU" Romania hopes to promote policies that counter discrimination, provide for equal opportunities and

treatment for men and women, as well as foster European debate. The latter is a particularly important issue for Romania as the government highlights the need for countering online misinformation and fake news. Romania also calls for better media literacy and the development of a European wide mechanism to cooperate in sharing best practices to tackle misinformation.

Domestic political situation and tensions with Brussels

While some have expressed doubts over the Romanian government's ability to deliver such an ambitious set of Presidency priorities, other commentators have argued that the domestic political situation and tension with Brussels will not be a distraction. Writing for the European Council on Foreign Relations, Radu Magdin, a former adviser to the Prime Minister of Romania, argues that despite heightened political division, the members of the Romanian government will take their duties seriously and will be "keenly aware of the media scrutiny they are under at home and abroad."⁵

One of the more interesting dynamics at play is the fact that the Romanian Head of State, President Klaus Iohannis, represents Romania in the European Council and not Prime Minister, Viorica Dancila, who serves as Head of Government. President Iohannis is a member of the centrist National Liberty Party (PNL) and has clashed repeatedly with the Social Democratic (PSD) government, which has been in power since 2016. These clashes are expected to intensify ahead of the Presidential election which is due to be held in November or December 2019. The most recent controversy centres on the dismissal of Laura Codruta Kovesi, who as head of Romania's anti-corruption agency was responsible for the prosecution of hundreds of local and national officials—including three ministers, five MPs and a senator—since her appointment in 2013.⁶ The PSD government claimed that Ms Kovesi had violated the Romanian constitution and attempted to damage Romania's international reputation. This was eventually upheld by the Romanian Constitutional Court.

Critics have argued that Liviu Dragnea, President of the PSD, who is banned from holding political office following a suspended prison sentence for corruption charges, is the main driving force behind the judicial reforms. Both the United States and the European Union have raised serious concerns with the Romanian government over these reforms and Romania is still subject to special monitoring of its judicial and anti-corruption efforts by the EU.⁷

Recent proposals by the government to offer amnesty to politicians who have been prosecuted for corruption or who face corruption charges have also been strongly criticised. In a recent interview with the BBC's *Newsnight* programme, Romanian Foreign Minister, Teodor Meleşcanu, cited prison overcrowding as one reason why an amnesty policy has been taken under consideration.⁸ When pressed on whether Romania was fit to assume the EU's rotating Presidency in such turbulent circumstances, Minister Meleşcanu insisted that following more than ten years of membership of the EU, Romania was ready to fulfil its obligations as President of the Council of the EU.

Conclusion

While there is no doubt that the Romanian government would prefer to be assuming its first Presidency of the Council of the European Union under better political circumstances, it is nonetheless a momentous occasion for the former communist state. Despite the role of the Presidency diminishing in the post-Lisbon Treaty era, Romania has still been able to put items it considers to be a priority on the European agenda, such as convergence ahead of the upcoming negotiations on the MFF and further EU engagement with the Black Sea region. While these issues will be prioritised over the next six months, it is, however, likely that the UK's departure from the EU, the European Parliament elections and the domestic political situation in Romania will eclipse the day-to-day activities of the Romanian Presidency.

Important dates in the Romanian Presidency of the Council of the EU

8 January 2019 – General Affairs Council
 21 January 2019 – Eurogroup Summit and Foreign Affairs Council
 22 January 2019 – Economic and Financial Affairs Council
 28 January 2019 – Agriculture and Fisheries Council
 11 February 2019 – Eurogroup Summit
 12 February 2019 – Economic and Financial Affairs Council
 18 February 2019 – Foreign Affairs Council
 19 February 2019 – General Affairs Council
 7-8 March 2019 – Justice and Home Affairs Council
 11 March 2019 – Eurogroup Summit
 12 March 2019 – Economic and Financial Affairs Council
 18 March 2019 – Foreign Affairs Council and Agriculture and Fisheries Council
 18 March 2019 – General Affairs Council and General Affairs Council in Article 50 formation
 20 March 2019 – Tripartite Social Summit
21-22 March 2019 – European Council
29 March 2019 – Expected UK Departure from the EU
 8 April 2019 – Foreign Affairs Council
 9 April 2019 – General Affairs Council

15-16 April 2019 – Agriculture and Fisheries Council
9 May 2019 – Europe Day and Sibiu Summit
 13 May 2019 – Foreign Affairs Council
 14 May 2019 – Foreign Affairs Council (Defence) and Agriculture and Fisheries Council
 16 May 2019 – Foreign Affairs Council (Development) and Eurogroup Summit
 17 May 2019 – Economic and Financial Affairs Council
 21 May 2019 – General Affairs Council
23-26 May 2019 – European Parliament Elections
 28 May 2019 – Foreign Affairs Council (Trade)
 6-7 June 2019 – Justice and Home Affairs Council
 13 June 2019 – Eurogroup Summit
 14 June 2019 – Economic and Financial Affairs Council
 17 June 2019 – Foreign Affairs Council
 18 June 2019 – General Affairs Council and Agriculture and Fisheries Council
20-21 June 2019 – European Council
 25 June 2019 – General Affairs Council (Cohesion)
[A full calendar for the Romanian Presidency is available here.](#)

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The IIEA acknowledges the support of the Europe for Citizens Programme of the European Union



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