

The real challenge of Romania's first EU presidency

Blog post by Practice Lead Alexander Smotrov, 7 January 2019

Romania's presidency of the EU Council - formally launching this week - has already received a dose of high-profile scepticism both in Brussels and Bucharest. Politicians ranging from president Juncker to president Iohannis expressed doubts about Romania's preparedness for its first ever stint at the helm of the EU, 12 years after its accession. In fairness, it will not be a routine rotation as the next six months will signify a turbulent and eventful period for the European Union.

Under the headline theme of solidarity and cohesion, the Romanian presidency will face two major challenges on top of the official 'honest broker' duties. First, to complete a legislative agenda squeezed by the looming European Parliament election and the upcoming top jobs reshuffle at the council, commission and ECB. Second, to ensure the Sibiu summit - the centrepiece event of the presidency - provides a platform for a 'renewal of vows' and launching a post-Brexit policy agenda for the EU27.

Fig.1: Key dates for Romania's presidency of the Council of the EU

February 10th	Interim deadline for major legislative proposals to be adopted by the European Parliament
March 21st-22nd	Spring European Council meeting
March 29th	Planned withdrawal of the UK from the EU
April 18th	Last session of the outgoing European Parliament
May 9th	EU27 summit in Sibiu
May 23rd-26th	Elections to the European Parliament
June 20th-21st	Summer European Council meeting and expected nomination of the new European Commission president

However, the real challenge will be to reboot of Romania's own EU membership, both in the eyes of European institutions and Romanians at home. Another group which will be watching closely is the three-million Romanian diaspora scattered across the EU. It proved to be a powerful force capable of deciding the fate of Romanian presidential elections in 2014, and another election is due in November.

Bucharest's relations with Brussels have recently been strained by concerns about the rule of law and a setback on anti-corruption efforts. These - coupled with an economic agenda characterised by populist economic and fiscal measures - have alarmed international investors. The EU presidency itself has become part of a domestic war of words between pro-European president Klaus Iohannis and the Eurosceptic leader of the ruling Social Democratic party Liviu Dragnea, whose public statements on the EU often echo the rhetoric of Hungary's Fidesz and Poland's Law and Justice.

On the other hand, the next six months provide a golden opportunity for Romanian politicians and officials, many of whom are young and ambitious, to build up political capital and networks in Brussels. This could help Romania to accelerate progress towards Schengen and euro zone membership. A successful presidency could also re-align Romanian public opinion, if deals can be brokered on the EU budget and on legislation to deliver investment, better connectivity and collective defence, moving on from the more divisive ‘us and them’ politics around the rule of law.

Other recently-joined member states - notably Estonia - skilfully managed their EU presidencies to lead the policy agenda and enhance positive image of the EU back home. It is difficult to predict whether Romania can match this, or whether the presidency will be derailed by domestic politics, pre-election populism in other member states, or just the fundamental challenge of delivering an effective presidency at the end of a contentious political cycle. But with the next chance to prove themselves as presidency not due until the 2030s, the next six months are a crucial period for Bucharest’s pro-Europeans.

Fig 1.: Change in positive attitude towards the EU in member states holding the Council presidency, %

Austria, 2018 .. Bulgaria, 2018.. Estonia, 2017 .. Greece, 2014 .. Italy, 2014 H2 Latvia, 2015 H1 Malta, 2017 H1 Slovakia, 2016..

