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THE ROMANIAN PRESIDENCY OF THE COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION. GREAT EXPECTATIONS?

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Abstract: *The post-accession evolution of the new Member States to the European Union benefits from limited attention in the EU studies literature. More scholarly works are needed to map the performance of Romania and Bulgaria. Therefore, this paper investigates Romania's performance during the six-month Council Presidency to the European Union in the first half of 2019. Building on the framework of analysis of Karolewski et al., the paper makes an empirical contribution. It seeks to analyze if Romania lived up to the challenges of the office and managed to consolidate its reputation and show its political maturity during this crucial political moment, which countries only get to play every twelve years. The paper argues that the Romanian government aimed to project the image of an active, dynamic, and efficient actor, consensus orientated but without significant policy ambitions. It was a test it wanted to pass to confirm that Romania no longer represents an exceptional case in terms of its laggardness.*

Keywords: *EU Council Presidency; Performance; Romania; New Member States; Post-Accession*

INTRODUCTION

In the last decade, after the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty (2009), the issue of the rotating EU Council Presidencies has generated new attention leading to the emergence of a prolific scholarship. One of the most significant research strands in the EU studies literature is the issue of performance. However, several problems persist, as pointed out by a substantial body of research preoccupied with explaining how EU Member States perform during their six-month term. First, descriptive accounts are dominant. There needs to be a more shared understanding of the theoretical approaches to measuring performance based on a standard set of objective indicators. However, recent theoretical contributions aim to fill this gap (see Toneva-Metodieva 2020; Vidačak and Milošić 2020).

Second, there is a preference for single case studies rather than comparative studies (see Hogenauer 2016; Svetličič and Cerjak 2015), with scarce contributions focused on comparing the performance of the old Member States *vs.* the new Member States.

Finally, there is limited research on the first-timers chairing the EU Council presidency (Vandecasteele and Bossuyt 2014, 237), although in the last years' research emerged examining the new Member States (Bilcik 2017; Karolewski 2015; Panke and Gurol 2018; Coman 2020).

In this context, this paper aims to contribute to the performance literature on the EU Council Presidencies by examining the new Member States and turning to Romania as a highly pertinent case. First, there is consensus amongst EU policy-makers and academic scholarship that one of the most challenging enlargement rounds in the history of EU accession was represented by the accession of Romania and Bulgaria, as both countries faced tremendous challenges in the accession period due to unfavorable domestic conditions, arguing that they need to be examined differently and by framing these two countries as exceptional cases, employing the concept of laggardness (Noutcheva and Bechev 2008) or laggardness reputation (Pridham 2007b, 236) to explain their road to the EU.

Second, Romania and Bulgaria are the only EU Member States where post-conditionality continued to apply even after both countries became full members of the EU[1]. The European Commission designed the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism (CVM) to ensure that Romania will continue consolidating the rule of law and fighting against corruption, even in the absence of the carrots and sticks policy. Based on the arguments presented above and the consent in the literature, it can be concluded that Romania and Bulgaria were not quite ready to join the EU in 2007 and "came in too early" (Grabbe 2014, 45). Considering the context presented above, one important question arises: How did Romania perform during the sixth month EU Council Presidency? Was it able to successfully meet the requirements of the office, or did it fail to address the demands twelve years after assuming EU membership, especially as deep distrust was voiced by a wide range of actors from the European Commission, domestic actors (institution of the Presidency or opposition parties) or Romanian citizens.

APPROACHES TO EXAMINING THE PERFORMANCE OF THE EU COUNCIL PRESIDENCIES

Although there is rich literature examining the accomplishments of the EU Council presidencies, several lacunas persist. First, as (Vandecasteele and Bossuyt 2014, 234) point out, there needs to be more conceptual clarity on the difference between success and influence. The two authors define success in connection with the behavior of the Presidency, reaching its objectives and goals. At the same time, influence translates as the ability of the Presidency to make a difference in policy-making. On the same line, (Bursens and Hecke 2011, 23) define a successful presidency as "realizing the priorities of the program and coping with unexpected events". Second, there are methodological shortcomings. As Metodieva highlights, few analyses advance a methodological framework for evaluating the results in objective, evidence-based terms based on a set of indicators (Toneva-Metodieva 2020, 3), as success is hard to measure (Vandecasteele and Bossuyt 2014, 240).

[1] The European Commission decided to lift the CVM for Bulgaria after the October 2019 Evaluation report which acknowledged the progress achieved in the area of judicial reform, corruption and organised crime. See: Commission reports on progress in Romania under the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism, Commission reports on progress in Romania (europa.eu) (23.11.2022)

The methodological deficiencies are also raised by (Vidačak and Milošić 2020), who, in their comparative study on the Austrian and Croatian Presidency, propose a set of quantitative and qualitative indicators to measure the performance of the rotating Presidencies.

In the absence of sound methodological frameworks to objectively measure the EU Council Presidencies' achievements, academic scholarship has turned to several factors to explain the success of the Presidencies. One influential research path examined the role and responsibilities of the Presidency. Consistent research also reviewed the conditions of success. 'National conditions' occupy an important role, emphasizing the organization of the Presidency (Bunse 2009), Brussels-based Presidencies (Bursens and Hecke 2011), or the role played by a good reputation which can be understood in terms of expertise and good practices a state disposes of in national policies which can be transferred at European level (Jakobsen 2009, 87).

In their systematic review of the literature (Vandecasteele and Bossuyt 2014, 241) discuss a wide range of domestic variables that shape success: the role played by networks, the size of the country, or the national political context. The 'external context' has also received attention by highlighting the role played by an external stable political and economic environment (Vandecasteele and Bossuyt 2014, 241). Bursens and Hecke (2011) propose a model to study success conditions and distinguish between the EU environment, the domestic environment, and specific issues linked to policy domains (p. 25).

THEORETICAL APPROACH

Starting from the literature which investigates the factors that shape the successful performance of EU Member States during the chairing of the EU Council Presidencies, this paper has selected the approach developed by Karolewski *et al.*, which proposes a framework for understanding and analyzing the results achieved by the Polish Presidency. In their research on the Polish Presidency, the authors make a methodological contribution to how to study performance. The merit of their approach is that they build their framework by grouping the most prominent factors discussed in the literature: the functions of the Presidency, the behavior dimension, and the contingency dimension (Karolewski *et al.* 2015, 669), as explained in Figure 1. As such, this paper builds on the approach of Karolewski *et al.*, 2015 and tests it at the Romanian EU Council Presidency level. This article has selected four variables advanced under the functional demands: management, agenda setting, internal mediation and media spinning. It has excluded inter-institutional agency, a fifth variable proposed by the authors.

Under the behavior dimension, the paper will analyze the capacity of the Romanian government to act as an impartial actor and mediate between European interests. Finally, under the third category, this study will test internal and external factors that can challenge the smooth running of the EU Council Presidencies. Although Karolewski *et al.* propose several factors under the endogenous category, this study has selected the unfavorable domestic political context and the question of reputation and expertise as explanatory variables for interpretation. Last, under external factors, the paper introduces the potential elements that could further challenge a successful and efficient EU Council Presidency.

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Functional Demands	Behaviour Dimension	Contingency
Management	Honest Broker	Endogenous Factors
Agenda Setting	National Or European Interests	Exogenous Factors
Internal Mediation		
Media Spinning		

Figure 1: Three-Level Approach (Source: Karolewski *et al.* 2015)

RESULTS: ROMANIA, A SOUND PERFORMER?

Functional Dimension

Management

Romania started the preparation for chairing the EU Council Presidency by adopting several measures in 2017 and 2018. It hosted two reunions of the Trio Presidency (Romania, Finland, and Croatia) in 2017 and 2018. It has also shadowed Austria, which held the EU Council Presidency in the second half of 2018 (July-December), which offered the opportunity to get socialized with the demands and expectations of holding the office of the EU Council Presidency and opened a valuable learning opportunity. The appointment of additional staff and training was another priority. It envisaged strengthening the national administration to equip it better to cope with the tasks by supplementing the number of experts(short-term positions) to 232. It has also created 132 new posts within the Permanent Representation of Romania to the European Union. And not lastly, it has nominated more than 279 vice chairs for working groups, 342 coordinators, and more than 800 experts(Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Press Release 2018).

However, at the same time, the preparation phase was not without challenges, being affected by political turmoil. For example, between 2017 and 2019, Romania changed three Ministers of European Affairs, which are essential in coordinating the preparations. Moreover, Victor Negrescu (Minister of European Affairs) resigned two months before Romania took over the rotating Presidency (November 2018), replaced by George Ciamba, a career diplomat.

Agenda-Setting

Under the motto, 'Cohesion, a common European value', Romania identified several priorities grouped around four pillars: 'Europe of Convergence', 'A safer Europe', 'Europe, a stronger global actor', and 'Europe of common values'. The most notable was strengthening internal security by fighting terrorism and consolidating the Schengen area, the enlargement policy towards the Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership, and combating discrimination and equal chances between men and women.

The Romanian Presidency has advanced legislation in many areas, including economy and finance, employment and social affairs, environmental protection, justice, home affairs, and energy. Successful initiatives adopted EU-wide CO2 reduction targets for heavy-duty vehicles for the first time, aiming at 30% from 2030 onwards (Romanian Presidency of the Council 2019). Another significant achievement announced by the Bucharest executive was finalizing the

negotiations on the Gas Directive, which governs the rules for gas pipelines to and from third countries. Other noteworthy results were strengthening the mandate of the European Border and Coast Guard (Frontex) and establishing a new standing corps of 10.000 staff to be operational by 2027 (Romanian Presidency of the Council 2019).

The Romanian government was also involved in the 2021-2027 Multi-Annual Financial Framework (MFF) negotiations. As a result, it has succeeded in achieving progress, closing ten sectoral files, and opening negotiations on thirteen additional MFF files with the European Parliament (Council of the EU 2019, 2). The talks were to be continued by the Presidencies of Finland and Croatia.

Promoting National Interests? The Schengen Agenda

Nevertheless, as shown previously in a paper published by one of the authors on the relationship between Romania and the European Union, Romania disposed of limited maneuver in the case of national interests (Cugleșan 2020). An indicator is that the Romanian authorities still needed to unlock several Member States' opposition to the Schengen issue during the six-month rotating Presidency. The Netherlands, which had strong objections to Romania's acceptance into Schengen, has upheld its position throughout the six-month EU Council Presidency. On the occasion of the EU Summit in Sibiu (May 2019), Prime Minister Rutte underlined that Romania "will join Schengen when it complies with the rule of law and democracy" (Schengen Visa Info 2019). This negative resultshows, that the problems between 2017 and 2018 in the area of the rule of law have taken their toll, with the EU Member States more reluctant than ever to lift their veto. Also, as Wantijen (2013) shows, the states dispose of limited time to reach an agreement during the rotating Presidency (p. 1241).

However, Prime Minister Dăncilă was hoping that a decision on accepting Romania's entry into Schengen would be adopted by the end of the Presidency (Joint Press Conference by Prime Minister Viorica Dăncilă and the President of the European Parliament Antonio Tajani 2019), framing it from a double perspective, caught between the anti and pro-EU dilemma: continuing to employ the anti-EU rhetoric displayed in the last two years (Romanian citizens are treated as second-hand citizens or Romania is a second-hand country), but also from a European perspective (boosting the participation for the European Parliament elections).

This issue complicates matters when it concerns sensitive issues which require unanimity. Also, Finland, which took over the Presidency from Romania, aimed to strengthen the rule of law during its six-month Presidency and could not have pushed the Romanian cause with more success (Cugleșan 2020). Moreover, Finland was one of the EU countries vetoing (2011) in the Justice and Home Affairs Council Romania's bid to enter Schengen. Lastly, Romania and Finland do not have a close working political relationship inside the EU. According to the EU Coalition Explorer, Romania does not consider Finland one of the countries with which it shares interests in EU policy-making (not included among the first 20 EU countries)[2].

[2]The EU Coalition Explorer: Out of EU 27, Romania shares the most interest in EU policy-making with Bulgaria(12.6%), Poland(12.6), France(10.7%), Spain(8.7%) and Germany(6.8%). See: EU Coalition Explorer – European Council on Foreign Relations (ecfr.eu)

Internal Mediation: Romania as a Consensus Seeker

Romania assumed the Presidency of the Council in January 2019 in a tense relationship with the EU Institutions. First, it had a strained relationship with the European Commission due to the changes introduced in the judiciary and penal code reforms, which determined Jean-Claude Junker - only a few days before Romania took over the Presidency - to state that "the Bucharest government has not fully understood what it means to chair the EU countries" (Deutsche Welle 2018). Second, EU Justice Commissioner Vera Jourova seconded the European Commission President and hinted at Romania's amateurism, stating: "The EU is expecting Romania to manage the Presidency without hiccups, without combining the presidency work with domestic problematic issues"(Gotev 2018).

After Romania officially assumed the rotating Presidency, the EU actors preserved this stance (exerting pressure and skepticism). At the opening ceremony, the President of the European Council, Donald Tusk, emphasized the importance of playing by the rules and recommended that the Romanian authorities exclude the possibility of cutting corners (Donald Tusk speech 2019). In the same note, the President of the European Commission expressed a warning for the Romanian authorities that there is no compromise on the values of the EU, such as the respect of rule of law (Discours par le President Juncker a la ceremonie d'ouverture de la presidence roumaine du Conseil de l'Union europeenne n.d.).

However, against this lack of confidence expressed by the EU authorities at the debut of the rotating Presidency, Romania managed to have a positive relationship with the European Commission and European Parliament during the six-month mandate. A relevant indicator to capture the cooperation with the supranational institutions is represented by the number of trialogues. In the first six months, it has managed to hold 190 trialogues, performing above average when compared to the Austrian Presidency (150), Finnish Presidency (76), and Croatia (31) (Consilium n.d.). The gap between Romania and Croatia can be explained by the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and the stalemate in the negotiations of the MFF (Vidačak and Milošić 2020, 51).

Finally, the partnership with the General Secretariat also contributes to the success of the Presidency, as the latter is involved in the organization, coordination, and coherence of the activities of the EU Council. At the same time, it offers guidance on training before the outset of the Presidency (Europuls 2017). Prime Minister Dăncilă acknowledged the critical role played by the General Secretariat in the success of the Romanian EU Council Presidency.

Between Consensus and Efficiency

Romania has effectively closed in its six months term 90 dossiers in several areas (Romanian Presidency of the Council 2019), proving to be an efficient political actor and consensus seeker. Several explanations can support this outcome. The research results on the EU Council Presidencies between 2000 and 2012 show that a "common agenda leads to a significant decrease in the amount of time needed to reach a first agreement on regulations, directives, and decisions" (Gruisen 2019, 692) thus, speeding the process.

Also, the culture of consensus in the Council is another variable that explains these results, with unanimity often reached even when qualified majority voting was required (Gruisen, Vangerven, and Crombez 2017).

A relevant case that showed that Romania was consensus orientated was represented by the negotiations within the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF). Acting as an impartial and neutral broker was the motto of the Rotating Presidency, which Prime Minister Dăncilă reiterated on many occasions as a principle to follow in the MFF negotiations. It managed to close ten sectoral proposals of the MFF. Still, the second negotiating box failed to be adopted due to the contradicting positions of the Member States (Council of the European Union 2019). Romania did not have sufficient experience and political influence (Becker and Stiftung Wissenschaft Und Politik 2019, 32). It was a sensitive issue with the Member States divided on financing the Common Agricultural Policy and Cohesion Funds and Poland and Hungary's opposition to linking the granting of Structural funds to the rule of law.

Media Spinning

During the EU Council Presidency, Romania attempted to rebuild its image eroded by the 2017 and 2018 events. Against the lack of faith in its capacity to meet the standards of the EU Presidency, it aimed to project the image of an efficient state who is up to the challenge, is a disciplined EU state, and maintains good relations with EU institutions and Member States and has a pro-European stance. The strategy to consolidate its reputation can be explained mainly by the anti-EU rhetoric and illiberal tendencies employed by the Social Democrat government in the last two years (2017 and 2018) and distrust of the Romanian citizens in their government which has taken the streets and protests in the amplest anti-corruption protests that the country has witnessed to protect democracy. As evidenced by the case of the EU Polish Presidency (Karolewski *et al.* 2015, 677), the Romanian EU Council Presidency Media Centre also preferred to promote significant events, such as the inaugural opening of the Presidency, the Sibiu summit, or the closing ceremony of the Presidency. To highlight its performance as an efficient leader, the final report of the Romanian government underlined quantitatively the results achieved by focusing on the number of files it has closed or the number of events it has organized, but without explaining the implications or the impact of the results and how they contribute to better EU Policies.

ROMANIA, A NEUTRAL AND IMPARTIAL ACTOR?

Romania has aimed to act as an honest broker, which, as Elgstrom shows, is characteristic of small Member States embracing it more naturally (Elgstrom 2004, 51). This argument can be extended to new Member States, especially when performing for the first time on the main stage and finding themselves in the spotlight. Moreover, acting as an honest broker is more opportune when a member state lacks experience or finds itself in a troubled relationship with the EU (Cugleșan 2020). Romania favored the mediator approach because it is expected for the Member States to act impartially and neutrally. It was the first time after 2007 that it occupied a central role on the European stage. However, more importantly, it needed more expertise and

authority to negotiate more from a national perspective. Coupled with Romania's reputational problems before the start of the EU Council Presidency, Romania did not have any other option than to embrace the neutrality norm and prove to the European partners that it was committed to the "European Union values" (Ilik and Adamczyk 2017, 11-13), promotes consensus and can be a reliable partner.

Thus, it followed this approach in the negotiations of several agenda priorities. In the area of climate and energy policy, it managed to secure an agreement that the rules governing the EU's internal gas market will also apply to gas pipelines to and from third countries. However, the deal included an exemption clause for existing pipelines, which meant it did not apply to the Nordstream 2 project, which is a project that divided the Member States, with Germany and Austria supporting the project, but met with criticism by Poland and the Baltic states. The agreement is framed as a compromise by the Romanian government: "We worked hard to find a compromise that would be acceptable to everyone, and I think we now have a good solution which will guarantee that we have a fair and competitive European gas market" said Romanian energy minister Anton Anton.

Also, in the area of climate policy, an agreement was reached on establishing CO2 gas reduction emissions for heavy vehicles. Buses were exempted, but trucks had to produce 15% less CO2 until 2029 and 30% CO2 starting in 2030 (Romanian Presidency 2019). Noteworthy was the Council's position on the new legislation on the Drinking Water Directive and Water Reuse. According to the European Environmental Bureau, critical of the work of the Council as it was the least ambitious compared to other EU institutions, it praised the efforts of the Romanian Presidency (EEB Assessment of the Romanian Presidency n.d.). However, the Romanian government had to compromise between different interests. For example, Ireland and the UK invoked respect for the principle of subsidiarity in exchange for supporting the Romanian proposal.

On the other hand, Austria appealed to the issue of costs and bureaucracy that it would create for the small drinking suppliers. At the same time, Denmark and Greece wanted more ambitious objectives (EU Environmental Council 2019). Also, Romania made progress in the area of asylum policy. It has extended the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex) mandate, a standing corps of 10.000 operational staff, which will be active starting in 2027. These new measures advantaged the southern states heavily affected by the 2015 refugee crisis (Warsaw Institute 2019, 9).

However, there was a policy area where the EU Council Romanian Presidency could have deviated from the neutrality norm due to national interests. After joining the EU in 2007, Romania aimed to play an active role in the Black Sea region and ambition to be the most relevant EU member state in Black Sea affairs (Mitat Celikpala 2010, 13). Therefore, during the six-month rotating Presidency, it aimed to set the European agenda and increase the visibility of the Black Sea issues (Results of the Romanian Presidency of the EU Council for the Black Sea Region | Ministry of Foreign Affairs n.d.). As such, two documents were adopted: 'The Strategic Research and Innovation Agenda in the Black Sea region and Common Maritime Agenda for the Black Sea'. As both agendas were to be implemented voluntarily by the Member States, there was no need to break away from the neutrality norm; consultations with Bulgaria, as a critical partner, also took place.

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ENDOGENOUS FACTORS

Domestic Conditions

The domestic environment represented an unfavorable context. First, the Romanian government and the Institution of the Presidency represented by Klaus Iohannis disagreed on the capacity and preparedness of the Dăncilă government to hold the rotating Presidency of the Council of the European Union, with President Iohannis voicing public skepticism (Cugleșan 2020). Especially as 2019 was a double electoral year with European Parliament (EP) elections in May and presidential elections scheduled for the end of the year, the political competition between President Iohannis and Prime Minister Dăncilă reached new heights, as both political actors stood in the presidential elections. Also, a successful Presidency could have offered an electoral advantage for the Social Democratic Party in the EP elections, which created more pressure to perform and required the division of the political attention. As such, the Romanian political leadership needed to demonstrate a deep understanding of the responsibilities of the office more than ever.

The results of the EP elections situated the Social Democratic Party in terms of the percentages of the votes after the National Liberal Party (27%), with 22.50%. This was a significant blow, as their coalition partner, ALDE, failed to reach the threshold and enter the European Parliament. It also represented a consequential loss compared to the 2014 elections when it convinced the Romanian electorate to cast their vote in favor of the Social Democratic Party to a great extent (37.60%). Several factors can explain these results.

First, the Romanian electorate got a new opportunity to sanction the government for the illiberal tendencies and democratic backsliding the country had experienced between 2017 and 2018, keeping in mind the 2017 anti-corruption protests, when almost one million people took the streets in several Romanian cities, the most massive protest movement since the fall of the Ceaușescu regime. Second, the pro-EU orientation of the Romanian constituency determined the support for the new pro-EU parties that emerged from the anti-corruption protests placing the Coalition 2020 USR+PLUS Alliance in third place with 22.36%. Third, the Social Democratic Party leader, Mr. Liviu Dragnea, was sentenced to jail on corruption charges just before the May 2019 elections. Also, along with the organization of the European Parliament elections, President Iohannis organized a referendum on justice, an agenda he owned but detrimental to the Social Democratic Party. President Iohannis managed to secure a second five-year term in the presidential election defeating the Social Democratic Party candidate, Viorica Dăncilă.

The variable, a eurosceptic population, influences the ambitions of the Presidency and does not hold in the case of Romania. Romania was one of the countries with strong support for the European Union. Still, the linkage to the EU has deteriorated recently, with dissatisfaction growing among Romanian citizens. As the (Eurobarometer 86 2016) shows, 4 in 10 Romanian are dissatisfied with the EU. Still, regarding attachment, 54% of Romanians feel loyal to the European project, situating Romania in the top 10 out of 28 states in the context of consolidating Eurosceptic feelings among EU citizens.

Reputation and Expertise

Romania joined the European Union, affected by a reputation deficit that predominantly characterized its conduct in the post-accession stage due to its inability to act as a policy-maker. Regarding the contribution to the EU project, and as Hunya shows, Romania has failed to play an active role in shaping the EU agenda and was confined to the role of a policy taker (Hunya 2017, 14). One area of the EU external policies where Romania could have substantially contributed was the EU policies and strategies towards the Western Balkans, the Eastern Neighborhood (Moldova or Ukraine), and the Caucasus (Bechev 2009, 210). Romania has missed the chance to act as a regional broker towards the Western Balkans or find its Eastern vocation partly due to the lack of experience in foreign policy (Angelescu 2011, 137-138) and the lack of strength of the foreign service (Bechev 2009, 222), as the Eastern Partnership was an initiative of Poland and Sweden. It still has to build a strategy for the future and become a policy learner (Cugleșan 2020). During the rotating Presidency, the government placed the issue of EU enlargement towards the Western Balkans, with several bilateral meetings taking place at a governmental level before and during the Romanian Presidency. One of the results was adopting the Council Conclusions on Enlargement and Stabilisation and Association Process adopted in June 2019, reiterating its support for the enlargement policy towards the Western Balkans. More, regarding the Eastern Neighbourhood, it has contributed to the post-2020 Eastern Partnership Agreement (Romanian Presidency 2019). Second, reputation is also connected with its ability to act as a mediator. According to the ECFR Coalition Explorer, Romania has a poor connection with other EU Member States; together with Poland, Spain and Italy is the least influential actor in policy-making (Zerka 2020), punching below its weight, with a slight improvement between 2018-2020, scoring eleventh among EU Member States, probably gaining more visibility due the Romanian Council Presidency.

EXOGENOUS FACTORS

Events beyond the control of the state assuming the leadership of the EU Council has the power to challenge the success of the Presidency, such as external crises. However, when Romania was in charge of leading the EU Council, it had to deal with internal concerns, such as Brexit, as one of the most severe challenges that continental Europe encountered. Former President of the European Parliament Martin Schulz feared that Brexit could trigger "the implosion of the European Union" (Modebadze 2019, 89). The UK was supposed to exit the EU on 29 March 2019 but requested a deadline extension. The European Parliament elections or negotiations of the MFF were other events beyond the Romanian state's control.

CONCLUSION

Romania took over the Presidency of the EU Council six months earlier due to the results of the Brexit referendum. However, Donald Tusk, the European Council President, characterized it as an "energetic and successful presidency" and underlined the "impressive" number of files Romania has managed to close (Donald Tusk 2019) in the short time it had at its disposal to

steer the European Union. In this context, evaluating the Romanian EU Council Presidency was critical by focusing on the performance dimension. Therefore, it has aimed to map how Romania lived up to the expectations of the office by determining the factors that enabled or limited the success of the rotating Presidency. This paper has applied the framework advanced by (Karolewsky *et al.* 2015) in their article on the Polish Presidency. They proposed an analytical approach that grouped the functional demands, the behavior dimension(neutral broker), and a set of endogenous and exogenous factors to explain the performance issue.

The results show that Romania met the functional standards with success due partially to the role played by the Permanent Representation in Brussels or the General Secretariat, which supported Romania in the endeavor. Concerning the behavior dimension, it was loyal to the neutrality and impartiality norm as it lacked the expertise and skills to shape the agenda from a national perspective (see Schengen), was poorly connected to other Member States and showed no sign after 2007 of becoming a policy-maker. Also, it aimed to overcome the image deficit it has suffered more acutely since 2017, so playing the neutrality broker card suited its mission. Given the lack of trust and confidence in its competencies, the Romanian government aimed to project the image of an active, dynamic, and efficient actor, consensus orientated but without significant policy ambitions. It was a test it wanted to pass to confirm that Romania no longer represents an exceptional case in terms of its laggardness.

A critical limitation of this research is that it has yet to test all the variables grouped under the three dimensions (especially the exogenous factors) and supplement the three-level approach with quantitative indicators. Therefore, more data sources are needed to capture the performance behavior of the Romanian state, which can be obtained through interviews.

The paper makes a twofold contribution to the EU Studies literature. First, it covers the case of Romania, which is partially overlooked in the literature examining the new Member States, especially in their post-accession evolution. It has selected the EU Council Presidency. It is a project of critical importance for the Member States, as countries find themselves in the spotlight, and they only get to play the part every twelve years. It is an opportunity to consolidate their reputation and show their political maturity. Second, it makes an empirical contribution to the literature on performance.

Despite emerging literature on the new joiners and the success achieved during the rotating Presidency, Romania's six-month term is not approached from the angle of performance. Future studies should explore the behavior dimension (honest broker) more in-depth or test this approach in a cross-country comparative study at the level of the fifth enlargement wave by looking at Romania and Bulgaria.

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