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Article

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CES Working Papers

Provided in Cooperation with:

Centre for European Studies, Alexandru Ioan Cuza University

Suggested Citation: Mureşan, Antoanela-Paula (2019) : French Press on the Romanian and Bulgarian Presidency of the European Union, CES Working Papers, ISSN 2067-7693, Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iasi, Centre for European Studies, Iasi, Vol. 11, Iss. 3, pp. 170-184

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/286608>

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French Press on the Romanian and Bulgarian Presidency of the European Union

Antoanela-Paula MUREȘAN*

Abstract

Bulgaria and Romania joined the European Union in 2007. For both of them, the taking over of the rotating presidency of the Council of the European Union has represented a crucial moment. Two former communist countries, east-central countries, have been in charge of the Council of the European Union. The article attempts to present some perception of the French press on the presidencies of these two countries, which has engendered a series of results indicating a subjectively different approach towards the Romanian and the Bulgarian presidencies of the Council of the EU. While the former has been regarded from a critical standpoint in the light of the internal political context, a more constructive view has been adopted in the case of the latter.

Keywords: European Union, Romania, Bulgaria, Presidency of the Council of the European Union

Introduction

The press is considered to be the fourth power in the state. And like any power, it has a tremendous influence, especially in the 21st century, a century of information and information consumption. Thanks to our digital technologies and internet access, we are now permanently connected to all news – i.e. the latest information. This paper aims to present the French journalists' perception of the presidency of Romania and Bulgaria of the EU Council. We have turned to five French national journals, La Croix, Le Parisien, Est Républicain, Le Monde and Les Échos, which allotted press articles before the taking over of the rotating presidencies of the two countries. The five have been picked so as to benefit from a representative spectrum of the French press, from the standpoint of the political ideologies favoured, but also because they pertain to the traditional, reputable segment of French media. They also have a reputation for covering international subjects in a comprehensive manner. The topic is important at present because of the emphasis made in current research on the fake news phenomenon, but also because the reflection in western media of the course of European integration in East-Central European countries needs to be checked for bias. In fact, the

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manner in which the French press has reflected significant events in matters of European affairs from countries such as Romania and Bulgaria has at times been somewhat controversial and, given the influence it may have on public opinion, we consider our case study on the important matter of the presidency of the Council to be welcome. The reputable press is expected to be objective, thorough in its research and informative, especially in a founding member state of the European Union, but its degree of understanding of European affairs in the former communist states is, in our view, questionable. Numerous political discourses and even some political parties in France have made a point of resorting to exaggerated criticism of Romanian realities, for instance, even before the country's integration into the Union, which has taken its toll on the diplomatic ties between the two countries and the image of Romanians working in France. For the first time in history, Romania (much like Bulgaria), has had the task of taking over the rotational presidency of the Council of the European Union, which should be a matter of national pride, but comes with great responsibility and expectations of a political, as well as a symbolic nature. These are some of the arguments that favour the study of the topic our research tackles. From a methodological point of view, we shall use a quantitative-comparative analysis, evaluating the themes discussed in the editorials, and a comparison between journalists' opinions on the presidencies of Romania and Bulgaria. Text analysis is the predominant method, as certified in literature by a number of prominent scholars (Kuckartz, 2000; Roberts, 1997; Titscher and Jenner, 2000).

1. The Council of the European Union. A few general remarks.

The bases of the Council of the European Union were laid in 1950, with the negotiations for establishing the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) Treaty (Eur-lex, 2019). Back then, four institutions were created, one of which was the Special Council of Ministers. Since its creation, it has suffered modifications in terms of denomination, structure, functions, attributes, so as to correspond to changing contexts. Originally, its role was to represent and coordinate the national governments and policies of the ECSC Member States. Following the signing of the Treaty of Rome of 1957, two other special councils were created, one for each of the two newly established communities - the European Economic Community and EURATOM (or the European Atomic Energy Community). Subsequently, upon signing the Brussels Treaty of 1965 (Eur-lex, 2009) and its entry into force in 1967, it was decided to replace the three existing councils with one, able to serve all three European communities. In the Treaty of Maastricht of 1992, the denomination was that of Council of the European Union but, in the Treaty of Lisbon of 2007, the name of the institution is simply the Council (Eur-lex, 2009). The Council is seen as the voice of the Member States, an institution that represents

their interests by adopting together with the European Parliament the legislation and coordinating European policies.

The Council represents the governments of the Member States of the European Union. It is composed of one representative at the ministerial level of each Member State, empowered to engage the government of the Member State which it represents and to exercise the right to vote (Art. 16/2). Consequently, there are no permanent members. (As long as they are ministers in their countries, they participate in the meetings). Depending on the topic discussed, the ministers of each Member State participate in meetings without fixed dates (every 1-3-4 months, depending on the 10 Configurations). The Council of the EU is a single legal entity, but it meets in 10 different 'configurations', depending on the subject being discussed (Council of the EU, 2019). These 10 configurations are:

- Agriculture and Fisheries Council
- Competitiveness Council
- Education, Youth, Culture and Sport Council
- Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council
- Environment Council
- Transport, Telecommunications and Energy Council
- Economic and Financial Affairs Council
- Foreign Affairs Council
- General Affairs Council
- Justice and Home Affairs Council

Although there are no differences between them, *three configurations deserve an outline: The General Affairs Council, The Foreign Affairs Council and the Economic and Financial Affairs Council* (Neill, 2017, p. 166), due to their activities.

Within the Council, each Member State shall hold the rotating presidency for a period of six months. The Member States holding the Presidency work together in groups of three, called Trios. *The Trios system, in fact, commenced in 2007 after the reform of the Council's rules of procedures. The Lisbon Treaty merely finalized this change.* (Bache *et al.*, 2015, p. 265) The Trio sets long-term goals and formulates a common program addressing major issues over a period of 18 months. Each member country prepares its own agenda for six months in what is called the *priorities*.

The presidency is responsible for driving forward the Council's work on EU legislation, ensuring the continuity of the EU's agenda, orderly legislative processes and cooperation among member states. The presidency has two main tasks, giving evidence of neutrality: planning and chairing meetings in the Council and its preparatory bodies, and representing the Council in relations with the other EU institutions. The presidency works in close coordination with the President of the

European Council and with the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. Responding basically to policies that affect our daily lives, the Council, due to the Lisbon Treaty, has the following functions: policy and lawmaker, meaning that it is stipulated in the Treaty that it negotiates and adopts EU legislation (TEU art. 16/1), together with the European Parliament, on the basis of proposals submitted by the European Commission, and coordinates EU countries' policies; negotiator - the Council shall frame the common foreign and security policy and take the necessary decisions for defining and implementing it on the basis of the general guidelines and strategic lines defined by the European Council (TEU, art. 26/2). It concludes agreements between EU and other countries or international organizations. The *Council shall authorize the opening of negotiations, adopt negotiating directives, authorize the signing of agreements and conclude them* and it adopts the budget. The European Parliament and the Council, acting in accordance with a special legislative procedure, shall establish the Union's annual budget (TFEU, art. 207 and 218).

The ministers of the country holding the presidency preside over the meetings of the 10 configurations, except for the Foreign Affairs Council, which is always chaired by the same person - the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy.

In terms of its hierarchical structure, the Council is made up of: ministers who meet in the ten Configurations, COREPER or “Committee of Permanent Representatives of the Governments of the Member States to the European Union”, an organ composed of experts from national administrations specialized in a particular subject and their assistants, and “Council preparatory bodies” composed of around 150 committee and working parties.

The particularity of the Council is that it is made up of national government members that have to decide at international level. When attempting to achieve a rational institutional balance that promotes the values of the European Union, the Council along with the Commission and the Parliament represent the *Institutional Trio* of the European Union.

2. Analysis of journals

The context of our analysis is somewhat thorny for Romania, as it was for Bulgaria, upon its taking over of the Presidency of the Council. From an EU-centred perspective, it revolves around the rise in populism and a wave of anti-European feelings taking ever stronger roots in countries from the so-called New Europe, chiefly Poland and Hungary. As for Romania and, to a lesser extent, Bulgaria, while Eurosceptic voices barely make it to the eyes of the media, let alone the offices of government, conflicts with EU institutions and perceived abuse in matters of justice and, notably, human rights, have been reported of late. The stakes appear to pertain to at least two paramount

subjects, one of which is the control of the justice system, often camouflaged in the form of an alleged reform, while the other is the management of European funds. While the presidency of the Council does not make a country almighty in European affairs, it is certain that it endows it with a power of influence that is worthy of being studied from the standpoint of its ability to influence the European agenda. Hence, the press plays an important role in informing on the progress, agenda and eventual slips of a presidency.

The first article we shall comment on was published in *Est Républicain*, written by Aurélien Poivret (with AFP) (2019). The title is an open, incentive-based question, formulated in such a manner as to suggest a negative answer: *Can Romania preside over the European Union?*

The editorial underlines the challenges that Romania is likely to face during the presidency. These are chiefly related to Brexit and EP elections. Although Romania has been since its accession to the EU, in 2007, a Europhile country, in recent months, because of the Social Democratic government, the relationship between Bucharest and Brussels has become tense: *Romania takes the presidency of the European Union with a government that today frontally opposes Brussels.*

The judicial reforms proposed by the government are seen by the representatives in Brussels as a measure that enables corrupt Romanian politicians to evade prison, especially the leader of the Social Democratic Party, Liviu Dragnea: *Brussels believes that the justice reform project prepared in Bucharest is only intended to provide amnesty for elected and close officials of the Social Democratic Party in power (PSD) worried about corruption cases... Liviu Dragnea, former Prime Minister (sic!) already convicted for electoral fraud.* On the other hand, the Romanian government considers that these measures are only intended to correct the abuses of certain magistrates and prosecutors who are accused of having set up a "parallel state". President Klaus Iohannis is often seen as a Europhile, who fights against corrupt politicians, the only one who can genuinely represent Romania outside its borders.

Romania is also presented in economic and demographic terms, mentioning that the standard of living of Romanians is amongst the lowest within the EU: *The average gross wage is 970 euros, making it one of the poorest countries of the twenty-eight. (Since the fall of the communist regime in 1989, about 4 million Romanians have gone abroad to live, or 20% of its population).*

Romania's priorities during its mandate are presented extremely succinctly with reference to the webpage of the Presidency made by the Romanian Government. These pertain to *Europe of Convergence*, cohesion in Europe, the development of the EU's *social dimension*, *more attention to migration issues*, *Europe as a global player* and *Europe of common values*.

Liviu Dragnea and Florin Iordache, vice-president of the Chamber of Deputies, are the most outspoken voices against the European Commission, considering that Romania has the right to be

independent, to act according to its Constitution and to take its own decisions. *Liviu Dragnea, who is still considered the strongman of Romania, has described the European Commission as "unfair"...* *The vice-president of the Chamber of Deputies, Florin Iordache, also a member of PSD, was even clearer, adding the gesture to the word.*

The desire of Bucharest to protect its corrupt politicians, the tensions with Brussels on judicial reform, and cohesion as a priority are the main ideas of the article. *At the end of the Romanian presidency, the European Union could have changed its face.*

We shall deal with two articles published in *Le Monde* about Bulgaria's and Romania's presidencies. The first article is assumed by Cécile Ducourtieux (2018), while the article on Romania is assumed by a collective team.

The title of the first article is an educational one, dwelling on the social-economic condition of Bulgaria: *Bulgaria, the poorest of European countries, takes the rotating presidency of the EU.*

The challenges that Sofia has to face are related to finding an optimal solution to the issue of migrants and to the second phase in the negotiation process on Brexit. For Bulgaria, it is the first time that it has held the rotating presidency of the Union in the 10 years since it became a member of the EU. Therefore, without experience in this area, the European Commission helped it, by "lending" 40 officials to cope with the demands of the presidency. *For six months, the Bulgarian officials will be responsible in Brussels for organizing the European ministerial meetings, setting the agendas and working on the formation of consensus.*

Bulgaria's agenda is considered to be loaded and delicate due to the issues it should solve. In the last two years, Europe has been facing an extremely serious problem which has basically led to the shaping of two totally different opinions on the matter of migration. The countries of the former communist bloc reject the idea of "quotas", as this would affect the sovereign decisions of the Member States. This is the point of view of the Polish prime minister, shared by his Hungarian counterpart, Ludovic Orban. On the other hand, three countries, Italy, Sweden and Germany, believe that the Eastern European countries should grant material or logistical support to the issue of migrants. *Its most complicated task will probably be to reach an agreement on a subject that has deeply divided Europe in the last two years: migration.*

The role that Bulgaria must assume within the Presidency is one of neutrality, a difficult position to achieve, because before the crisis, in 2015, the position of the Bulgarian prime minister was more similar to that of the Hungarian leader than to that of Angela Merkel. Another important issue in this discussion is the fact that Bulgaria has a common frontier with Turkey of about 250 km.

Another extremely important challenge for Bulgaria is linked to the second phase of negotiating the Brexit agreement. The difficulty lies in the stubbornness of the British prime minister, Theresa

May, to offer the best trade deal, meaning not leaving the EU's internal market and customs union: *Prime minister Theresa May continues to promise her fellow citizens the best possible trade deal with the EU, while defending an exit from the internal market and the customs union, which will take a considerable toll on British economic actors.*

The multiannual financial framework, i.e. the Union's budget for 2021-2027, also represents a heavy stone test for Sofia. Due to the fact that Britain no longer contributes to the Union's budget, it will face a decrease of 10 billion euros a year. France and Germany aim to condition the distribution of funds on the existence of the rule of law, aimed directly at the "illiberal" excesses in Poland and Hungary.

With a GDP per capita nine times lower than Luxembourg's, Bulgaria hoped, much like Romania, to obtain the country's passport for the Schengen area. This is a major goal that the Bulgarian commissioner, Marya Gabriel, always emphasises: *It is an injustice that cannot last.*

According to the article, neither Bulgaria nor Romania deserved accession to the European Union: *The two states entered the EU through the small door because they were deemed insufficiently prepared.*

Sofia faced three major issues that require annual monitoring by the European Commission in order to observe progress/regressions. These were: corruption, organized crime and reform of the judiciary system. *In a report dated January 2017, the Commission regretted that "the fight against corruption is the sector where Bulgaria has made the least progress in ten years".*

Although the President of the European Commission, Juncker, in 2017, offered support for Bulgaria's entry into the Schengen area, this was hard to achieve because unanimity was needed in the Council. Bulgaria did not prove its fight against corruption even though the president of Bulgaria, Roumen Radev, was personally involved in it.

A loaded agenda - a battle over the budget, negotiations on Brexit, with a divided Europe on "quotas" for Member States on migrants, being closely monitored by the Commission, but with the strong support of Juncker to obtain the passport for the Schengen area, such were the challenges that Bulgaria had to answer.

The title of the second article from *Le Monde* (2019) is informative, but with a negative meaning *Worrying anti-European drifts in Bucharest.*

The relationship between Romania and Brussels is one of distrust, and the attacks on the rule of law in Romania have been increasing. These represent the central points of the *Le Monde* journalist reporting on the Romanian presidency. *The government in Bucharest has not yet fully understood what it means to preside over the countries of the European Union.* The words of Jean-Claude Juncker, President of the European Commission, give an idea of the worrying atmosphere in which Romania took over its first rotating presidency of the EU on Tuesday, 1st January.

According to the article, the Social Democratic Party's goal since winning the 2016 elections has been to launch *a huge offensive* against Romanian justice for the party leader, Liviu Dragnea, *the strong man of the Romanian power* to evade prison and become Prime Minister. In addition, the Romanian leader is on the edge of copying the model of Poland and Hungary of weakening the rule of law. Romania will have the difficult task to determine whether it will sign up on the agenda of the European Council (sic!) the procedure against the two countries mentioned above: *but Bucharest will have to decide in the next few months whether to include on the agenda of the European Council the procedure of sanctions against Warsaw and Budapest for undermining the independence of the judiciary.*

As stated in the article, PSD managed to increase the number of Eurosceptics through a speech that poor and rural Romania accepted and resonated with, while Romania's rich urban areas became apathetic and no longer eager to protest: *In a country so deeply pro-European, PSD has managed to advance Euroscepticism by targeting Brussels.* The cliché used by several personalities of PSD, in their favour, is that of the *influence of the foreigners*. The editorialists' perspective refers to the fact that the European Commission is careful not to activate *Article 7, which punishes states trampling their institutions*, (Hungary and Poland being examples of this particular situation) because it does not want to take drastic measures or to add other countries onto this list. In this regard, the European Commission uses all the instruments it has at its disposal in order to make countries respect its decisions. Consequently, it turned to the European Court of Justice in the case of Poland and for Romania's cases of corruption. Liviu Dragnea is given as an example for a fraud of 21 million euros' worth of European funds, which the European Commission's anti-fraud services brought to the knowledge of the Romanian justice.

A polarized Romania between urban and rural, increasing Eurosceptic discourses, corruption of the political leaders, these are the fundamentals that the article emphasizes with regard to Romania's presidency.

Derek Perrotte (2017) assumes the article on *Les Echos* concerning Bulgaria's presidency. The title informs about the priorities put forward by Bulgaria: *New President of the European Union, Bulgaria wants to help the Balkans.*

Bulgaria's priority is to help Balkan countries and provide a *safe, stable and solidary Europe*. European unity is another priority assumed by Bulgaria. Bulgaria primarily wants European *security with a focus on strengthening border control*. The author's opinion is that during the presidency, Bulgaria will have a limited role, because it is a small country which does not have the necessary force to promote great changes. Other European political personalities will make the rules, amongst whom we find Donald Tusk, the President of the European Council, together with the leaders of large countries, and will decide on matters of Brexit and the Eurozone. The author considers that although

the main priority is the relationship with Western Balkans countries in order to stop Russia's influence in the area, there will be no new EU members during the Bulgarian Presidency.

On the contrary, Estonia, the country from which Bulgaria took over the presidency, succeeded in meeting the goals it had set at the beginning of its agenda, in terms of the digital economy, climate, external borders or detached work, proving that a small county can make important changes during its presidency, which it is not the case of Bulgaria.

A rotating presidency without stakes, a limited role, no new memberships, western Balkan countries as priority, these were the leitmotifs of Bulgaria's presidency that the article brought to the forefront.

It is the same journalist (Perrotte, 2019) that writes about Romania, too. The title expresses the point of view of the author: *Romania takes over EU Presidency amid tensions with Brussels*.

Romania is starting the presidency in a period when three major events will occur: Brexit, the discussions about the EU budget and the European Parliament elections. Meanwhile, inside the country, the anti-Brussels speech is becoming more and more powerful: *the Romanian government is multiplying Eurosceptic declarations...*

Although when it entered the EU and in the years that followed Romania was a Europhile country, lately it has met with a certain authoritarian drift as the leader of the Social Democratic Party, Liviu Dragnea, considers that Brussels leads an *unfair policy* towards Romania, denying it *the right to have its own opinions*.

The tensions between Bucharest and Brussels started from the disagreement on the reform of the legal system. Brussels accuses Bucharest of failing the rule of law, citing two other countries, Poland and Hungary, which have confronted this issue. The author considers corruption to be generalized in Romania: *According to the European institutions, the manoeuvres of power undermine the fight against corruption, which is endemic to the country*. If Romania changes its legislation according to the desire of the Social Democratic Party, the EU may consider that Romania would no longer be credible at European level. *Tension could rise again as Bucharest says it is determined to adopt an amnesty decree that Brussels calls a red line*. The tense internal situation between President Klaus Iohannis and the leftist government does little but to aggravate the context of the presidency, so that the latter cannot have an innovative or ambitious agenda: *Romania will also find it difficult to speak with one voice as the coexistence between the left-wing majority and the centre-right president Klaus Iohannis, a convinced Europhile, is complex*. The journalist believes that Romania will finalize the current EU dossiers, but nothing more. The disbelief in Romania's ability to have an ambitious presidency is summed up by Juncker, who believes that Romania is not fully capable of assuming the presidency. The author's perspective regarding the negotiations on the EU budget for 2021-2027 is

that Romania will postpone the discussions, although he mentioned that it was the country in Europe with the greatest economic growth. (6.9% in 2017).

Authoritarian drifts, the tense internal cohabitation between the president and the government, generalized corruption in the country, attempts to change the judicial system to save corrupt politicians, the irrelevant agenda of the EU presidency characterize Romania's presidency at the beginning of 2019, according to journalist Derek Perrote.

With regard to the article published in *Le Parisien*, journalist Philippe Martinat (2019) opted for an ironic, suggestive headline: *Romania, another puzzle for Europe*.

The author considers that given the fact that Romania has taken over the EU presidency, another issue is added to the two extremely important ones, Brexit and the European Parliament elections. In his opinion, Romania, although a Europhile country at first, due to Social Democratic Party leader Liviu Dragnea, has made a populist and nationalist leap, extremely dangerous for the EU, much like Hungary and Poland. *The strongman of Romania, Liviu Dragnea, head of PSD and president of the Chamber of Deputies, was prevented from becoming prime minister because of his suspended prison sentence for electoral fraud, and has two other corruption trials pending.* PSD - seen as the heir to the Communist Party, does little but to antagonize President Klaus Iohannis, a declared Europhile, and Brussels, because the socialists want to amend the judiciary system in order to have the most corrupt politicians evade prison time. *Dragnea, who keeps pulling the strings in the government, is trying to push through a reform of the judicial system meant to muzzle the judges. Exasperated, the population took massively to the streets.* The internal cohabitation between president Iohannis and the leftist government is seen as a difficult one, leading nowhere.

Since the rule of law is attacked by these attempts, the European Parliament intervened with a resolution urging Romania to abide by this core principle. Moreover, even the President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, considers that Romania cannot chair the EU: *The Bucharest government has not yet fully understood what it means to preside over EU countries.* Therefore, the mandate of Romania is seen as a very thorny one, and the Finnish presidency is expected with hope and trust.

With internal issues such as the tumultuous relationship between the President and the government, and the attempts of the socialist government to weaken the state, to which are added European issues - Brexit and the European parliamentary elections - Romania's presidency is seen as a very long one. *In July, Finland will take over. But by then, the six months under the Romanian presidency will be very long.*

The journal *La Croix*, through Agence France Presse (2017), characterizes the status of Bulgaria, both economically and as a member of the EU: *Poor and pro-European, Bulgaria takes over the presidency of the EU.*

Bulgaria's priorities are to build relations between Eastern and Western Europe and find the best solutions to the migration issue. Bulgaria is presented as the poorest country in the European Union. Another negative point is that the country suffers from endemic corruption. Nevertheless, the country has reached a certain level of stability, especially due to its Prime Minister, Boyko Borissov.

The purpose of the Bulgarians during their mandate is to convince European officials that they deserve the passport for entry into the Schengen area and the Eurozone, and consequently to improve the country's image.

Unlike the Visegrad countries (Poland, Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia) that have refused immigrants, Sofia has accepted the policy of reallocating refugees as it needs European money, so its attitude will be presented in terms of reconciliation. In this context, the slogan of Bulgarians is *Unity Makes Strength*. Aware of the importance of European funds for the development of their country, Sofia will maintain cordial relations with Brussels officials. The text brings into attention a quotation of a European diplomat who asserts that *Bulgaria is one of the few ex-communist countries in the EU that value European funds, which have provided 66% of its growth since 2007. It does not create difficulties in migration policy.*

Bulgaria's agenda is a busy one: from maintaining good relations with Turkey (*Mr Borissov also calls for improved relations between the EU and Turkey, with which his country shares 259 km of land border*) on the issue of migrants to the support for the Western Balkan countries in terms of EU accession, or the negotiations of the post-Brexit phase. These actions will be conducted under the auspices of reconciliation, Sofia's bet being that of a mediator within the EU. *With this conciliatory attitude, the government of Boyko Borissov sees itself as a mediator on the most difficult subjects.*

Seen as an expert on regional issue, Bulgaria's main goal is to help Western Balkans countries to gain access to the EU. Signs of encouragement from the EU are vital for these countries (Corpădean, 2018, 86-105): *An EU-Balkans summit is scheduled for May. Of the countries of the former Yugoslavia, and Albania, only Serbia and Montenegro have so far entered into accession negotiations with the EU. Bulgaria wants the EU to send signs of encouragement to this region: the progress of rail and road infrastructure projects, as well as the decrease in roaming charges for EU-Balkans telephony would be worthy of concrete progress.*

Endemic corruption, Bulgaria's priorities and agenda are revealed in the article as the main features.

Anouk Helft's title (2018) written for *La Croix* is a negative one, emphasizing from the beginning the helplessness of the Romanian presidency *Romania, a bad student at the helm of the EU.*

The journalist starts the article by quoting the President of the European Commission, who believes that Romania cannot preside over the Council, especially because the socialist government is trying to change the laws on justice. Europe is confronted with two important events: Brexit and the European Parliamentary elections. And as if these had not been enough, the Romanian presidency is also added. *However, the country of Central Europe, when it arrives at the presidency of the Council for the first time, increases the provocations against Brussels, which does not need this in a period when Eurosceptics multiply their attacks.* The relations between Bucharest and Brussels have deteriorated lately because of the PSD government, whose leader, Liviu Dragnea, wants amnesty for the corrupt politicians of PSD, including for himself. As in the other articles, the same worries are observed. *If adopted, this project would allow amnesty and pardon of individuals accused of corruption. The measure is likely to favour prominent members of PSD with a criminal record, including Dragnea himself, and is strongly denounced by the opposition.* The European Parliament reacted to the government's intention to reform the judiciary through a resolution in which it expressed its worries and preoccupations. The Parliament was *very worried about the redrafting of the legislation governing the Romanian judicial system and penal system.* The PSD government considers that Parliament's approach is *unfair* and has transformed European institutions into a target for criticism. Albeit the relations are tense, the journalist believes that the Romanian government will have to defend its image of a democratic state, and in addition, it needs European funds for the country's development. *Romania does not have any interest in quarrelling with the EU in the coming months.* Therefore, it will make a compromise. Brussels will also make a compromise with Romania, as it is unwilling to have tense relations with a state holding the EU presidency. The journalist draws the conclusion, considering that Romania, 30 years after the collapse of Ceausescu's regime, is the most polarized country in Europe. In the same regard, the fracture between a centre-right president, Iohannis, and a socialist government, shows nothing but an ideological and political cleavage between urban and rural Romania.

Deteriorated relations between Bucharest and Brussels, a worrying resolution of the European Parliament against Romania's attempts to weaken the state of law, tense internal relations between the president and the government, Brexit, the European elections, the EU budget for 2021-2027, these are the main leitmotifs on which the journalist has structured the article.

Conclusions

Bulgaria and Romania have benefitted, for the first time since they became members of the European Union, in 2007, from the chance to exercise the rotating presidency of the Council. The

presidency of the EU Council gives countries the opportunity to assert themselves on the international stage, as well as to accumulate image capital.

The editorials written in French national journals that we have focus our analysis on have an informative purpose and are endowed with the power of influence traditionally associated with the French press. A few constants are seen in all the journals analysed with respect to the Romanian presidency. It is thus noted an internal tense political situation between the centre-right president, Klaus Iohannis, a convinced Europhile, and the PSD government, a leftist one, considered to be somewhat anti-European – in the light of the usual approach encountered in the western press, this is not very surprising. Another constant refers to the fact that the PSD government wants to protect its perceivably corrupt politicians (Liviu Dragnea is given as an example in this regard) and for this, it strives to change the laws on justice. This is to some extent a reductionist view, which echoes some voices from the European Commission and the Romanian people, but fails to take into account the position of the Romanian government, often not at all included, against the customs of an unbiased media. According to the articles cited, the phenomenon has resulted in a split between Bucharest and Brussels. Therefore, the journalists consider that this attempt at changing the laws on justice would do nothing but weaken the rule of law, citing in this respect two states that have tried the same thing: Poland and Hungary – albeit without clearly making a case for this parallel. In our opinion, it is quite strange that the priorities and the challenges - the most important aspects of the presidency of a country - of Romania during its mandate (Brexit, the European elections, the negotiations for the 2021-2027 budget) are not discussed in any of the articles, thus leaving an information gap. We have also remarked that two articles contain some terminological inaccuracies (Dragnea is presented as former Prime Minister and the Council of the European Union is mistaken for the European Council).

On Bulgaria's presidency, on the contrary, the constant (two of three articles) makes reference to the priorities assumed, i.e. helping the western Balkans countries to join the European Union. Each article adds other information (from the support offered by the President of the European Commission to join the Schengen area up to the conciliating policy of Sofia concerning the “quotas” on migration issues, from endemic corruption to the fact that their mandate is limited).

The titles of the articles are subjective, reflecting the editorialist's opinions but doing little more. The titles with reference to Romania have a negative, ironic significance, inducing to the reader the idea that Romania will not be able to handle its new position in the European Union. As concerns Bulgaria, the titles express the economic situation of the country (two of three articles) in comparison with the EU Member States, and the third title indicates the priorities during the mandate.

Some articles take the two presidencies individually, others collectively, which is once again indicative of the propensity of the western media to associate Romania and Bulgaria, in the light of

the two undergoing an integration endeavour at the same time, but without drawing convincing parallels in this regard.

Not all of the journals analysed have had editorials about the presidency of both countries, showing that the presidency of Romania stirred up more interest than that of Bulgaria. From the five analysed newspapers, three offered editorial space to Bulgaria and five to Romania.

In conclusion, the leitmotif of the analyses revolves around the idea that the Romanian Presidency stirs many signs of concern, while Bulgaria was treated with more leniency. This is heavily reliant on the perception of the two countries' relations with the European Union at this time, which indicates that the French press, mostly Europhile, echoes this state of affairs, which takes its toll on the quality and completeness of the information it provides to the public.

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