

# Taking Over the Rotating Presidency of the Council of the European Union by Romania: A Psychosocial Approach

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## Abstract

*The 2018<sup>th</sup> Eurobarometer shows that "the number of Romanians who have a positive image about the EU is also rising above the European average (52% vs. EU average of 43%)". In order to analyze the perception of Romanians regarding the taking over of the Presidency of the Council of the European Union by Romania, starting with January 2019, but also other important issues concerning Romania in its context of member state, we applied a questionnaire with 8 questions constructed as follows: (1) the degree of knowledge about the studied issue, (2) awareness of the importance of the studied subject, (3) assessment of the perception on the standard of living, (4) scenario regarding the positive and negative future of Romania as a member state. The questionnaire was distributed, between May 3-5, 2019, to the students of the Faculty of Law and Administrative Sciences ("Ovidius" University of Constanta).*

**Key words:** European Union; Romania; The Presidency of the Council of the European Union

**J.E.L. classification:** P48

## 1. Introduction

Romania started to negotiate with West-European countries from the first years since the transition to a democratic system from communism. So, on February 1, 1993 (on February 1<sup>st</sup>, 1995 the agreement became effective), Romania signed the European Agreement, which establishes an association between Romania and European Union states. In the same year, in June 1993, Romania submits the application for joining to the EU and 2 years later, in 1997, the European Commission adopts the Agenda 2000, which includes the Statement on Romania's accession request. In November 1998, the European Commission publishes the first Country Report on the process of Romania's accession to the European Union, and in June 1999, Romania adopts the National Plan of Accession to the European Union. In December of the same year, in Helsinki (Finland), the European Council decides to start accession negotiations with six candidate countries, including Romania.

In 2000, in February, at the meeting of the EU General Affairs Council, dedicated to launching the Intergovernmental Conference, the accession negotiations with Romania are officially opened.

## 2. Theoretical background

In 2002, 3 major events favor Romania's accession to the European Union: (1) November 13 - Commission adopts a "Roadmap" for Romania and Bulgaria, (2) November 20 - European Parliament considers January 1, 2007 as target date for Romania's accession to the European Union and (3) December 12-13 - The Copenhagen European Council decides on the accession of 10 new Member States and adopts the roadmaps for Romania and Bulgaria.

On March 26, 2003, the European Commission presents the revised edition of the Accession Partnership with Romania, and on December 17, 2004, at the European Council in Brussels, Romania receives the political confirmation of the conclusion of the accession negotiations with the European Union.

The following year, 2005, the European Parliament voted for the accession of Romania and Bulgaria to the European Union, and on April 25, during an official ceremony, held at the Neumunster Abbey in Luxembourg, the President of Romania, Traian Băsescu, signs the Treaty of Accession to the European Union. Starting with January 1st, 2007, Romania becomes a member state of the E.U., but this accession procedure came with a series of specific measures that the Government had to take to raise performance indices in several fields of activity, like: food safety, agricultural funds, judicial system reform and the fight against corruption. During January-June 2019, Romania took over, for the first time, the rotating Presidency of the Council of the European Union. This journey from Romania to Europe was described by Dimitris Papadimitriou and David Phinnemore (2008) in 2 stages, as follows: (1) 1989-1997 - from isolation to incomplete rehabilitation, (2) 1997-2007 - from rehabilitation to accession in the EU.

Even so, Tom Gallagher (2013) considers that Romania joined the European Union on some relaxed or collateral criteria with the key areas. "The European Union (EU) revealed itself to be an institution that had great difficulty projecting democratic values and indeed ethical forms of capitalism into inhospitable terrain. Political power continued to be wielded by a narrow set of parties and economic interest groups. The shape of the *acquis communautaire* determined the nature of the EU's engagement with Romania" (Gallagher, T., 2013). Moreover, Gallagher argues that the European Union has failed to combat high-level corruption and political clientelism, lowering the Community's general standards at the level of the Romanian political system. He also characterizes this EU policy decision as a mistake, arguing that "under-developed state now finds itself within the Union". (Gallagher, T., 2013)

However, the perception of Romanians regarding the status of member country of the European Union has undergone fluctuations from the moment of accession until now. In 2011, following a study by Tasente Tanase and Ciacu Nicoleta (2011), it appears that: "67% of the respondents stated that they generally have a good image about the EU and only 19% labeled as very good the image they have about European Union". At the same time, we can notice that "46% of the respondents consider that Romania joined the European Union only on geopolitical and geostrategic criteria and not due to the economic performances or the effort to harmonize the Romanian legislation with the European one, and 45% of the respondents stated that their financial situation did not change after Romania's accession to the EU, but for 22% the accession to the EU meant a worse economic situation" (Tasente, Ciacu, 2011).

Moreover, Klaus Armingeon and Besir Ceka (2014) noticed that, during the 2007<sup>th</sup> economic downturn, the European population, including Romanians, haven't lost trust in European Union institutions more than they lost trust in national governments. "Only part of the loss of support is directly related to EU policies toward the countries that came under EU and IMF surveillance" (Armingeon, Ceka, 2014). The same study shows that Romanian changed their trust in EU from 77% (in 2007) to 69% (in 2011) during the economic crisis, especially because adopting by the government's unpopular austerity measures.

The 2018<sup>th</sup> Eurobarometer shows that "the number of Romanians who have a positive image about the EU is also rising above the European average (52%, compared to a European average of 43%)". Moreover, half of Romanians trust the European Union (compared to an EU average of 42%), and 51% of Romanians believe that their voice matters in the EU (EU average is of 49%). At the same time, 56% of Romanians have a positive perception of the situation of the European economy (EU average is 49%), and 48% of Romanians are optimistic about the labor market situation (compared to an EU average of 44%).

On January 1st, 2019, Romania took over the Presidency of the Council of the European Union, for a period of 6 months, according to the rotating system introduced in the Lisbon Treaty of 2009. The rotating presidency system involves a collaboration between the 3 successive presidents, also called "trios". "The current trio (2019–20) is made up of Romania (January–June 2019), Finland (July–December 2019) and Croatia (January–June 2020)", according to the European Council's website (2019). In 2003, Ken Kollman considers that the rotating system of the Presidency of the

European Council is "a curious, and unusual, institutional feature" (Kollman, 2003) and may be a good policy, but once the European Union exceeds 20 Member States, this procedure may no longer be sustainable (Kollman, K., 2003). According to Agnes Batory and Uwe Puetter (2012), the EU's rotating trio Council Presidency model can be described as attempt to "re-adjust the balance between consistency and diversity" and the rotation remains "a key-instrument for ensuring the representation of the diversity of member states in an enlarged Union".

According to the Treaty of Lisbon, "the presidency is responsible for driving forward the Council's work on EU legislation, ensuring the continuity of the EU agenda, orderly legislative processes and cooperation among member states. To do this, the presidency must act as an honest and neutral broker". Moreover, the presidency of the Council has two main tasks: (1) Planning and chairing meetings in the Council and its preparatory bodies and (2) Representing the Council in relations with the other EU institutions.

### **3. Research methodology**

With the starting point of the results of the above-described research, we set out to conduct a study focused on three major objectives, namely: (1) the opinion of Romanians on the image of the Union European, (2) the degree of knowledge and perception of the Romanians regarding the taking over of the rotating presidency of the Council of the European Union, in January 2019 and (3) positive and negative projections on the future of Romania as a member country of the European Union.

In order to analyze the perception of Romanians regarding the taking over of the Presidency of the Council of the European Union by Romania, starting with January 2019, but also other important issues concerning Romania in its context of member state, we applied a questionnaire with 8 questions constructed as follows: (1) the degree of knowledge about the studied issue, (2) awareness of the importance of the studied subject, (3) assessment of the perception on the standard of living, (4) scenario regarding the positive future of Romania as a member state, (5) scenario regarding the negative future of Romania as a member state.

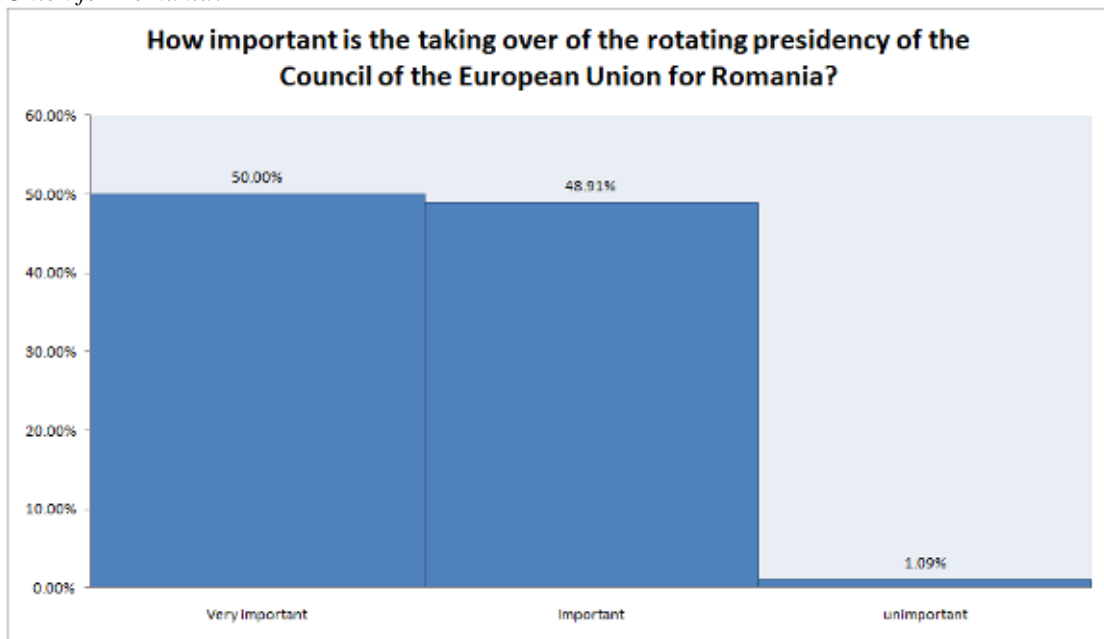
The questionnaire was distributed, between May 3-5, 2019, to the students of the Faculty of Law and Administrative Sciences of the "Ovidius" University of Constanta and was completed by 92 persons. The sample consists of 83.70% women and 16.30% men. Most of the respondents (77.17%, are aged 18-25 years, 11.96% - 26-35 years, 7.61% - 36-45 years and 3.26% - 46-55 years. 51.09% of the respondents come from the environment rural, and 48.91% - from the urban area.

### **4. Data analysis**

Most of the respondents (73.91%) were aware that, starting with January 1, 2019, Romania assumed the presidency of the Council of the European Union, and 26.09% of them did not know this. Moreover, 50% of the respondents consider that taking over the rotating presidency by Romania is a very important thing for the country, 48.91% consider it an important thing, and 1.09% think it is an important thing.

46.74% of the respondents consider that the current Government is unprepared for this role, 26.09% - prepared, 26.09% - not prepared, 1.09% - very prepared. At the same time, 52.17% of the respondents replied that, according to their knowledge, Romania no longer held the presidency of the EU Council (correct answer), 44.57% - they did not know how to answer, and 3.26% replied that it did not held in the past (wrong answer). Half of the respondents (50%) said that their life is the same as before Romania's accession to the EU, 40.22% - their life is better, 9.78% - their life is worse than before their accession.

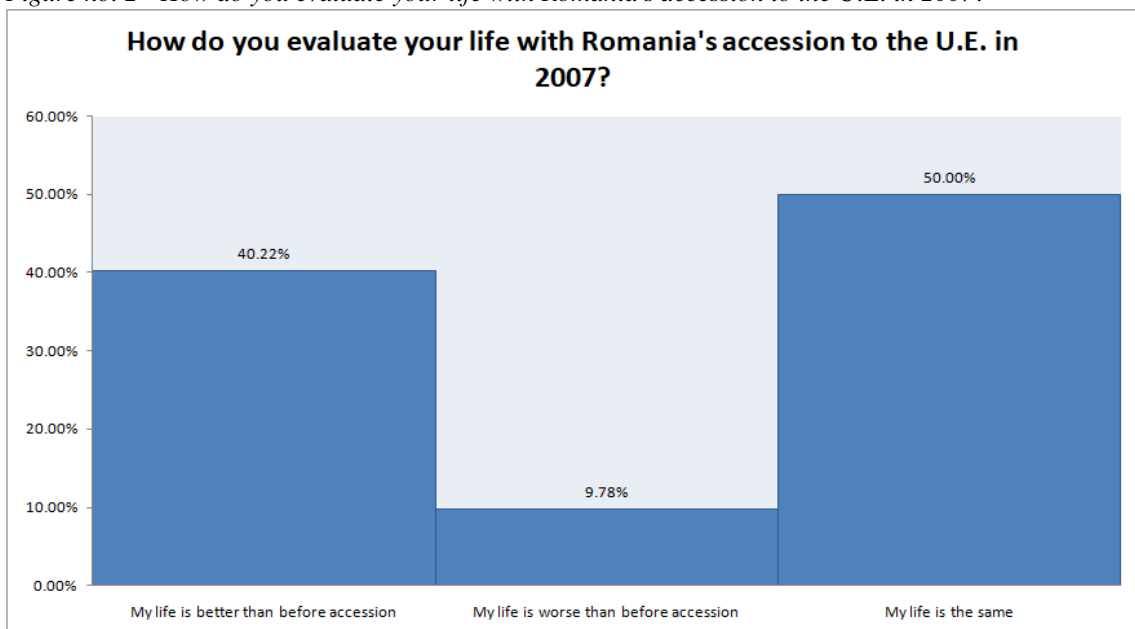
Figure no. 1 - How important is the taking over of the rotating presidency of the Council of the European Union for Romania?



Source: Authors' contribution

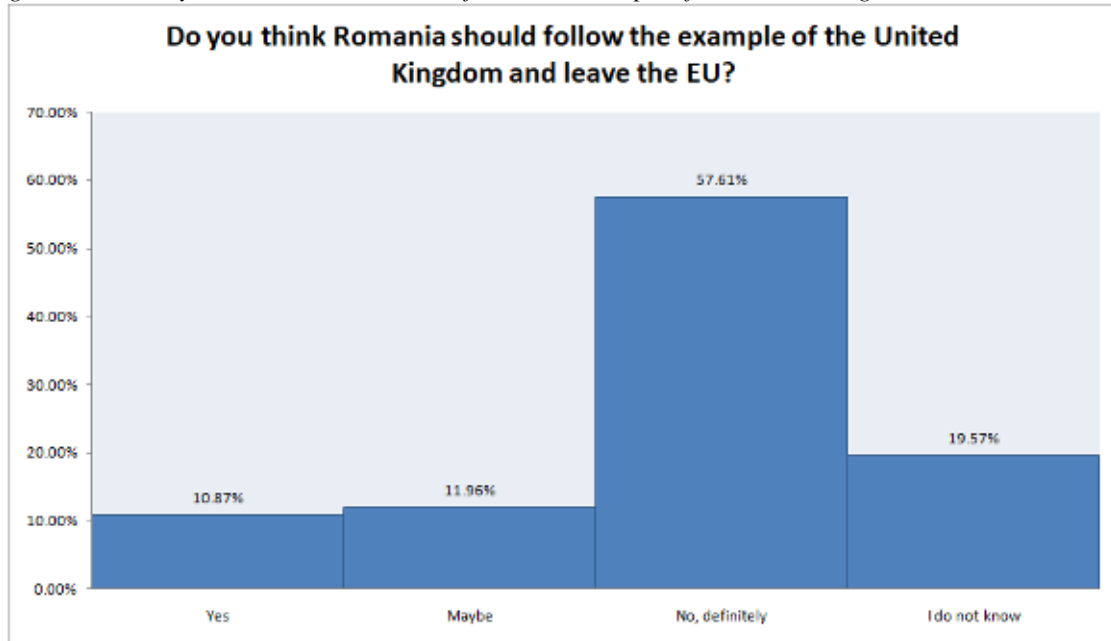
At the question "What are Romania's chances of joining Schengen in the context of taking over the EU Council presidency?", 39.13% consider that Romania's chances of joining Schengen have increased due to the new context, 25% - chances have not increased, 33, 70% believe that we will not enter Schengen in 2019. At the same time, asked if they believe that Romania should follow the UK and leave the EU, 57.61% of respondents answered that Romania should not leave the EU, 19.57% - do not know, 11, 96% - maybe, and 10.87% consider that Romania should leave the EU.

Figure no. 2 - How do you evaluate your life with Romania's accession to the U.E. in 2007?



Source: Authors' contribution

Figure no. 3 - Do you think Romania should follow the example of the United Kingdom and leave the EU?



Source: Authors' contribution

### 3. Conclusions

According to the results of the study, we can see that the majority of Romanians (73.91%) are informed about the major events of Romania regarding its status as a member of the European Union, but a significant percentage (about 48%) did not know that Romania takes over for the first time the rotating presidency of the EU Council, and about two-thirds of the respondents did not know or answered incorrectly when asked what time Romania will hold the EU Council presidency. At the same time, almost all the respondents confirmed that this event is important and very important for Romania, although about 3 quarters of those questioned categorize the Romanian Government as unprepared for such responsibility.

Looking at the scenario in which Romania would be favored for joining the Schengen area in the context of taking over the presidency of the U.N. Council, 4 out of 10 respondents believe that the chances have increased. On the other hand, when asked if Romania should leave the European Union, following the UK example, over half of the respondents believe that Romania should not leave the EU, 30% are undecided and only 10.87% believe that Romania should leave the EU

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