

## AUSTRIA'S EXPERIENCE AND THE GOALS OF ROMANIA TO THE PRESIDENCY OF THE COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

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**Abstract.** *The European political news from the recent past and the limits of the objectives of the present is facing with different challenges to the history of the European Union, becoming a political and economic entity made up of decision-making bodies among which Council of the European Union bringing together the Ministers of the Governments of the Member States. The theme chosen propose to analyze the Austrian experience at the presidency of the EU Council and the beginning of the Romanian Presidency in terms of the proposed objectives and the challenges that have altered the European agenda. The aim of the analysis is to discover the continuity and challenges of the agenda of the EU Council for the two states, in particular, Austria.*

**Keywords:** *Council of the European Union; Austria; Sebastian Kurz; Romania.*

The idea of the United Europe makes one note a necessity of European (re)construction after the Second World War as guided by the peacekeeping of European society inside and within its borders threatened by the sphere of political influence of the Soviet Union. The history of reflections on “European order” has recorded a series of debates and analyzes from both political personalities in western Europe and from representatives from Central and Eastern Europe. The start-up challenges of the European construct are identified by André Fontaine’s statement on the unity of Europe, “namely a mixture of French imagination, pressure of the American, reluctance of the Benelux, dynamism of the German and fear of the Russians”<sup>1</sup>.

The European political news from the recent past and the limits of the objectives of the present is facing with different challenges to the history of the European Union, becoming a political and economic entity made up of decision-making bodies among which Council of the European Union bringing together the Ministers of the Governments of the Member States.

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<sup>1</sup> Bertrand Vayssière, *Vers une Europe federale?*, Bruxelles, 2006, pp. 316-317.

Pol. Sc. Int. Rel., XVI, 2, pp. 79–86, Bucharest, 2019.

In the second part of 2018, the Austrian state took over the presidency of the Council of the European Union for the third time since 1998 and 2006. Austria held the presidency of the EU Council until the end of 2018 when it was taken over by our country. This was the third country of the Trio, alongside Estonia (second half of 2017) and Bulgaria (first half of 2018).

*Imagine the past and remember the future?*

The recent experience of the Austrian EU Council Presidency<sup>2</sup> has seen new challenges at the level of European policies which can lead, in the context of international relations to the outlined changes, to the paradoxical question of Lewis Bernstein Namier, “Imagine the past and remember the future?”<sup>3</sup> That is, to imagine the past in order to find the roots of the problems of international politics from the point of view of today’s European project.

The official inauguration of the bridge by Austrian Chancellor, Alfons Gorbach in 1963 was marked by the following statement: “Can this bridge connect the peoples of Europe in peace and freedom” and this bridge symbol was invoked by Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz in almost every speech, as was the one in the European Parliament in Strasbourg on 3 July 2018: “We want to be bridge builders and focus on topics where we can work together”<sup>4</sup>.

Upon taking over the presidency of the EU Council of Austria there were at least three central aspects of the European Union: the new European Commission proposal on the EU’s seven-year budget, a difficult dossier, a common approach to migration and asylum, and the Brexit negotiations. If the complicated negotiations of the EU budget the challenges of illegal migration and Brexit negotiations can be sustained by 2020 could not fail.

Thus, it was no coincidence that the Austrian Presidency at the EU Council had the motto: “Ein Europa, das schützt”/ “A Europe that protects” and as major objectives the security and the fight against illegal migration, ensuring prosperity and competitiveness through digitalization and European stability. Sebastian Kurz, in his capacity as Chancellor of Austria and President of the EU Council, has asserted its firm stance in the fight against illegal migration, following the assumed dictum of protecting and securing Europe when the challenges of the trade conflict with the United States, the wave of migration in southern Europe or the “no deal” Brexit transformed the initial agenda Austria in his capacity as mediator in successful management, according to public expectations during the six-month presidency.

The head of the Austrian government, Sebastian Kurz, launched as a major priority within the presidency of the EU Council reducing immigration on all

<sup>2</sup> Austria became a Member State of the European Union in January 1995 and the Presidency of the EU Council recovered from July to December 1998; January – June 2006; July – December 2018. This time, the presidency of the EU Council was different for the Vienna government. With the Treaty of Lisbon, the role of the country holding the presidency in office for a six-month period has changed, this means that space for political maneuver has been reduced for the responsible country.

<sup>3</sup> Edward Hallett Carr, *Sei lezioni sulla storia*, Torino, 1966, p. 131.

<sup>4</sup> Stephanie Liechtenstein, *Austria’s EU presidency: a bridge over troubled water?*, in <https://euobserver.com/>, on September 19, 2018.

routes in a context where misunderstandings over a common European migration policy have demonstrated the inability of a settlement, and Italy has taken measures to close ports in order not to receive ships carrying migrants in distress. The isolation of Europe from the wave of migration has been designed as a common goal through the voice of Sebastian Kurz; "It was not so in 2015. Now it is, and this is a step in the right direction"<sup>5</sup>.

A consensus on the management of migrants did not exist in the European Union. The Government of Rome has been requesting for years that refugees recognized as such by Italy should be transferred to other states of the Union. Slovakia and Hungary struggled unsuccessfully against a European directive in 2015 and Austria, like many other EU states, has not met its share of migrants. However, Austria has pledged to improve the protection of the EU's external borders and to support the substantial expansion of the Frontex agency despite the statement by Saskia Stachowitsch, the director of the Austrian Institute for International Politics in Vienna, who argued that a much larger increase in staff is unrealistic because it is costly and difficult to achieve.

Although, in the margin of EU presidency, Chancellor Sebastian Kurz explained in several interviews and statements, as he stated at the beginning of the term, that his government wanted "to play a mediating role, mediation between radicalized fronts,"<sup>6</sup> Jean Asselborn, Luxembourg's foreign minister, said in reply for Spiegel: "A presidency has the task of bringing together fundamental positions. I do not think it is fair, good or European, but rather confusing that the Austrian presidency is so categorically placed on the part of the Visegrad countries<sup>7</sup>. This thing will harm the European Union! Without a common European solution for burden-sharing, ie the balanced distribution of migrants across Europe, the ongoing migration dispute cannot be resolved"<sup>8</sup>.

Austria takes over the presidency of the EU Council against the backdrop of internal policies that it has advocated in recent years promoting intransigence in terms of immigration, without compromise solutions<sup>9</sup> to combat illegal migration at the level of European projects. Thus, the motto "A Europe that protects" has risked turning into a Europe with contradictory tendencies. At the other end of the Austrian border protection project by isolating the wave of migrants, the project of Germany, whose policy is remarkable for maintaining open borders.

In the European Form Alpbach, Sebastian Kurz, referring to the fact that Austria wishes to maintain its course of building bridges for European unity and cohesion, declared on August 27, 2018, *whether we allow ourselves to be separated from within or outside our motto "unity in diversity" will soon turn into separation in uniformity.*

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.jurnalulromanesc.at>.

<sup>6</sup> Steven Erlanger, Katrin Bennhold, *For Europe, Cutting the Flow of Migrants Challenges Basic Ideals*, in "The New York Times", July, 5, 2018.

<sup>7</sup> Austria had, at the beginning of the presidency of the EU Council, 4 allies, 4 countries with whom they shared many common ideas, starting with migration. These are those in the Visegrad group, Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia.

<sup>8</sup> "Spiegel Online", July, 30, 2018.

<sup>9</sup> Note that Sebastian Kurz (People's Party) took over the political leadership of Austria together with the anti-immigration party, the Freedom Party.

A topic that opened the way for demanding talks for Austria as a mediator was the negotiation of the Community budget<sup>10</sup> for the next seven years (2021-2027) and this time without the UK. The financial budget for the years 2021-2027 is the first budget prepared without the Great Kingdom. To compensate for the loss of a contributor, the contributions of the other states should increase, according to a European Commission proposal. Chancellor Sebastian Kurz has at the declarative level rejected the Commission's proposal to increase the contribution due to the loss of a contributor, which it considers "unacceptable" and launched "tough and long negotiations".

Another priority within the Austrian presidency of the Council of the EU was to launch the final proceedings of the Brexit negotiations for the UK not to leave the European Union without agreeing and clarifying some controversial aspects from the British side as possible border controls between Ireland the Northern and the Republic of Ireland and the Britain's (or not) stay in the single market.

At the end of the six-month presidency of the EU Council, the promise of Chancellor Sebastian Kurz, the youngest European bloc leader, to act as a "bridge builder in the European Union" was not fully successful but partly successful. Brexit's negotiations reached agreement on "withdrawal and political declaration" but the Austrian Presidency has worked very hard to maintain EU-27 unity and this "goal has been reached" according to the EU negotiator Michel Barnier.

An ambitious goal within the Austrian presidency was to boost the integration of the western Balkans, according to Sebastian Kurz's speech in July 2018: "The European Union project can only be considered in our opinion once the western Balkan states become, also part of our united Europe"<sup>11</sup>. In this regard, have been undertaken diplomatic meetings to open negotiations with Serbia and Kosovo by Austrian Foreign Minister Karin Kneissl. Meetings, though disappointing, have opened up negotiations with Montenegro and Serbia.

A statement that sparked rumors in European political circles was when Sebastian Kurz pleaded for «new channels of negotiations with Russia to resolve the Ukrainian conflict»<sup>12</sup>.

The Austrian Chancellor's priority, which was maintained throughout the presidency of the EU Council, was the protection of European ash and the paradigm shift in migration policy where it did not achieve the foreseen progress because it did not have the European political majority support for the strengthening of Frontex and a *better external border control but only in return and cooperation policies with third countries*. A relevant example is the EU informal summit in Salzburg on 20 September where EU Member States along the EU's external border, such as Italy, Spain, Greece and Hungary, did not show interest to assume more obligations border control.

<sup>10</sup> As an important point, the negotiations on the previous EU budget for 2014-2020 it took two and a half years.

<sup>11</sup> [http://www.cdep.ro/afaceri\\_europene/afeur/2018/ags\\_2512.pdf](http://www.cdep.ro/afaceri_europene/afeur/2018/ags_2512.pdf).

<sup>12</sup> Vasile Damian, *Migrants, Borders, Economy – Priorities of the Austrian Presidency of the EU*, in "RFI", July 4, 2018.

An apparent attempt to change the narrative on migration was the organization and hosting in Vienna of the EU-Africa Forum on 18 December 2018, entitled “Cooperation in the Digital Age”. The participation of more than twenty African leaders and a few entrepreneurs in Vienna opened the door for a dialogue and the promise of 2 billion euros for Africa was overshadowed by the lack of participation of the main European partners, Angela Merkel and Emmanuel Macron. Clearly, the presence of the extreme right in power in Austria and Italy coupled with the new migrant crisis has significantly changed the strength of the European policy of the Member States.

Beyond the challenges the Austrian Presidency has had, it is important to highlight a meritorious episode of the European political experience at the EU Council of Austria, namely the declaration on the fight against anti-Semitism<sup>13</sup>.

At the end of the presidency of the Council of the European Union Chancellor Sebastian Kurz said that *he sought to act as a neutral and honest negotiator in order to achieve compromises among the 28 and the EU Presidency means a lot of additional work and the work done by civil servants should not be underestimated. Progress has been made in combating illegal migration. There are 85% less illegal immigrants than in 2015, we have fewer deaths in the Mediterranean. We have managed to reach an agreement on Frontex.*

Recent analyzes and political debates about the Austrian presidency estimates a mixed result, meaning a combination of positive and negative aspects and qualities, and the inadequacy of objectives with the realities of European policies that over time can quantify the political, economic impact.

### *Romania to the Presidency of the EU Council*

The assumption for the first time of the Presidency of the Council of the European Union by Romania on 1 January 2019 legitimizes not only the European political momentum of our country but also the history of the political ideals of the Romanian thinkers worth mentioning.

Among the promoters of European unification are the Romanians: Grigore Gafencu, George Ciorănescu and Leontin Jean Constantinescu who fought for the federalization of Europe in order to ensure a “European balance” in which the western Europe unit would ensure the optimal conditions in the process of unification of the whole of Europe.

The preoccupation for finding solutions to pacify Europe through federalization was one of Grigore Gafencu’s outstanding goals, developing them in various concepts<sup>14</sup>. Grigore Gafencu believed in the European project as a common reality and a common sense in which “Europe is not only a political but an imperious

<sup>13</sup> See Stephanie Liechtenstein, *Goodnight, Vienna! Mixed bag from Austrian presidency*, [https:// euobserver.com/](https://euobserver.com/), on December 26, 2018.

<sup>14</sup> In his work, *Preliminaries of the Eastern War*, Bilingual edition, Curtea Veche Publishing House, Bucharest, 2011, Grigore Gafencu outlined some scenarios for the organization of post-war Europe in the form of subregional groups or confederations, namely: “Northern Confederation”, “Confederation including the Filanda, the Eastern Confederation, the Confederation of the Center, Poland and Czechoslovakia, and the South East Confederation, a reunification of the Balkan Entente countries, i.e. Romania, Turkey, Greece, Yugoslavia and Bulgaria.

necessity”<sup>15</sup> It has issued the thesis of unifying Europe in opposition to the thesis of dividing the continent into two spheres of influence, supported by several European intellectuals, including the Belgian professor Henri Pirenne or the Italian historian Guilelmo Ferrero. The statement “without East, but not against the East” pronounced by Denis de Rougemont in the European Federalist Movement was understood by Grigore Gafencu as an abandon not only of federalist principles but also of European unity. The idea of the federalist (re) set up around the states of western Europe, representing in reality the price of the second unfinished peace<sup>16</sup>.

After the results of the Congressional Conference of Europe in The Hague in May 1948, Grigore Gafencu had the initiative of forming a Romanian Group for a Unified Europe with the objective of “believing in the European idea”. The advanced reflections of (re) vitalization of the idea of European unity of Grigore Gafencu was officially recognized on April 8, 1956, occasioned by his election as president of the Central Committee of the European Union of the Federalists.

Another promoter and follower of the idea of European construction was George Ciorănescu, who co-authored the same for a European unit, participating in the second congress of the European Movement (Hague, 8-10 October 1953). After the congress, George Ciorănescu addressed a message to Radio Free Europe, stressing that “the idea of liberation, the goal of our life and action, is also clear on the federal level”<sup>17</sup>. After 1990, in a speech at Radio Free Europe, he spoke in words what he had anticipated for more than half a century, namely, the importance of inaugurating an era of European renewal, of unity of the East with the West with the fall of communism.

Leontin Jean Constantinescu remarked that he was a member of the Romanian Group for Unified Europe, constituted on 1 June 1948 under the chairmanship of Grigore Gafencu, where he has been working for a decade within the European Union of the Federalists. Some of his ideas are contained in *Mirage et nécessité de l'Unité de l'Europe*<sup>18</sup>, claiming that European political unity has existed since ancient times, and that Romania has been involved in European construction since the Middle Ages. Referring to the confrontations of the post-war world, Leontin Jean Constantinescu launches the idea that “Europe must develop a history, but not unicentral, uniform, but unified. To unify Europe on its broad continental basis, defined in this new and amplified perspective, its spiritual and cultural positions, internal and external, which are all conditions for it to be able to resume its slow pace of slowing down pulse”<sup>19</sup>.

The advanced ideas of Grigore Gafencu, George Ciorănescu and Leontin Jean Constantinescu made a significant contribution to European construction and unity, reaffirming Romania’s European identity at a time when it was in the Soviet sphere.

<sup>15</sup> *Europe’s challenge. The Swiss exile of Grigore Gafencu. 1941-1957*, Edition by Claudia Chinezu, INMER Publishing House, Bucharest, 2004, p. 506.

<sup>16</sup> Grigore Gafencu and the United Europe project. Documents (1944-1956), Curtea Veche Publishing House, Bucharest, 2013, p. 9.

<sup>17</sup> George Ciorănescu, *United Europe. From idea to foundation*. Paideia Publishing House, 2004, p. 45.

<sup>18</sup> *Extrait de La Revue de Culture Européenne*, Year II, No. 2, January, 1952.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*.

At present, the priorities of the Romanian Presidency at the Council of the European Union they do not seem to depart from the ideals and the political line of the three Romanian promoters of the United Europe, enrolling in the motto: cohesion, a common value, understood as unity, equal treatment and convergence.

The Presidency program focuses on four key priorities: Convergence Europe, a safer Europe, Europe as a strong global actor, and a Europe of common values. A major event hosted by the Romanian Presidency will be the summit in Sibiu on Europe Day, which will guide the debate on the future of Europe<sup>20</sup>. Among the major challenges of Romania under the presidency of the EU Council are Brexit or the multi-annual financial framework, materializing the budget for the next seven years. According to the first analysis, Romania chose the EU Council presidency as the motto of cohesion because, on the one hand, it benefited directly from the cohesion policy promoted by the European Union through European funds, so that the gaps between its countries are diminished and, on the other hand, cohesion is a symbol of European unity and solidarity and is now a necessity.

Among the first statements of Sebastian Kurz the assumption of Romania's mandate as President of the EU Council consisted in mentioning a few general issues, such as the importance of each European member state representing each "one chain link. I wish all the good and the Romanian Presidency for the next semester. The EU structure is very complex, some things seem impossible, but there are so many things that unite us that there is no alternative to this collaboration. I am glad that in the last 6 months we have succeeded in reaching some compromises and I hope that the EU could go in the right direction"<sup>21</sup>. At the end of his statement, Sebastian Kurz insisted on EU-27 unity, despite the vote in the British Parliament on Brexit, prefigured to be a rejection of the deal negotiated by the Union and the UK.

Upon taking over the mandate of the Romanian Presidency, the Heads of State or Government of the Member States, have requested that in the negotiations on the Multiannual Financial Framework an orientation for the next stage of the negotiations be drawn up in order to reach an agreement within the European Council in autumn 2019 during the Finnish Presidency<sup>22</sup>.

As the Romanian Presidency is underway, an analysis of the political path or possible political challenges, I would consider it at this time a risk of objectionable conclusions, even if some results might seem predictable. However, a view from the end of 2018 on whether it is a good idea for Europe to hand over the Presidency of the EU Council to an "unstable country like Romania, Johannes Hahn, European Commissioner for Neighborhood Policy, said in an interview: "The EU Council Presidency's Action Plan has been drawn up for a number of years. But I am confident that many goals can be achieved through interactions with institutions

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/ro/council-eu/presidency-council-eu/>.

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.caleaeuropeana.ro/>.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*.

– the European Council, the European Commission and the EU Parliament. The tasks of the Presidency of the EU Council concern first of all the establishment of the themes and the impetus for the agenda”<sup>23</sup>.

### *Conclusions*

The conclusion of the Austrian Presidency’s mandate to the Council of the European Union and the taking over of the mandate by Romania paves the way for an analysis that considers both the continuity aspects of the two countries’ objectives – despite the fact that Austria has concluded a mandate within the Trio – Estonia, Bulgaria and Romania started in another that includes Finland and Croatia – and those of the challenges. If Austria preferred a focus on three specific themes / objectives, under the motto “A Europe that protects”, combating illegal migration, welfare and competitiveness and neighborhood, Romania chose general themes that seem difficult to quantify at the end of the mandate. In line with the continuity of the two Presidencies, the negotiations for the European budget and the Brexit are in place. Clearly, for the two countries, the European Union’s presidency of the EU Council is diverse and started under different conditions and the nature of the challenges opens new themes on the European agenda.

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<sup>23</sup> <https://www.handelsblatt.com/today/politics>.