

National School of Political Science and Public
Administration
Doctoral School of Political Science

*The EU Council Presidency -
Responsability with Power.*

*Analysis of the Romanian EU Council
Presidency (2019)*

- PhD Thesis Summary -

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Bucharest

2021

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	3
1. Research objectives	3
2. Research methodology.....	7
3. The thesis structure	8
4. Literature review	10
CHAPTER I Evolution of the EU CONS PRES. The Council in EU architecture	14
1. The validity of the theory of institutionalism. Institutions matter	14
2. EU CONS PRES, from Paris to Lisbon.....	19
3. Tasks of the EU Council. The role of Coreper	23
4. Changes in the dynamics of the EU Council in the perspective of Brexit.....	28
CHAPTER II EU CONS PRES: <i>administrative chore vs. power source</i>	37
1. EU CONS PRES - "responsibility without power"	37
2. EU CONS PRES - "responsibility with power"	41
3. Defining elements of a successful EU CONS PRES.....	50
i. Conceptualizing the success of an EU Council Presidency	50
ii. Defining elements for holding a successful presidency	56
CHAPTER III Analysis of the performance of the Romanian EU CONS PRES	63
1. RO PRES and the 'technical' roles of being the leader of the EU Council.....	63
2. The mandate of RO PRES in the paradigm of <i>success = power</i>	77
i. RO PRES as manager of the EU agenda (agenda setter / shaper).....	77
ii. RO PRES as a mediator / broker (without the honest side).	86
A. Possible action strategies inspired by the theoretical framework proposed by T. Börzel	86
B. RO PRES and <i>pace setting</i>	89
C. RO PRES and <i>foot dragging</i>	99
CHAPTER IV Perspectives of the EU CONS PRES	111
1. EU CONS in the context of COVID-19, between innovation and power games... 111	
2. <i>Conference on the Future of Europe</i> - a potential <i>trigger</i> for the <i>resettlement</i> of the EU Council Presidency in the EU architecture.....	124
BIBLIOGRAPHY	138

1. THE OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH

The thesis addresses the subject of the **presidency of the EU Council/ EU CONS PRES**, in the context of Romania taking over the mandate in the EU (semester I / 2019), as part of the trio with Finland (semester II / 2019) and Croatia (semester I/ 2020). The subject is relevant in the disciplinary field of political sciences and pursues a topic of interest for the contemporary Romanian society.

In fact, the paper has **two objectives**:

1. the scientific exploration of certain working hypotheses disregarded by a large part of the literature (regarding the *power* of the EU CONS PRES). In essence, the research focuses on how a state can capitalize - tactfully - on (re) sources of power of the EU Council Presidency;

and

2. the analysis of the performance of the Romanian presidency, from two analytical "angles":

i. EU CONS PRES = "administrative chore". Based on the "technical" responsibilities of the EU Council Presidency, the paper assesses how PRES RO has fulfilled its roles as administrator / organizer and manager of the EU agenda. This thesis does not deny that these skills determine, at least in Brussels, the *success* or *failure* of a presidency;¹

ii. EU CONS PRES = „responsability with power". The paper seeks *to go beyond* the classical logic of evaluating the presidency's performance - that of "checking" the achievement (or not) of its objectives - and rather aims to assess how PRES RO has succeeded, more or less tactfully, to *slow down* or *advance* certain negotiations according to its national interests. The thesis,

¹ Helen Wallace and Geoffrey Edwards, "European Community: The Evolving Role of the Presidency of the Council," *International Affairs* 52, no. 4 (October 1976): 535–50, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2616771>, P. 538.

although situated in this "camp"², does not start from the premise that the EU Council presidency is an instrument that can be manipulated directly, in a *vacuum*, by *imposing* the will of the state that leads the EU Council in any situation and in any case.

Rather, the **central hypothesis of the thesis**, based on the conceptual parameters of *rational choice institutionalism*,³ argues that a state, **by capitalizing on institutional resources** (less analyzed in the literature on EU CONS PRES), **can strategically maximize its influence** in the European negotiations. In this sense, the paper partially accepts the limitations deriving from the formal roles of the EU Council presidency, but postulates that EU CONS PRES, as a platform for promoting national interests, enhances the *assertive* behavior of that state, in direct opposition to the customs of neutrality and impartiality. Even so, the paper **acknowledges that the influence of EU CONS PRES is not implicit or guaranteed**, but varies - as it depends not only on the institutional portfolio but also on the European context and, most importantly, on the state (eg its image, stability of its political and administrative context, the credibility of the government's mandate to exercise the EU CONS PRES).

In fact, *the working hypotheses* resulting from the research process and that are argued in the thesis can be formulated as follows:

² Ex.: Simone Bunse, *Small States and EU Governance: Leadership through the Council Presidency* (Basingstoke England; New York: Palgrave Macmillan; Oxford, 2009); Ken Kollman, "The Rotating Presidency of the European Council as a Search for Good Policies," *European Union Politics* 4, no. 1 (March 2003): 51–74, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1465116503004001581>; Adriaan Schout, "The Presidency as Juggler: Managing Conflicting Expectations," *EIPASCOPE (Maastricht: European Institute of Public Administration)* 2 (1998): 1–9; Jonas Tallberg, "The Agenda-Shaping Powers of the EU Council Presidency," *Journal of European Public Policy* 10, no. 1 (January 2003): 1–19, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1350176032000046903>; Jonas Tallberg, "The Power of the Presidency: Brokerage, Efficiency and Distribution in EU Negotiations*," *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 42, no. 5 (December 2004): 999–1022, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0021-9886.2004.00538.x>; Jonas Tallberg, *Leadership and Negotiation in the European Union* (Cambridge Cambridge University Press, 2006).

³ Peter A. Hall and Rosemary C. R. Taylor, "Political Science and the Three New Institutionalisms," *Political Studies* 44, no. 5 (December 1996): 936–57, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9248.1996.tb00343.x>; Jonas Tallberg, "Formal Leadership in Multilateral Negotiations: A Rational Institutional Theory," *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy* 1, no. 2 (2006): 117–41, <https://doi.org/10.1163/187119006x149517>; Kenneth Shepsle, "Rational Choice Institutionalism," in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Institutions*, ed. R.A. Rhodes, Sarah A. Binder, and Bert A. Rockman (Oxford University Press, 2006), 23–39.

- the EU Council Presidency has evolved into an *influential* institution that gives the incumbent a comparative advantage in shaping the EU agenda and the results of the decision-making process in line with its national interests;

- factors - such as the internal context of the state that holds the EU CONS PRES, the European / international environment, the heterogeneity and intensity of EU Member States' positions in the Council, interinstitutional relations and the ability of the incumbent to use the resources of the General Secretariat of the Council - are essential in highlighting the skills of the EU Council presidency in pursuing successfully its national interests.

In essence, the *novelty* of the thesis comes from :

1. *adapting the theoretical conclusions to the specifics of our country.* The thesis accepts that Romania's bargaining power is not implicit or guaranteed (by the status of "being the seventh country in the EU, even the sixth post-Brexit") and takes into account the *power deficit* resulting from the tension between Bucharest and Brussels concerning the rule of law, but also from the the delay in meeting the accession criteria (eg CVM), respectively the incomplete integration of Romania into the EU (eg the adoption of the single currency, the accession to the Schengen Area);

2. *highlighting the assertive behavior of the Romanian EU CONS PRES.* This body of work is all the more relevant in the context in which the idea that an EU CONS PRES (and even the Romanian one) can be a broker - without the honest part - is still *taboo*, even though there are studies⁴ that prove empirically that this "administrative task" can be a platform for promoting national interests and that the the presidency enhances the assertive behavior of the states that hold the EU CONS PRES, as opposed to the concept of "silencer";

3. *pointing out the changes in the dynamics of the Council* - before and after Romania took over the EU CONS PRES. The paper postulates that

⁴ Rikard Bengtsson, Ole Elgstrom, and Jonas Tallberg, "Silencer or Amplifier? The European Union Presidency and the Nordic Countries," *Scandinavian Political Studies* 27, no. 3 (September 2004): 311–334, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9477.2004.00108.x>.

Member States were already acting on the premise that Britain would leave the EU. The prospect of Brexit and the gradual *decoupling* of London from the EU decision-making process has triggered reconfigurations/re-evaluations of alliances (traditional or ad hoc) among states;

4. studying the impact of COVID-19 on the functioning of the Council. The contribution of EU CONS PRES (in particular in Coreper) has proved to be essential for the functioning of the Union during this period. However, the pandemic revealed (once again) that the **Council's working procedures are not designed for crisis situations**, having cumbersome and time-consuming mechanisms, which can easily be blocked under the burden of unanimity. The thesis argues that the Council's hesitant approach to adapting its way of working to the circumstances of COVID-19, and the inter- and intra-institutional *power games* will be further arguments in favor of a comprehensive reform of the European project, but one "made by design" and not ad hoc, "in response to a disaster", as the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, recently stated in her first State of the Union Address (16 September 2020).

5. anticipating a resettlement of the EU CONS PRES in the EU architecture. The thesis takes into account the latest developments around the EU issues, namely the reflection process on the reform of the Union (which was launched by the **Conference on the Future of Europe**). It is almost certain that one of the main institutions targeted during the reflection process on EU reform (which was launched by the Conference on the Future of Europe) will be the EU Council, amid concerns on the inefficiency of the European decision-making process. The thesis argues that future debates risk bringing in the spotlight sensitive issues regarding the decision-making dynamics of the EU, already unbalanced by Brexit. Once the "Pandora's box" is opened, talks will inevitably focus on the shortcomings of the EU Council presidency. Consequently, there is a risk that the status of the EU Presidency of the Council will be jeopardized either by the disappearance of this rotating system of administrative "burden-sharing" meant for organizing the Council meetings or by further diluting the prerogatives of this office – there are already strong signals in this regard.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study was based on *bibliographic research*, so that the argument of the thesis is highlighted (EU Council Presidency = responsibility with power). The research approach was both *historical* (to study how the EU CONS PRES evolved during the EU enlargement and the revision of the European Treaties) and, especially, *interpretive* (to analyze the influence of the EU CONS PRES on the decision-making process), whereas the data was gathered using *qualitative methods*.

The **concrete** way of documentation followed a rich and varied bibliography, among which **primary documents regarding the activity of the Council during the Romanian presidency** (eg agendas, conclusions, results, summary minutes of the Council working groups meetings, Coreper and ministerial meetings that took place before and during the Romanian EU CONS PRES) and the **role of presidency in the EU decision-making architecture** (eg EU Treaties, EU Council and European Council Rules of Procedure). To highlight the intentions and objectives of the Romanian Presidency of the EU Council, the paper relied on **official documents** (eg government memoranda regarding the preparations for the Romanian EU mandate, the Romanian EU CONS PRES priorities program, the Romanian proposed timetable for organizing EU Council meetings, MFA report on its 2019 activity).

Moreover, the thesis benefits from fundamental books / articles on the subject of EU CONS PRES (the research of Jonas Tallberg and Simone Bunsie certainly influenced the working hypotheses of this paper), the most recent books / articles on the role of the EU Council presidency and Romania's mandate in EU that were published in international databases (eg EBSCO, SSRN, JSTOR), as well as press articles - checked at several media agencies for accuracy - and studies issued by *think tanks* with expertise on the European decision-making process (eg Center for European Policy Studies, European Council on Foreign Relations, Swedish Institute for European Policy Studies, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik).

The doctoral research also used *discourse analysis*, focusing on the

messages of opinion formers (eg policy makers, diplomats, researchers / experts) who have had and continue to have legitimacy and expertise and / or the possibility to influence the conduct of European leadership.

In addition, to outline the conclusions regarding Romania's EU mandate, the paper also capitalizes on the *input* of persons that have expertise in the field of reference or had a contribution in shaping Romania's policy - by studying their interviews and public statements regarding the Romanian presidency and progress in EU negotiations, including in events (eg debates) dedicated to EU issues.

The construction of the thesis followed the **"taught PhD model"** - the paper is structured on four chapters by the consistency of publishable articles, reunited by a common theme, answering several hypotheses.

3. THE THESIS STRUCTURE

In essence, the chapters answer the research questions as follows:

CHAPTER 1 details the **theoretical framework** used - institutionalism, in this case the *rational choice* type - which has proved useful both in framing the institutional room for maneuver of EU CONS PRES and in highlighting the appropriate conditions for the state holding EU CONS PRES to achieve results closer to personal preferences.

Thus, the thesis postulates that, in the view of rational choice institutionalists, EU CONS PRES analyzes the EU negotiations and the European decision-making process from the perspective of a **strategic environment in which rational actors, including EU CONS PRES, act in a cost-benefit logic to maximize their chances of achieving their goals.** This approach, applied to the specifics of EU CONS PRES, also highlights the **information, informal and procedural resources** available to the state holding the position of EU CONS PRES, **but also the institutional constraints** on it (non-compliance could compromise the reputation of that state or it may antagonize other actors and may set a precedent for future EU CONS PRES). Indeed, the influence of EU PRES CONS on the EU agenda

and negotiations is **not** absolute, but in some situations - created by a **combination of factors / variables** - it cannot be disputed.

At the same time, the chapter focuses on **understanding the institutional evolution of the EU Council presidency**, from the time of its creation (1957) to the innovations brought about by the Lisbon Treaty - aspects that contribute to a better framing of the EU Council presidencies, by clearly defining the parameters in which they manifest. Furthermore, the chapter postulates that the transformation of the EU Council presidency reflects a process of *rational institutional adjustment*, with Member States seeking more effective methods of intergovernmental cooperation.

Simply put, as a simple organizer of meetings, the Presidency of the Council was accepted without controversy. However, successive rounds of enlargement of the Union have increased the importance of the presidency, **strengthening the visibility and prestige of this position as initiator and promoter of initiatives, mediator among states, manager of the EU agenda, and "voice" of Member States** vis-à-vis European Commission and European Parliament. This evolution of the presidency - from a passive administrator to an important leader in European decision-making, contrary to the vision of the founding states - has "disturbed" the European balance, with large states wanting to remove the presidency and small states fiercely defending it. In fact, this very determination of states to support (or not) the practice of the rotating presidency reflects that this function is not only an administrative task, but also a **real opportunity to influence European decision-making**.

In addition, the first chapter of the thesis highlights **the role of Coreper in the EU decision-making**, taking into account the fact that in the literature and in the EU community there is consensus on the **essential expertise of Coreper members** in helping Brussels-based EU CONS PRES (such as the Romanian presidency) to manage complex negotiations and to reach compromises that advance the European decision-making process. At the same time, the thesis details the contribution of the **General Secretariat of the Council** in supporting the work of EU CONS PRES.

Last but not least, the first chapter of the thesis explores the decision-making changes in the Council (in the context of **Brexit**), which are useful in describing the environment in which PRES RO was to operate. In fact, the climate in the Council – before and during the mandate of the RO PRES - was certainly complex - the interactions between Member States at that moment showed that: the size of the state did not guarantee the success of its efforts; a qualified majority on sensitive files was increasingly difficult to achieve; Brexit pointed out that investing only in certain strengthened bilateral relations was risky; States had begun to be concerned that Brexit would upset the balance between Council Member States, leading to a strengthening of the influence and voting power of the Franco-German duo; EU states could not rely solely on bilateral relations with France and Germany, even if the two countries remained essential for building a qualified majority (or a blocking minority, especially post-Brexit).

CHAPTER 2 details the two conceptual *camp*s in which EU CONS PRES is framed - *administrative chore* vs. *power source*. In essence, the paper shows that the first "camp" focuses on the **constraints on the presidency that derive from its formal roles (manager of the EU agenda) and excludes the informal resources of EU CONS PRES** and, implicitly, the ways in which these can be exploited by the state that holds the PRES. **On the other hand, the other "camp" (in which this thesis is framed, namely "EU CONS PRES – responsibility with power")** partly accepts the limitations deriving from the formal roles and emphasizes the presidency's ability to tactfully exploit institutional resources. The chapter also focuses on the concepts of "power" and "sources of power" in the political sciences, on the basis of which a number of elements can be drawn to detect how a state can capitalize on the EU mandate to influence the European decision-making process.

In essence, the chapter **first lists the classic arguments** of those⁵ who consider that the **EU CONS PRES has relatively little power** to influence the agenda according to its own preferences, due, for example, to: the short term of the presidency; the emergence of unexpected internal / external factors that require the attention of the EU Presidency; the fact that the state holding the EU CONS PRES will have to make more concessions to give the *impression* of a good presidency, in the spirit of the customs of *neutrality* and *impartiality*. Subsequently, **the paper focused primarily on dismantling these arguments** and, implicitly, **on highlighting the sources of power (formal / procedural, but also informal) of EU CONS PRES.**

The chapter also details **the sine qua non conditions for a PRES** that successfully maximizes its influence at EU level, such as its relationship with the **European Commission and the European Parliament.**

The second chapter of the thesis also aimed to identify some characteristics of a *successful presidency* and highlighted the indicators that affect the success of a mandate at the head of the EU Council. **Theoretical aspects were enforced with relevant examples** of states that held the presidency of the EU Council (eg Spanish PRES / 2010, Austrian and Bulgarian PRES / 2018).

CHAPTER 3 aimed to answer the substantive question of this research, namely "*How did PRES RO perform and how did Romania capitalize on the resources of the EU Council presidency?*" by referring to the conceptual findings of the previous chapters.

Given that most assessments of the success of PRES RO were based on the paradigm of *success = efficiency*, this paper also explores this perspective, in relation to the traditional responsibilities associated with the presidency of

⁵ Ex.: Jean-Louis Dewost, "The Presidency in the Institutional Framework of the European Communities," *Revue Du Marché Commun*, no. 273 (1984): 31–34, https://www.cvce.eu/obj/jean_louis_dewost_the_presidency_in_the_institutional_framework_of_the_european_communities_january_1984-en-1f2a60bf-74b6-4cb2-9baf-12240f0f9dd4.html; Jelmer Schalk et al., "The Power of the Presidency in EU Council Decision-Making," *European Union Politics* 8, no. 2 (June 2007): 229–250, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1465116507076431>; David Metcalfe, "Leadership in European Union Negotiations: The Presidency of the Council," *International Negotiation* 3, no. 3 (1998): 413–34, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15718069820848300>.

the EU Council. Starting from the responsibilities of the EU Council Presidency, the most obvious indicator is how RO PRES has fulfilled its roles as administrator / organizer and manager of the EU agenda. In this key, **a successful presidency is an effective one**, being evaluated in terms of how it ensures the organization of meetings (eg their planning, space allocation and interpretation), as well as the **results in managing difficult files** (eg proposing solutions , advancing negotiations).

PRES RO managed to stand out through the **90 legislative files** closed in the three months until the end of the legislative activity of the European Parliament, or, as the Romanian officials summarized, **on average one file every day**. The number of cases is not impressive in itself (eg the Austrian PRES has reached 128 agreements in the Council and the European Parliament, the Bulgarian PRES has closed 78 files with the two institutions), but the performance is certainly commendable given that it was carried out in a shorter period (January - mid-April) than the traditional six months. In order to highlight the success of the RO PRES, its performance must be compared with another presidency that has carried out its activity in a context as similar as possible, at least from an institutional / european perspective (changing the EU's "leadership" in the context of the European elections). From this point of view, the results of the **Greek presidency of the EU Council** (sem. I / 2014) are relevant, because this is the first and only EU CONS PRES that was in the same institutional context as the Romanian PRES, after the entry into force of Treaty of Lisbon. In its mandate in the EU (in fact the second, after holding the EU CONS PRES in 2003), Greece closed 71 legislative cases.⁶

The successful completion of 90 legislative files in 100 days cannot be attributed exclusively to PRES RO and neither to the other EU institutions, with the argument that legislative progress has been achieved only due to the willingness of the European Commission and the European

⁶ Hellenic Presidency, "Hellenic EU Presidency," EUKN, 2014, <https://www.eukn.eu/eu-presidencies/hellenic-eu-presidency>;
Filippa Chatzistavrou, "Defying the Oracle? The 2014 Greek Presidency of the EU Council," CEPS, February 14, 2014, <https://www.ceps.eu/ceps-publications/defying-oracle-2014-greek-presidency-eu-council>.

Parliament to close as many files as possible because of the:

- the European Parliament elections of 23-26 May (and estimates of an increase in the rise of Eurosceptic / extremist parties in EU Member States → The European Parliament was much more willing to get results, but some visible ones, which could be "sold" to the European electorate);

- the change of the EU 'leadership' → The European Commission, the High Representative and the President of the European Council had high expectations of concrete results in order to strengthen their "legacy" at the end of their term.

In evaluating the activity of RO PRES, one must take into account **the abilities of the Romanian side to liaise with the European Commission and the European Parliament**, as the dynamics with the two institutions is essential in maximizing the success of the EU presidency. The increased number of completed legislative files reveals that RO PRES managed to cultivate a close relationship and bring the two institutions closer as allies in advancing the European decision-making process (or, in the words of the then Foreign Minister T. Meleşcanu - "*Romania has proven to be a country capable of being an important player in the European Union*"⁷).

The chapter also lists the objectives and results achieved on each of the **four pillars of the RO PRES priorities** ("*Europe of convergence*", "*Europe of security*", "*Europe, a global player*", "*Europe of common values*"). In evaluating the performance of PRES RO, it is also important to mention that the EU CONS PRES continues to be associated, in public acceptance, with the **role of EU foreign policy exponent** (perception that is enhanced by the presence of the EU PRES at EU Summits with third countries and of foreign policies in the PRES priorities program), even if there is a consensus in the literature that this role was *removed* due to the innovations of the Lisbon Treaty (creation of the posts of President of the European Council and High Representative). In this context, it should be noted that RO PRES was involved (through the **Sibiu Summit**) in the process of developing the

⁷ "Interviul ministrului Teodor Meleşcanu pentru Digi24, cu ocazia finalului Preşedinţiei României la Consiliul UE (1.07.2019)," in *Diplomaţia: Politica Externă a României: 1992-1996, 2017-2019*, vol. 3 (Bucureşti: Cadran politic, 2019), p. 369.

Union's strategic agenda for 2019-2024, which underpinned the planning of the European Council's work over the next five years and served as "inspiration" for the work programs of the other EU institutions (European Commission, European Parliament).

The success of RO PRES is all the more relevant as the capacity of the Romanian side to fulfill its obligations was challenged and viewed with distrust prior to taking over the European mandate. Government changes or internal political tensions, especially in the pre-electoral context (eg in addition to the European elections, in 2019 presidential elections were to be held in Romania) are quite common developments for states holding the EU Council presidency. Therefore, the "vibrant political life" of these state holding the EU CONS PRES (using the words of the former Romanian Minister Delegate for European Affairs George Ciamba⁸) does not *automatically* determine their failure. However, the image deficit of PRES RO continued to worsen as Brussels-Bucharest tensions over internal developments in the rule of law intensified - it was (at least) unusual for an EU Member State chairing the EU Council to be criticized (and threatened with the triggering of Article 7) by the European Commission and the European Parliament, as well as by other Member States, for non-compliance with a fundamental value of the EU - the rule of law.

The chapter focuses, however, on highlighting Romania's performance in the paradigm EU CONS PRES = *responsibility with power*. First of all, the thesis analyzes the decision of the Romanian officials for RO PRES to be "Brussels based", with the **Permanent Representation of Romania in Brussels** being the *center of gravity* of the Romanian team (unlike the "*capital based*" model, in which the Capital is the "driving force" of EU CONS PRES).

In explaining the choice of the Brussels-based model, the Romanian side explicitly invoked considerations related to the "*efficiency and capacity to react quickly in the complex negotiation and coordination process*" in

⁸ Anca Gurzu and Lili Bayer, "Romania Brushes aside EU Concerns Ahead of Presidency," POLITICO, December 5, 2018, <http://www.politico.eu/article/romania-george-ciamba-viorica-dancila-brushes-aside-eu-concerns-ahead-of-presidency>.

Brussels⁹. Moreover, in the sense of the rational choice institutionalism (and in the literature dedicated to the study of EU CONS PRES - eg Bunse), Brussels-based PRES are in fact much more influential than those that are kept under strict capital control, as they allow:

- *capitalizing* on the solid expertise of Permanent Representation's diplomats, their thorough knowledge of EU procedures, their negotiation skills and their language skills;

- *the neutralization* (even if not entirely) of some internal political factors, such as political instability (eg Belgian PRES / 2010 was considered a success, despite the fact that Belgium was led by an interim government), lack of political vision or Eurosceptic attitude of the government holding EU CONS PRES (eg even though it was vehemently criticized for the controversial decisions of the Budapest government on press freedom, the **Hungarian PRES / 2011** was considered a *competent* presidency, which managed to advance the European legislative process).

By putting Romania's Permanent Representation to the EU *at the forefront*, RO PRES thus increased its chances of success, as **Coreper has been given the central operational role**, which has an overview of the Council's work, sets agendas for Council meetings and streamlines preparations for the work of the Council. The decision for the PR RO to be the *agile core* of the RO PRES (*Brussels based presidency*) made *sense* also in terms of the **priorities assumed by Romania** for its EU mandate, as they were mainly inherited from previous PRES, which considerably limited, however, the scope of RO PRES for the inclusion of (new) national priorities.

Subsequently, the thesis focused on **two examples** (revision of the Gas Directive and management of rule of law discussions in the General Affairs Council) to reveal **two opposing strategies of RO PRES** (*pace setting and foot dragging*) in order to achieve its national objectives. The two files - politically sensitive, blocked for more than a year, in which states' positions

⁹ Ministerul Afacerilor Externe, Ministrul Delegat pentru Afaceri Externe, and Secretarul General al Guvernului, "Accelerarea Procesului de Pregătire a Președinției Române La Consiliul UE În Primul Semestru 2019," March 20, 2017, https://www.gov.ro/fisiere/stiri_fisiere/Memorandum_cu_tema_Accelerarea_procesului_de_pregătire_a_Președinției_României_la_Consiliul_UE_în_primul_semestru_2019.pdf.

were already known - **clearly highlight RO PRES's ability to mediate relations** with EU member states to "push forward" and "slow down" the decision-making process in the Council. At the same time, the thesis demonstrates how **RO PRES capitalized on the procedural control**, having at hand, as *master of ceremonies*, several procedural tools (as *agenda setter* and *agenda manager*) through which RO PRES could determine the pace of negotiations in the Council. These prerogatives have given Romania the ability to improve or affect the chances of an agreement in the Council.

CHAPTER 4 aimed to bring the topic of EU CONS PRES “up to date”, so it focused on the role of EU CONS PRES in the context of the Council adapting its functioning to the extraordinary circumstances of the **COVID-19 pandemic**. In fact, the pandemic revealed (once again) not only that the Council's working procedures were not designed for crisis situations, but - especially - how important is the EU CONS PRES in boosting the European decision-making process in such situations, both at the political level, as well as - especially - at the technical level, in Coreper (recently labeled by the Portuguese Prime Minister as the “*true center of power*” of the EU and the “*engine*” of the Union).

On the other hand, the Council's hesitant approach to adapting its way of working during COVID-19 and the inter and intra-institutional *power games* will be invoked as arguments in favor of a **comprehensive reform of the European project**. Thus, the last chapter also analyzes the risks regarding the **possibility of a resettlement of the EU CONS PRES in the EU architecture**, in the context of the reflection process regarding the EU reform (and of the **Conference on the Future of Europe**). In this context, a number of European initiatives are highlighted that signal the risk of further *diluting* the prerogatives of the EU CONS PRES and even the disappearance of this periodic system of administrative “*burden sharing*” of EU Member States. Such a development will not, however, be accepted by small states without a *fierce* struggle, as demonstrated by all the discussions so far that have fueled the processes of revision of the EU Treaties, aspects detailed in the first part of the thesis.