

National University of Political Studies and Public Administration
Multidisciplinary Doctoral School
Political Studies

PhD Thesis Summary

**The Presidency of the Council of the EU – the maturity test for the
central public administration of a member state.**

Case study – the first Romanian Presidency of the EU Council

PhD coordinator:

Univ. Prof. Dr. Iordan Gheorghe Bărbulescu

PhD candidate:

Ana-Cristina Tudor

Bucharest, 2024

The research aims to examine the effects generated by the exercise of the six-month Presidency of the EU Council (in the current institutional framework defined by the Treaty of Lisbon) within an EU Member State. More specifically, the paper seeks to determine whether the process of preparing and exercising the Presidency mandate influences **the level of European integration and the administrative capacity of a member state**, with the central public administration as the subject of analysis.

The theoretical framework used is based on the principles of **neofunctionalism**, with an emphasis on the process of political integration at the level of **the administrative elites** and on the **spill-over effect, from the supranational level**, of the European institutions, in this case the EU Council, through the European civil servants involved in this process, which provide the main support for the management of the Presidency of the Council mandate, **at the national level**, through the diplomats from the ministries of foreign affairs/ministries of European affairs, who generally manage the project of taking over the Presidency of the EU Council at the level of each member state.

In order to verify the hypotheses mentioned above, **an extensive, transversal research** was carried out, containing both qualitative and quantitative elements. The first stage of the analysis focused on the specific case of Romania, which held the Presidency of the EU Council in the first half of 2019, for the first time since its EU accession, and on the effect generated on the officials involved in this process – diplomats from the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Based on the results of this first stage of the research, the analysis was subsequently extended to the foreign ministries of the member states that exercised the presidency of the Council after Romania, between July 2019 and December 2023.

As for the **elements of interest** of this paper, they are multiple:

Regarding the professionalization effect of the central public administration, the research draws attention to the multidimensional implications of this mechanism, including to aspects related to **the learning organization and the Europeanization process** at the level of a central public institution, elements that have had limited coverage in academic literature so far, especially regarding the Romanian public administration.

On the other hand, the research brings new connotations to neofunctionalism, including by **analyzing large-scale crises that have affected the Union recently** (Brexit, the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as Russia's military aggression against Ukraine) and which have generated a

special pressure for a coordinated, solidary, swift and efficient action at the level of the EU institutions. These elements are relevant taking into consideration that numerous authors have been referring for some time to the need for the state that holds the presidency of the Council to be able to adapt to turbulent events with a significant impact on the advancement of the European project. From this perspective, **crisis management** has become a current necessity for the Presidencies of the Council.

Regarding other new elements that may have a significant impact on the role of the Council Presidency in the future, the analysis also follows the results of the **Conference on the Future of Europe**, held between 2021-2022, examining the possible effects on the future of the Union, including through possible revision of the Lisbon Treaty.

Additionally, against the background of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, **the revival of the EU enlargement process** and the opening of accession negotiations with Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova in December 2023, this paper aims to provide a useful tool for the experts in the field. From this perspective, the present analysis has a novelty character, by presenting the assessments of diplomats, the main actors in the organization of a Council Presidency, being one of the few research papers presenting the perspective of national officials involved in the process of exercising the Presidency of the EU Council, with the aim of offering a deeper understanding of the complex implications of this six-monthly mandate. Another original element of the paper is **the transversal nature of the research carried out**, analyzing the perception of diplomats from ten member states in the period 2019-2023. This ambitious and complex approach offers unique personal perspectives, valuable testimonies of the experience of the first Romanian presidency of the Council, from the point of view of the diplomats involved in this large-scale project, augmented by the assessments of the diplomats/experts from other member states who took over this mandate afterwards.

From a theoretical point of view, the period covered by the present research is represented by **the interval May 2021 - March 2024, from the start of the Conference on the Future of Europe** (May 9, 2021), a relevant event with consequences on the future structure of the Council presidency and on possible future amendments to the Treaty of Lisbon, **to the two-year mark of Russia's military aggression against Ukraine** (February 2024), analyzed in the present paper within the sub-chapter dedicated to the crises that affected the European Union, **respectively the publication in March 2024** of the Communication of the European Commission on the reforms and review of

EU policies in the perspective of enlargement. The research also takes into account the frequent references, at the level of the European institutions, to the year 2030 as a possible target date for a continuation of the Union's enlargement process, as well as to the figure of approximately 30 member states.

In terms of structure, the paper starts with the theoretical part, namely the review of the relevant literature and encompasses both elements related to the current features of the EU Council Presidency and details related to neofunctionalism, reaching the possible changes to the structure and role of the Council Presidency from the perspective of the results of the Conference on the Future of Europe. Subsequently, the research develops the methodological framework of analysis and the relevant results, as well as possible future perspectives.

In order to reach the functions currently held in the configuration of the EU institutions by the Council of the European Union, a central European institution, and implicitly by the state holding the Presidency, the paper refers to the evolution of this institution since the creation of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) in 1952 until the present time. It mentions some of the most relevant changes brought to the role of the presidency of the EU Council by the Treaty of Lisbon, a reforming document of particular importance, which had as its main objective the preparation of the Union to manage effectively, at a functional level, its successive enlargement from its initial form, of six members, towards the largest expansion (in 2004) and the subsequent ones. From this perspective, some of the main elements introduced by the Treaty referred to in the paper are changes that, according to relevant authors in the field, have reduced the importance and role of the member state that holds the Presidency of the EU Council. In this view, the paper mentions elements such as the European Council becoming an official institutional actor of the EU, the creation of a permanent Presidency of the Foreign Affairs Council, the development of the trio programme, as well as other elements of interest with an impact on the results of a Presidency, including: the importance of the administrative capacity of the state that holds the Presidency of the Council, the informal nature of the negotiations within the Council and their relevance in generating a „culture of compromise”, the role of the EU Council Presidency as an honest broker between larger and smaller member states, the relevance of the preparatory bodies within the Council, the ability of the state holding the Presidency of the Council to set the priorities on the European agenda or the central role of the General Secretariat of the Council as the „machinery” supporting the member states while at the helm of the EU Council.

Regarding the theoretical framework, the analysis considers the use of **the neofunctionalist theory**, originated by Ernst B. Haas (1958), aiming to present new perspectives on the terminology initially used. From this perspective, the paper starts from the main elements that define neofunctionalism, whose main focus was the European integration process. It then refers to the **increase of political integration** through the specific process of **spill-over** and it places the primary emphasis on the efforts and the pressures exerted by **the elites** in the member states and on the growing role of **supranational institutions**, once international organizations, such as the European Communities, were created.

In the present research, the focus is on the **spill-over** effect from the supranational level to the national level and on the role of the **administrative elites** - both those within the **EU Council** (representing in this case the **supranational institutions**) **and the national ones**, i.e. officials from the central public administration of the member state holding the Presidency. In this regard, the subject of interest is represented by diplomats from the ministries of foreign affairs, the institution that generally carries out the main preparations for the Presidency of the Council of the European Union.

Despite some critics that considered neofunctionalism obsolete and no longer reflecting the way the Union has evolved, the paper argues that this theory provides the most appropriate framework to analyze the different forms and effects of the current European integration process. From this perspective, the paper analyses the process by which taking over the six months' mandate of Presidency of the EU Council generates an increased attachment to the European objectives for the member states that hold this position, and, implicitly more integration, with a special contribution in terms of increasing the administrative capacity of the respective member state.

Moreover, **it can be asserted that neofunctionalism is currently experiencing a period of revival** after the 1990 moment, considering that, as a result of the Conference on the Future of Europe and in the context of Russia's military aggression against Ukraine, very concrete discussions were undertaken in order to continue the efforts to expand the Union to more than 30 member states, with implications on a future reform of the European institutions and policies as well. In the same way, the role played by neofunctionalism and its means of explaining specific processes, such as the progress of political integration, the impact of the spill-over process, the socialization of elites and the growing importance of supranational organizations, are adapted in

the most appropriate way to the successive crises through which the Union has recently passed and which strengthened the European solidarity.

From the perspective of the effects generated by the holding of the presidency of the Council on the administrative apparatus of the member states, the current analysis contains various elements of interest related to the studies dedicated to Europeanization, with an emphasis on the professionalization through **the Europeanization of national bureaucratic apparatuses**. From this view, holding the Presidency of the Council represents a superior stage in the process of specialization of the administrative apparatus in the vast field of European affairs compared to the stages of preparation for the EU accession and subsequently to the need to adapt, including at the level of the central public administration, in the first years after obtaining the membership status. At the same time, the research also takes into account elements related to the sphere of organizational management and sociology, analyzing the way in which the **transfer of skills** takes place from the supranational to the national level through the collective process of **organizational learning**, with positive effects on increasing the professionalization level of the officials involved in this significant project.

As an additional relevant element, this paper also refers to **the successive crises of recent years, which had a significant impact on the Union** and to which it had to react and adapt quickly and efficiently, while the member states demonstrated unprecedented solidarity in establishing the measures to be implemented at the European, supranational level. These challenges with a substantial impact for the Union have amplified the debates on the need to amend the treaties in order to facilitate the reaction speed at the level of the EU institutions. From this perspective, given the particularly complex international environment, more and more authors emphasize the need for the state that holds the presidency of the Council to be able to effectively manage the crises that currently affect the European Union. In this view, the paper analyses some of the more recent and significant crises which have had a significant impact on the Union (Brexit/the withdrawal of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland from the EU – where the actions at the European level in the negotiation with Great Britain started in 2017, the COVID-19 pandemic - with a global impact from the beginning of 2020, respectively the military aggression of Russia against Ukraine - which started in early 2022), following the considerable efforts of all EU institutions and of the Member States to adequately manage their impact, with a focus on the role of the EU Council and on the tasks of the Presidency of the Council.

Regarding possible future changes of the role and structure of the Presidency of the Council, analyzing the potential impact of the results of the Conference on the Future of Europe, respectively the requests of the European citizens centralized within this extended exercise of European debate, the present paper reviews both elements of interest from the organization of this large-scale event, its conclusions, the reactions of the most important actors – the EU institutions and the member states, as well as the contribution of the French Presidency of the EU Council. In this approach, the paper also refers to the relevance of the Laeken Declaration of 2001, which enabled for the first time the use of the Convention method, a significant innovation at that time both in terms of legitimacy generated by the broad participation of relevant actors at EU level, and by the substantial political and legal changes that it could generate.

Concerning the methodological framework, the research is structured in two stages. The analysis begins with a **qualitative, exploratory research**, whose subjects are Romanian diplomats that participated in this large project, given that the ministries of foreign affairs (and European affairs) are generally the central institutions in this type of projects. This first stage of the research focused on the perception of the Romanian diplomats who were part of the team that managed the Romanian Presidency of the Council of the EU, regarding their experience during the preparation and organization of the six-month Presidency of the Council. This experience was mainly based on the interaction and the transfer of expertise from the level of the Council, respectively of the General Secretariat of the Council, to the level of the experts involved from the respective member state. Thus, the case study from which the analysis begins and on which the research focuses is the first Romanian Presidency of the EU Council, which took place in the first semester of 2019, i.e. between January 1 and June 30, 2019, 12 years after Romania's accession to the European Union (and six months earlier than originally set, as a result of the withdrawal of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland from the European Union).

The second stage of the research, developed on the basis of the information obtained through the analysis of the interviews from the first stage, consists of a **quantitative, transversal analysis**, offering recent data by focusing on the perception of diplomats from the member states that took over the Presidency of the Council after Romania, from the second semester of 2019, up to and including the Spanish Presidency of the Council, which held the mandate in the second semester of 2023.

The results of the above-mentioned methods of research were complemented and strengthened by the additional use of **document analysis**, both through documentation from official information published on the websites specifically created by each Member State to manage information related to the Presidency of the Council, and from other official sources, both at European level – The EU Council, the European Council, the European Commission, the European Parliament, and at national level – the Presidency, the Government, the Parliament, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the respective member state. We based our research on an in-depth documentation of both advantages, and limits of the qualitative research, in addition to the characteristics, strengths and weaknesses of the quantitative research. Combining the two types of research, complemented by the document analysis, aims to both verify and reinforce the data, as well as provide additional information in order to contribute to the expansion of knowledge on the topic of interest.

The results of the analysis largely confirmed the research hypotheses, namely that **the process of preparation and organization of the Presidency of the EU Council generates an increase in integration at the level of the central administration of the respective member state, interpreted as an increased attachment to the European project, also contributing to the increase of its administrative capacity.**

From this perspective, according to the results of the present analysis, taking over this function and interacting directly with the EU institutions, with the unprecedented responsibility of exercising the function of *honest broker* it comes with, generates both a significantly deeper understanding of the European institutional mechanism and an increase in expertise for the national staff involved. Therefore, **taking over the rotating Presidency of the EU Council generates two major advantages for the member states: Firstly, it generates an increase in the level of attachment to the European project. Secondly, it generates an increase in the level of professionalization of the central public administration through the Europeanization of the national bureaucratic apparatus** (which represents, from this perspective, **the maturity test for the central public administration**, as we emphasize in the title of this paper).

From this perspective, the Presidency of the Council represents in itself an efficient instrument leading to the specialization of the officials within a member state, with medium and long-term positive effects on the administrative/diplomatic apparatus of a member state.

It should be also mentioned that, among the diplomats who felt a significant increase in their attachment to the European project, according to their own statements, the primary group were

those who, before Romania took over the Presidency of the EU Council, had worked in other fields of activity than European affairs and who were brought in specifically for this project, which is an important side benefit to consider. Nevertheless, the effect (increased level of attachment to the Union post-presidency of the Council) was also observed among those who were already active in the field of European affairs. Among the reasons mentioned were: the special access offered by this position to the functioning of the European institutions, the fact that by holding this position they come to feel as a part of the European institutional mechanism, directly understanding and adopting the perspective of the respective institution, including by appreciating its complexity as well as the concrete benefits brought about by the Union.

From this point of view, this paper aims to generate a **guide to good practices in this field**, from the perspective of the actors involved in this large project, starting from the concrete example of Romania, for the first time in this capacity, as well as based on the contributions of the other states that later took over the Presidency of the Council.

On the other hand, given the rather significant time gaps in which the presidency of the Council is currently taken over (at 13 and a half year intervals, in relation to the current number of member states), even experienced member states tend to undergo a process of specialization of the national officials in the field of European affairs before the actual moment of taking over the next Presidency. This is also due to the fact that, diplomats and civil servants who were members of previous Presidency teams may only be brought back in small numbers, considering the specifics of the diplomatic activity (periodic change of the field of activity or the rotation process between the headquarters and different posting abroad, including later retirement from the professional activity). Additionally, given that the perspectives of the enlargement of the Union take into account both the extension of the period between two mandates of a member state at the helm of the Council, as well as the situation in which future new member states will take over the Presidency of the Council for the first time, the present paper may prove to be a useful material in the process of preparing this mandate.

Regarding the developments brought about by the progress and results of the Conference on the Future of Europe, in the context of the pressures generated by the effects of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, reality has shown that this important exercise of involving European citizens in setting priorities at the Union level has not had immediate and far-reaching consequences. Against the background of different positions at the level of the member states, as

well as more nuanced reactions of some EU institutions, a certain stagnation has been noted in achieving concrete and substantive developments in terms of possible changes in some policies or in the structure of the European institutions. Thus, given that the Council assessed at the time of the completion of the Conference on the Future of Europe that 95% of the requests of the European citizens resulting from the work of the Conference can be achieved within the current limits of the treaties, the European Commission considered it necessary to initiate internal reforms to take place in parallel with the EU's enlargement efforts, with an emphasis on using the full potential of the Treaty of Lisbon, the European Council has been reserved and treated this subject very discreetly in this interval, and the member states still have divergent positions, the European Parliament was the only European institution that vocally insisted on the start of the process to revise the EU Treaties.

In this regard, analyzing the prospects of possible changes to the Council's powers and implicitly to the future Council Presidencies (with an emphasis on efforts in the direction requested by European citizens to improve the effectiveness of the European decision-making process), they seem to be still distant, and a possible reform of the Treaty of Lisbon is still viewed with reluctance. Interpreting these results in a neofunctionalist key, it should be noted that the debate on this subject remained during the years 2023 and 2024 at the level of the European administrative elites, respectively of the European institutions, the issue's visibility, as well as the information transmitted to the general public in the member states being both rather scarce.

To the same extent, it is important to take into account the results of the European Parliament elections from the summer of 2024, that will likely lead to a further delay in the implementation of possible changes. This is also supported by the timeframes referred to in the European Commission Communication of March 2024 on the continuation of in-depth evaluations of European policies, which are to take place in early 2025.

On the other hand, given the official mention at the European level, during 2023 and thereafter, of the year 2030 as a possible deadline for continuing the enlargement process, including in the current context of Russia's military aggression against Ukraine, there is a pressure to make some substantial changes at the level of the institutional structure and policies of the EU until the end of the institutional cycle 2024-2029, in order to adapt for a future enlarged Union.

However, the length of time and the form in which these changes will be made can only take a more concrete form starting from 2025, when the new European institutional format will be in place and fully operational.