Romania held its first rotating presidency of the Council of the EU between January and June. How did the country perform during its six months at the helm? This special report outlines its main outcomes and successes.
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The world of tennis was stunned on 13 July, when Romania’s Simona Halep won the first Wimbledon title for her country. But it wasn’t the country’s only international success this year – just two weeks earlier, Romania brought the curtain down on its maiden six months at the helm of the EU’s rotating presidency.

The presidency stint has also prompted reactions of positive surprise from expert observers, particularly as Bucharest was mired in a domestic political crisis.

Like Estonia, Bulgaria and Austria before it, Romania kicked off its presidency six months earlier than planned, after the United Kingdom voted in 2016 to leave the EU and gave up its stint in charge.

At a glitzy opening ceremony in Bucharest on 10 January, the EU welcomed in the new year and its new presidency. The Romanians structured their programme into four pillars: Europe of Convergence, Safer Europe, Europe as a stronger global actor, Europe of common values.

The presidency also pledged to put cohesion at the heart of the decision-making for the following six months.

Prime Minister Viorica Dăncilă and President Klaus Iohannis both

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attended the gala event, with the former’s government services driving the presidency work and the latter acting as the holder’s figurehead.

Bucharest was aware that the months to come would not lack challenges, and Dăncilă said at the outset that “we are fully aware of the stakes, especially in this changing European landscape”.

She said Romania was “firmly committed to contributing, as a facilitator of consensus, through concrete actions, to the promotion of a more united and cohesive Europe”.

It ended up being a baptism of fire, given that Brexit was meant to happen on 29 March and crucial EU elections were held at the end of May.

There were also a large number of legislative files still on the negotiating table, on topics as diverse as climate change and transport emissions to social rights and the Banking Union.

In the first 100 days of its presidency, the team in Brussels, in coordination with the government back home, managed to get as many as 90 legislative files off of its books, as well as numerous agreements on joint negotiating positions for the next holder of the presidency baton, Finland, to take over.

Agreement on a landmark climate deal fell agonisingly short in June but political observers were impressed that consensus among 24 member states had built so effectively under the presidency.

Tusk actually labelled the summit as “one of the most memorable events of my political career” and said, in remarks made in passable Romanian, that “the whole of Europe is in love with Sibiu”.

**JUNCKER’S SCHENGEN WISH UNFULFILLED**

Romania, as well as Bulgaria and Croatia, want to join the borderless Schengen area. But a decision on membership must be approved by unanimous vote in the Council.

In keeping with its self-styled role as an ‘honest broker’, the Romanians did not impose a vote in the Council but that did not stop the presidents of the European Commission and Parliament, Jean-Claude Juncker and Antonio Tajani, from reiterating their support for the country’s accession.

Juncker even hoped to see a deal reached under his stewardship.

But with the Luxemburger on course to vacate his job at the end of October that prospect looks uncertain. More so given that the Council looks in no mood to add new members to Schengen.

In May, Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte said Romania is “not going in the right direction” to join, citing rule of law concerns.

His Romanian counterpart, Dăncilă, retorted that her country “met the technical criteria for joining the Schengen area as early as 2011”, as recognised in a Council decision.

After these six months the Romanians have earned a lot of credit during their presidency and a deal on membership could be in the offing during the first part of the next legislative cycle in Brussels.

“The presidency was proof that Romania is an honest member of the EU and a serious contender for getting the permanent membership of the Schengen zone,” according to a review of the presidency written by the Center for Global & Strategic Studies, an international think tank.

Finland is the second member of a trio of member states that will helm the presidency over an 18-month period, with Croatia the last of the set, making its bow on 1 January 2020.
On 9 May, EU leaders gathered in the Transylvanian city of Sibiu to discuss the future of Europe. What conclusions did heads of state and government reach in the Romanian hills? And what will be the summit’s legacy for the EU in the years to come?

The Sibiu gathering was meant to be the first major summit after the United Kingdom’s departure from the bloc but fate had other plans for the Romanian presidency of the EU.

After Britain successfully lobbied for an extension to the original 29 March Brexit date, the summit shifted its focus away from the purely post-UK stock-take that was envisaged to a broader, future-gazing affair.

UK Prime Minister Theresa May did not make the Transylvanian trip and although European Commission boss Jean-Claude Juncker said “I miss her”, he also said that, whether Britain was in attendance or not, “it’s almost the same, really”.

Juncker explained at the Sibiu summit that his September 2017 proposal to hold a meeting in the town was because “I wanted you to fall in love with this place”.

The spell seemed to work its magic on Council chief Donald Tusk, who said that it was “one of the most memorable events of my political career”, adding that “the whole of
Europe is in love with Sibiu”.

Indeed, several leaders were visibly pleasantly surprised by the welcome they received in the city, with hundreds of the locals gathering outside the meeting venue to wave EU flags and chant messages of support.

On the nitty-gritty details, Juncker said the summit was “one of the easiest I’ve ever attended. First, because the Romanian Presidency, in particular President Klaus Iohannis, prepared this council in the best possible way.”

“Secondly, because there was no urgent decision to take. This was more a trial run for the June council,” where EU leaders struggled to decide who should land the bloc’s top jobs.

Leaders acknowledged all along that the meeting was not aimed at agreeing on law changes or new proposals but rather a reflection period.

Observers of EU politics suggested that Sibiu could be a blueprint for all future summits, given the conviviality on display at the meeting, as well as the fact that it achieved what it set out to do: boost the debate about the future of Europe.

**A STRATEGIC RESULT**

The main tangible outcomes of the May meeting included the Sibiu Declaration, a broad-brush list of ten commitments ranging from defence and solidarity to the rule of law, and a first draft of the Council’s five-year-plan, known as the strategic agenda.

Leaders took only a matter of minutes to give their seal of approval to the declaration. But it was quickly dismissed as vague, particularly by some environmental groups, who insisted that climate change was relegated to “an afterthought” in the text.

However, the declaration ultimately fed into the strategic agenda. After the June summit, in which the broader document was adopted, President Iohannis said it “reflects entirely the 10 points under the Sibiu Declaration, the ‘Spirit of Sibiu’ as I call it”.

The strategic agenda prioritises defence and migration, economic stability, climate action and improving Europe’s standing on the global stage. It is set to guide the work of the EU institutions for the next five years.

Angela Merkel said after the summit that “it was important for us today to define our role in the world, to say once more that we are fighting for a Europe of values and everybody, or mostly everyone, agreed, one country cannot solve the world’s issues.”

EU leaders also preserved a united front on the Brexit issue and diplomats told EURACTIV at the Sibiu meeting that it was partly thanks to the Romanian presidency for the way in which it had organised meetings in the lead-up to the main event.

**START OF THE TOP JOB SAGA**

Sibiu also saw the beginning of the end for the Spitzenkandidat process of selecting the EU’s main institutional postings for the next five years.

Although the process, which elevated Juncker to the Commission presidency in 2014, survived the Future of Europe summit, Donald Tusk did not confirm that it would be used again to appoint the Luxemburger’s successor.

The writing was on the wall though, as leaders like Emmanuel Macron and Xavier Bettel voiced their strong criticisms of Spitzenkandidat.

Tusk ultimately called an emergency meeting for 28 May, immediately after the EU elections. It is now known that the Council decided not to give their blessing to Spitzenkandidaten like Manfred Weber or Frans Timmermans.

With the positive vote of the European Parliament on Ursula Von der Leyen’s appointment, it’s safe to say that Sibiu was the cradle where a decision on the EU’s leadership first saw the light of day.

The programme that will influence the work of the next Commission president was first sketched out at the Transylvanian summit, meaning that the meeting’s legacy will definitely influence the future of Europe as intended.

The Sibiu summit will ultimately be fondly remembered for being the first informal summit held on Europe day by one of the EU’s newest members, at a time when the bloc sorely needed to take a good long hard look at itself.
Arguably the most crucial EU elections in recent history took place under Romania’s watch in May. How did the holder of the rotating EU presidency tackle the growing challenge of disinformation, an issue that has already tainted several recent ballots?

In a nutshell, a Romanian presidency-led assessment, issued in late June, showed that the EU elections were free of unprecedented attacks but also acknowledged that disinformation was already in full flow before the EU started to address the issue in earnest.

Donald Trump’s 2016 US presidential race victory and the Brexit vote in the United Kingdom the same year have been linked to external interference and disinformation campaigns.

No wonder then that safeguarding this year’s EU elections was a top priority for national governments and the European institutions alike.

Some of the main actions rolled out by the EU apparatus included the ‘Securing free and fair elections package’ and the ‘Action Plan Against Disinformation’, which both debuted in late 2018.

In February 2019, the EU Council adopted conclusions on those strategies, agreeing that regular meetings should be held between the European election cooperation network, as well as a slew of other measures.

During its rotating presidency, Romania took up the baton not only to help shore up the defences of the

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May elections but also to lay solid foundations for future elections.

The presidency’s agenda included regular monitoring of the Action Plan, overseeing different Council formations and organising multiple events on issues related to the challenge, both in Brussels and Bucharest.

Ahead of the EU elections, Dimitar Lilakov of the Martens Centre for European Studies said it would be important to bear in mind that “disinformation should not be understood only as ‘fake news’”.

In a report outlining the challenges facing the elections, he wrote that “such one-dimensional labelling oversimplifies the phenomenon of malign information operations which are often varied and subtle in their approach”.

Lilakov added that “in some cases, the disinformation campaigns do not share fake content per se but promote particular stories from trustworthy media sources in order to contribute to a specific narrative. Other involve the triggering of strong emotions in users.”

**TAKING STOCK**

Once the end-of-May elections were done and dusted, the Romanians distributed a report to member states in the last week of their mandate, concluding that more “sustained efforts” need to be made.

The report also found that approaches to issues like fake news vary “greatly across member states” and are shared between ministries, rather than focusing on a more centralised offensive.

It added that disinformation campaigns “aim to undermine trust in democracy and in the EU, its policies and core values”, as well as exploit “divisive public debates and create a climate of mistrust”.

The main findings suggested that "wedge issues" like migration and terrorism are the main hotbeds of activity. Other such issues are roles of national capitals in EU decision-making, NATO, climate change, religious tensions and healthcare.

In a letter to Council President Donald Tusk, Romania’s EU affairs chief, George Ciamba, warned that “our assessment underlines that countering disinformation needs to be constantly addressed”.

He explained that it will need a “multi-stakeholder approach, by the EU institutions, member states, civil society, online platforms and academia”.

In its conclusions, the report said that efforts should focus on a “calibrated response”, “proactive and reactive approaches” and raising awareness. It also calls for a reflection period on tweaking the existing legal and institutional framework.

"The Romanian Presidency’s report and the June European Council Conclusions clearly underline the need to continue the coordination and preparedness efforts toward strengthening the resilience of our society,” said EU Romanian ambassador Luminița Odobescu.

She added that it would be best done “through better understanding of what each member state is doing and how it is affected, but also through exchange of best practices”.

The work continues: Based on the presidency trio proposal, the plan is set to be carried on by the Finnish presidency and then by Croatia’s.

The idea is to put in place a more structured approach at the Council level in strengthening resilience and countering hybrid threats, including disinformation.

The idea of the Presidency Trio to set up a dedicated “Horizontal Working Party” eventually saw the light in the first days after the Romanian mandate ended.

The first meeting of the hybrid threats task force was held in July, under the Finnish presidency.
Romania’s EU presidency was partly defined by factors beyond its control, such as the European elections and the ongoing Brexit issue. But the first-time Council chair still managed to do its job: broker agreements on EU legislation. Here are some of the most notable hits.

In the first 100 days of its presidency, before the EU elections campaigning started to draw attention in earnest, the Romanian presidency pushed forward 90 pieces of legislation. That included 10 agreements on the complex long-term budget talks.

During a statement by Romanian Prime Minister Viorica Dăncilă at the European Parliament’s plenary session on Tuesday (16 July), MEPs acknowledged the progress made by the presidency on issues like environment and finance.

“It was important to demonstrate to citizens that the EU institutions work for them and produce results,” Dăncilă told the Strasbourg assembly. “I am happy to be able to reassert that Romania has done just that.”

The prime minister added that “Romania proved its capacity to add value to the European Union, and that is reflected in the substantial stock take we can demonstrate: 90 legislative files concluded, 2,500 meetings organised.”

European Commission Vice-President Maroš Šefčovič summed up that “bringing 90 files to the finish line in 100 days was a political sprint, a testament to dedication”.

The files in question ranged from economic policy, coast guard

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By Sam Morgan | EURACTIV.com

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protection and better work-life-balance to information-sharing and gas markets.

**CLEANING UP HEAVY TRANSPORT**

One of the main climate-related files left over by the Austrian presidency was the Commission’s first foray into trying to regulate emissions from heavy vehicles.

The Austrians had already brokered an agreement on updating rules for light vehicles right at the end of their presidential shift, finalising a deal that defied expectations.

Given earlier failures to strike a compromise between western and eastern countries, it was expected that Romania would have to deal with both files. But in the end, they were able to focus efforts on the heavy vehicles rules.

Under the pact signed in February, truck emissions will have to be slashed by 30% by 2030, with a 15% benchmark as a stepping stone in 2025. Manufacturers that fail to meet the goals will be hit with an “emissions premium” penalty.

Negotiators ultimately compromised on the Commission’s initial proposal of 15% and 30%. MEPs had wanted CO2 targets of 20% and 35%, while the EU member states backed the Commission’s figures with added tweaks.

Dragging the truck rules over the line actually completed the bloc’s long list of climate-focused legislation, after deals were struck on legislation aimed at boosting renewable energy capacity and improving energy efficiency.

“The European Parliament and Council have reached an ambitious and balanced agreement. The new targets and incentives will help tackle emissions, as well as bring fuel savings to transport operators and cleaner air for all Europeans,” said EU climate chief Miguel Arias Cañete.

After the Parliament and Council gave the agreement their final stamps of approval in April and June, the next milestone is the end of 2019, which will be used as a baseline for future emission cut calculations.

**GAS MANOEUVRING**

In terms of energy and climate policy, the presidency also successfully shepherded an agreement on new gas pipeline rules into the completion zone.

The revised EU gas directive is meant to ensure that bloc rules apply to all gas pipelines to and from third countries, according to the Commission. This includes rules on third-party access, tariff regulation, ownership unbundling and transparency.

When the February deal was reached, Cañete said a “loophole” had been closed, as the EU starts to think in earnest about how to cut its dependence on foreign energy imports.

The amendment was given a final stamp of approval by the Council in April. An exemption clause for existing pipelines, as well as clear procedures for negotiating deals with third-parties.

“We worked hard to find a compromise that would be acceptable to everyone, and I think we now have a good solution which will guarantee that we have a fair and competitive European gas market,” said Romanian energy minister Anton Anton.

After publication in the official journal, the member states are in the middle of a nine-month-long transposition period.

**COPYRIGHT SHOWDOWN**

Following nearly two years of talks, negotiators managed to strike a deal on copyright reform in February, after what the Romanian presidency called “intense” negotiations.

The updated legislation is meant to “make the rules fit-for-purpose in today’s digital environment”, according to the Council and “ensure adequate protection for authors and artists”.

Under the agreement, online platforms like Google and Facebook will have to negotiate licensing deals with rights holders for the re-publishing of their work. YouTube videos will have to be vetted to ensure copyright has not been infringed.

At the March plenary session, MEPs gave their blessing to the reform effort, although controversial parts of the text almost failed to pass with a majority. In April, the Council announced that it would be published in the official EU journal.

**FOOD FOR THOUGHT**

Also in February, the presidency oversaw an agreement on updating the EU’s General Food Law (GFL).

The legislation “lays down general principles, requirements and procedures that underpin decision making in matters of food and feed safety, covering all stages of food and feed production and distribution”, according to the Commission.

After an in-depth audit in 2014 into the law’s effectiveness, the EU executive proposed its update to the GFL in April 2018.

Following complex negotiations within the Parliament, all it took was three inter-institutional meetings in under a month to reach a final agreement.

The new law grants EU citizens greater access to information submitted to the European Food Safety Agency and boosts transparency. It is set to have a large impact not only on pesticides but on all agri-food supply chain authorisations.

EU health boss Vytenis Andriukaitis
hailed the deal, saying that with “political will and determination, we can do wonders addressing citizens’ concerns”.

“We heard the call, notably expressed via a European Citizens Initiative on pesticides, for greater transparency, at an early stage of the risk assessment process, on studies submitted as part of an application for an authorisation,” the Lithuanian Commissioner added.

The Council formally adopted the updated law in early June. It is expected to be published in the Official Journal on 6 September 2019 and come into force by the end of March 2021.

**ERASMUS +**

A number of the files addressed by the Romanian presidency also focused on Brexit, especially given the fact the UK was supposed to leave the bloc on 29 March. It was ultimately granted an extension until Halloween night on 31 October.

One of the issues addressed was Brexit-proofing the EU’s flagship educational and cultural exchange programme, Erasmus +.

In mid-March, the Council adopted a regulation that would ensure the scheme is not negatively impacted by the UK leaving the EU without a withdrawal agreement in place.

As part of its so-called no-deal planning, the Parliament approved the proposal on 13 March. Estimates at the time suggested that 14,000 students from the other EU27 countries were in the UK at the time, with 7,000 British counterparts in educational schemes across the bloc.

The agreement means that any students caught up in a potential no-deal scenario would not lose their academic credits and would not be obliged to repeat any years of study.

“We are making sure that young people from EU-27 and the UK will be able to complete their studies after Brexit. This regulation will guarantee that the ongoing learning activities in which they are involved will continue to be eligible for grants,” said Ecaterina Andronescu, Romania’s minister of national education.

Romania’s preparation could still come into play, given that the 31 October deadline is fast approaching and the UK’s likely new leadership are more inclined to push for a no-deal exit.
Romania’s EU presidency was a successful mandate, showcasing the country’s commitment to the EU project, writes Prime Minister Viorica Dăncilă.

Six months of uninterrupted work, in addition to more than two years of preparations beforehand, have come to the end on 30 June 2019. This has been a remarkable period, marking Romania’s first mandate at the helm of the EU Council.

It was a unique experience, putting together our country’s sense of commitment, determination, long-term vision as well as capacity to work hard and deliver.

From the outset, a Romanian successful mandate was more than a political project, it was above all the highest expectation of the Romanian citizens. For Romanians, an efficient Presidency of the EU Council was evidence of their commitment to Europe.

Our aim from the very beginning was that of a Presidency which delivers for the EU citizens and gives especially the young people a sense of security concerning their future development and opportunities.

The program of our Presidency was structured into four pillars: Europe of Convergence, Safer Europe, Europe as a stronger global actor, Europe of common values. These strategic pillars have been approached in a cross-cutting and coherence-based approach, creating synergies and maintaining the red thread of cohesion throughout our priorities.

Romania’s mandate as Presidency of the EU Council came in a unique moment in time, marked by the European elections, though negotiations on the next Multiannual Financial Framework or intricate evolutions on Brexit.

Against this background, the Union needed a new vision post 2020 and a refreshed commitment to a joint future. We perfectly understood these implications and the Romanian government stood ready from the very beginning to act as an enabler in this crucial moment for the European Union.

In this capacity, Romania represented the interests of all member states in the negotiations with the European Parliament. With hard work and intense efforts, we succeeded to Continued on Page 14
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deliver beyond expectations, reaching the remarkable result of 90 legislative files concluded in 100 days.

These pieces of legislation bring tangible benefits to the European citizens such as guaranteeing equal opportunities, social protection and inclusion, boosting EU competitiveness and strengthening the Single Market, encouraging digitalisation, innovation, decarbonisation and promoting sustainability, connectivity and research, ensuring the efficient functioning of the financial sector, making Europe a safer place for its citizens or preparing the Union for any Brexit scenario.

Also, in our vision, a strengthened role of the EU as global actor could not be separated from an ambitious enlargement policy, therefore we worked intensively and succeeded to channel the discussions in a positive direction.

Furthermore, Romania envisaged cohesion as a common European value, an expression of unity among countries and regions across Europe. The approach we followed was based on the fact that the promotion of economic and social convergence is essential to the Union’s harmonious, balanced and sustainable development, which can only be achieved through narrowing the development gaps among various regions and creating genuinely equal opportunities for all citizens.

The Romanian Presidency has also strongly stood against a multi-speed Europe, as this would hamper EU’s sustainable and coherent growth, putting the future of the EU project in danger.

We also strongly believe that this cannot be separated from the perspective of Romania’s accession to the Schengen area, given the common objective to guarantee the security of all European citizens and their free movement.

A cohesive and strong Europe is one that guarantees equal opportunities for the development of all its citizens, ensures their safety, social protection and inclusion, and guarantees fair and non-discriminatory access to all the benefits of the Single Market.

In this sense, the Romanian Presidency has highly prioritized and succeeded in fighting for the protection of citizens’ social rights and employment, as well as guaranteed that nobody is left behind with regards to the advancement of digitalisation and requirements for new skills.

Through key achievements on new EU laws such as Work-Life Balance, Transparent & Predictable Working Conditions, the European Labour Authority, and reducing exposure to carcinogens at work, we ensure that all citizens benefit from fairness & social justice: the right to quality jobs, healthcare, lifelong learning and gender equality.

We have involved young people in EU decision making because a secure future is being built through accountability. The Youth Council under the Romanian Presidency drew essential conclusions on young people and the future of work, as well as adopted a resolution on the governance of the EU Youth dialogue.

The Presidency ensured that the EU ministers’ policy debate on the topic of ‘Young people as agents of democracy in the EU’ was introduced by two teenagers in their capacity as youth representatives.

The Romanian Presidency has also made it a key-criteria the involvement of all stakeholders, such as social partners, private and public organisations, in consultation and debate because a strong and fair Europe is one where everyone’s views are considered and their rights’ respected.

During our Presidency, we showed a fearless determination to fight anti-Semitism in Europe. I hope that our projects aimed to promote education, research and memory of Holocaust will be continued and materialized.

The fight against disinformation and the spread of fake news, especially in the context of the European elections in May, were at the core of our action. I strongly supported and I was personally involved in several awareness raising public events organized both in Brussels and Bucharest.

The six months spent in the role of impartial mediator have proved that Romania is a genuine consensus-builder, whose strength lies in the ability to listen, in the respect towards others, and in the quality of being a reliable partner on the long run.

It has also shown that Romania can be particularly effective and propose feasible solutions, even in the most difficult of situations. All along this mandate, we had good friends and partners on our side.

The valuable support provided by the General Secretariat of the Council, and the excellent cooperation with the European Commission, the European Parliament and all the other EU institutions and bodies contributed decisively to a successful mandate.

Last but not least, I can say that the Romanian Presidency of the EU Council was a true diplomatic marathon, an endurance exercise that tested our expertise, negotiation skills, stress resistance and, above all, team spirit. At the end of this journey, I am proud to say that the Romanian administration has successfully passed this test.

I am confident that we leave behind a strong legacy for the next chapter of the EU construction. Building on this new experience, we will continue to work hard for the consolidation of the Union and the strengthening of its policies, as well as to promote solidarity and unity among EU member states.