

CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE PREPARATION FOR THE PRESIDENCY OF THE COUNCIL OF THE EU IN ROMANIA. THE “EU-RO2019” FORUM

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Abstract

Employers' organizations, trade unions, academic and professional organizations, as well as other civil society formats or associations of local authorities can play an active role in the process of preparing and implementing the EU Council Presidency. In this context, strengthening the dialogue and cooperation between the government and the non-governmental environment holds particular importance. Romania is trying to find the best method to reach the European topics of interest. The use of a Forum, to verify those topics of interest, represents a new challenge for the Romanian Government that still dreams of a method that can bring together, under the same roof, all the above-mentioned actors and express their views regarding not only the national, but also the European issues.

Keywords

“EU-RO 2019” Forum, Romanian Presidency of the Council of the European Union, strategy, civil society.

Introduction

The article proposes a clear image on the intention of the Romanian government to involve the civil society in the preparation for the presidency of the EU Council by using as an example the “EU-RO 2019”

Forum. The methodology used for this research is qualitative. Except the academic literature, the article relies on statements of “EU-RO 2019” Forum participants, official statements provided by the official website entitled PREPARATION AND COORDINATION WEBSITE FOR THE ROMANIAN PRESIDENCY OF THE EU COUNCIL – #RO2019EU and national/international press articles.

The Romanian European Union Council Presidency for six months, at the start of 2019, is considered to be a difficult mandate for an inexperienced first-timer, an issue already mentioned in mass media throughout Europe since 2017. The main reasons include the elections to a new European Parliament, negotiations for the 2021-2027 financial framework, the end of Jean Claude Juncker’s era as a head of the European Commission, transition to a new European executive, and Brexit (Touma, 2017).

Countries invest heavily in presidencies (Schout & Vanhoonacker, 2006, p. 1073). In order to be remembered for its performance, when holding such accountabilities, a state must prioritize and elaborate the correct schedule for increasing the pace of integration. Every EU Member State has realized that in order to assure a successful presidency of the Council, it is important to involve as many actors as possible in the process of preparation. According to the applied strategies, this represents the best way for the future democratization and transparency of EU. Romania is trying to follow the same successful strategy.

Romanian Presidency of the Council of the European Union and the civil society

Regarding the term of civil society, the main problem is finding the right definition. There are different assumptions about the European Union which led to different notions of civil society and how civil society may contribute to enhance democracy. A supposition about civil society that supports this article belongs to Beate Kohler-Koch. We agree with her statement that the EU is “a multi-level quasi-government” and civil society organizations become “intermediaries giving citizens a voice and bringing the plurality of interests to the attention of decision-makers” (Kohler-Koch, 2013, p. 8).

According to the aforementioned definition, we should use a broad term of civil society organizations since there is no limit in representing interests, except the law. “The opportunities offered by the EU to participate are directed towards all types of organizations and associations” (Kohler-Koch, 2013, p.

8), like employers' organizations, trade unions, academic and professional organizations, as well as other civil society formats or associations of local authorities, not excluding citizens. They can play an active role in the process of preparing and exercising the Presidency of the EU Council. In this context, strengthening the dialogue and cooperation between the government and non-governmental environment holds particular importance.

Why the involvement of the national civil society in such an important process? The answers are simple. The Presidency of the EU Council represents an opportunity for the Romanian government to recognize the importance of the non-governmental environment, especially when discussing EU topics of interests that include the national needs. Also, involving the civil society increases the level of confidence of the EU Member States.

Romanian civil society has contributed greatly to the consolidation of democracy, by monitoring the government, acting for increasing transparency in the decision-making process and the responsibility of public authorities, but also by enhancing the level of citizen participation, the facilitation of the direct involvement of marginalized groups in the development and implementation of solutions they were facing, influencing the culture and attitude of both government officials and citizens (Balosin, 2018, p. 265).

As a clear signal of their determination to reach out to the citizens, European politicians, hence the Romanian ones, need to subscribe to a hard compact that addresses the democratic and communicative deficits of the EU with concrete measures (Kurpas et al., 2005). Public debates on European issues should be organized with the participation of politicians and civil society. New methods of participatory democracy – such as consensus conferences, deliberative polls or the formation of cross-border networks between citizens – should be considered at the national but also at the European level in order to maximize citizens' involvement in shaping policy.

On the official website for the Romanian presidency of the EU Council, the Interministerial Council outlined as one of the main topics of interest of the EU Council Presidency that we consider the citizen in the same time a source and goal. Transforming the citizen into the main actor remains the preparation strategy for the Romanian EU Presidency at a national level, attracting European appraisals.

The Minister Delegate for European Affairs continues to restate that the public consultation process will not stop, all those interested in participating actively in defining the role of Romania in a European context having the possibility to fill in a questionnaire on the website www.romania2019.eu.

Programs dedicated to professional integration, internship, volunteering, promoting Romania's Presidency of the EU Council or organizing debates, seem sufficient. Still, the citizens lack interest.

The “EU-RO 2019” Forum

The government sustains that “the process of drawing up the topics of interest was conceived as a democratic, deliberative, bottom-up process [...]” (“Cohesion, a common European value’, the slogan of the Romanian Presidency of the Council of the European Union”, 2018).

The solution to put in action the government's statements, to give the feeling of a bottom-up process and to create “a democratic and civic space” (Kurpas et al., 2005) is represented by the initiative of a forum.

The use of a Forum, to verify the European topics of interest, represents the new challenge for the Romanian Government that still dreams this method can bring together, under the same roof, all the above-mentioned actors, expressing their views regarding not only the national but also the European issues.

Why the need of a Forum for Public Consultation, Communication, and Debates for the Preparation and Implementation of Romania's Presidency of the Council of the European Union “EU-RO 2019”? Because its missions seem simple according to this initiative's official website: to generate the formal framework for carrying out the public debates organized by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on the topic of the future Presidency of the Council of the European Union, as well as to define the promotion objectives considered for the first six months of 2019 (EU-RO Forum2019, n.d.).

The “EU-RO 2019” Forum is an open structure for members of Romania's delegations within the European Union's consultative structures (the European Economic and Social Committee, the European Committee of Regions), associative structures with national representativeness, civil society institutions, employers unions, academics, professional structures, local administration associations, which have laid down in their statutes items referring to the promotion of European values, and which have a portfolio of relevant actions carried out over at least one year.

The Forum is a non-legal advisory structure working under the aegis of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, coordinated by the Minister Delegate for European Affairs, composed of the Council and a number of working groups.

The Council is the managing body of the Forum's activity. It consists of 17 people, each having the capacity of a facilitator/coordinator, with the role of coordinating one working group (WG). Facilitators have the role of improving/enhancing the activity of working groups, in their fields of competence, to facilitate the organization of meetings within the Forum, to contribute to refining the conclusions of discussions and realizing the final reports in their respective areas of competence.

The working groups are specialized internal structures, each of them acting in one of the policy fields corresponding to the configuration of the Council of the European Union (EU-RO Forum2019, n.d.). The working group consists of at least 10 persons, representatives of Forum members. Experts from governmental and non-governmental structures may also attend the debates of the Forum's working groups.

The working groups of the EU Council are not among the most described players in the EU decision-making system, but they have a mission, a role to play and fulfill. The same feeling circled the reliable participants of the “EU-RO 2019” Forum.

Each entity interested in becoming part of this initiative must fill in an application available on the official website that will be analyzed by the Forum's Council, and conclusions shall be forwarded for validation by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (EU-RO Forum2019, n.d.).

The presentation of the “EU-RO 2019” Forum is appealing for all the mentioned actors interested in the EU process. But some of the inadequacies of this initiative are mentioned from the beginning on the official website. There is no mentioning of the Forum's Council structure, procedures or period of response regarding any decisions. An example is the lack of a voting system about the proposals on European topics that affected the work of the working groups.

The Forum is functional but no public information about its members is available. The only provider of information about the activity of the Forum is Victor Negrescu, Minister Delegate for European Affairs. In the media (Dumitrescu, 2018), he indicated the number of participants (500 relevant actors), the period of time (80 hours of debates in the month of February), and the fact that under his coordination the Forum brought a number of constructive ideas that would be analyzed by the representatives of the public system.

The official website of the Romanian presidency of the EU Council has posted the list of WG coordinators/facilitators together with the final reports. As mentioned earlier, the main disturbing issue for most of the participants

remains that the list of participants to the Forum's activities is not "open to the public". Also, the reports are available only in Romanian, which represents a deficit of information for other EU-interested parties.

The declarations of three "EU-RO 2019" Forum members, coordinators of working groups (WG) bring an end to this study case that started as an admirable initiative for its applicants, up till now without any plausible results. Their statements rely on one important question: what is your final impression as a participant/coordinator of a Working Group in the EU-RO 2019 Forum?

1. The coordinator of the "EU-RO 2019" Forum, WG for competitiveness, Andreea Paul, president of INACO, declared that:

"The participation of INACO Think Tank to this Forum represented a first exercise of this category, and we started with high hopes that dropped a few months later. Why? Because we organized our proposals to be connected to European priorities and Romanian needs, and we had received the promise of punctual institutional replies for each one of these in a month, which did not happen. So, we have the feeling that we are playing Ping-Pong with the wall, regarding this process of public consultation. Actually, it is a one-way communication, from us to the institutions, which represents a step forward because until now we have not been listened. But we still need institutional feedback, debates, arguments, background notes and justified public decision."

2. The coordinator of the "EU-RO 2019" Forum, WG for Health and consumer protection, Prof. Nicolae-George Drăgulănescu, Ph.D., Faculty of Electronics, Telecommunications and Information Technology, University Politehnica of Bucharest, declared that:

"The consultation organized by the Ministry of European Affairs for the EU-RO2019 Agenda was opportune and relevant but singular, with an original organization, without feedback and future perspectives known to its participants. As a benevolent participant (in four groups: Education and training; Competitiveness; Health and consumer protection; Information society) and coordinator (WG - Health and consumer protection) in this consultation, but also as an international examiner of quality, I point out the following observations, remarks and proposals:

- The procedures of consultation and consent were presented succinctly in an oral manner.
- I am not sure that all the other participants (considered experts by a simple application) have been representative for the working group, taking into account their qualifications, contributions, positions, previous recognitions.

- The participants have issued a number of ideas (brainstorming) that have not been critically evaluated (simple vote, weighted vote). So, reaching to a consensus of the ideas in the final synthetic report was particularly difficult, leaving the task mainly to the coordinators.
- The utility of the consultation seems questionable taking into account that the final version of the reports elaborated by the groups of experts suffered a series of modifications/non-transparent selections after the handing over.
- The anonymization of ideas from the final reports (by eliminating their authors) – imposed by representatives of the organizers – contravenes the academic deontological principles, being similar to plagiarism.”

3. The coordinator of the “EU-RO 2019” Forum, WG for Employment and Social Policy, Radu Comșa, Education & Training Department Coordinator, National Employment Union, stated that:

“The Public Consultation, Communication and Debate Forum on preparing and implementing the Presidency of Romania at the EU-RO 2019 EU Council, conducted as an advisory structure to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, was a timely and fully constructive action at the level of intent. That is why the Forum generated, in the first phase, a series of consistent expectations at the level of the organizations invited to join the Forum. But the actual working time allotted to the activities and the timetable designed for meetings/consultations was under-dimensioned, which compromised the possibility of generating a solid result in accordance with the participants' objectives. Therefore, after a first meeting of the Employment and Social Policy Working Group, when this organization became visible, the interest in participation and feedback within this Group fell a lot, with some of the participants refusing to express their opinions/proposals, and then dropping out of attending meetings/consultations. At this state of affairs, the necessity of framing any proposal in the already established European themes, including the bureaucratic form of achievement, had a negative struck. I am convinced that a more consistent time spent on these consultations would have helped a lot to ensure a more personal and qualitative contribution. With all these avatars, within the Employment and Social Policy Working Group, there has been elaborated a consistent report, which included a whole series of proposals, some of which were undoubtedly topics of interest and in full agreement with the European themes and priorities.”

Conclusions

The “EU-RO 2019” Forum enjoyed the necessary advertisement to attract the attention of the interested public at its launch, however, we cannot say the same about the results. After this experience, the members of each working group have proven their qualities in team management, offering a good alternative for future comparable situations.

At the moment, the advantages of the “EU-RO 2019” Forum are limited to its participants under the form of improved networking skills, formal and informal contacts, collaborations, projects, etc. The future beneficiaries of the constructive ideas have to wait, according to the limited press statements, until the official EU Agenda is completed. The role of this structure was “to contribute to the definition of concrete proposals regarding the European Union’s re-establishment, but also to substantiate Romania’s position as a member state” (*“Victor Negrescu: The EU-RO 2019 Forum has generated many constructive ideas”*, 2018).

The Forum experiment is a step of recognition in front of the public of a relation between the Romanian governmental institutions and the civil society that puts first the EU priorities with its citizens.

In short, the Romanian government realizes that it needs a viable EU strategy to engage the civil society in the whole process of preparing for the presidency of the EU Council. Because the purpose is “to improve the impact, predictability and visibility of EU actions, ensuring consistency and synergy throughout this sector” (Balosin, 2018, p. 264).

As the coordinator of the Education and Training Working Group, I agree entirely with the expressed opinions of my colleagues. The Forum managed to bring together the desired types of civil society organizations and surpass what could be called a period of training for all the actors involved. Nevertheless, there remains the problem of confidence in the central administration in case of a second phase. Who will continue to stay alongside the “EU-RO 2019” Forum, taking into account the feelings of dissatisfaction and scepticism of its coordinators?

Paraphrasing Luis Bouza Garcia (2015, p. 5), the “EU-RO 2019” Forum can be an example of building a European sphere of communication via bureaucratic procedures, but the initiators require the experience of using a model specific to the Romanian environment, in which both main actors involved (civil society and government) are treated equally. The procedures should create opportunities for our civil society to contribute to

the whole process of preparation for the presidency of the EU Council and facilitate citizens' participation. In order to do that, the roadmaps should be known from the beginning.

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