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MEHLIKA ÖZLEM ULTAN

Kocaeli University, Turkey

THE POLITICS OF TRIO OF THE EUROPEAN UNION AND ANALYSIS OF BULGARIA POLICIES

Abstract:

The trio is a rotating presidency system within the context of the presidency of the Council of the European Union. It has a political significance because the heads of states and governments represent their country in the international arena and can show their policies to other member states. The rotating presidency has been on the agenda of the Union since the beginning, but the process of Trio has eventually changed and gained its last version by the Lisbon Treaty. The rotating presidency takes place every 18 months in the European Union and member states which are holding the presidency work together closely in groups of three. The Trio determines long-term goals and explains a common agenda of the three countries'.

In this study, the structure and historical development of the rotating presidency system will be explained and the policies of Bulgaria which holds the presidency from 1 January to 30 June 2018 will be defined. As a result, it will be attempted to analyze the scope of the Trio system and contributions of president country to the policy-making of the EU.

Keywords:

The Council of the EU, The Presidency System, Trio, Bulgaria

JEL Classification: F53, N44

Introduction

The presidency of the European Union is a system that operates since the day when the European Economic Community was founded. It is related to the Council of the European Union, one of the main institutions of the Union. As well as their existing systematic duties, the presidency is important because it gives an opportunity to the members of the Union so that their voices can be heard effectively. The rotating presidency, which takes place every 6 months in the European Union, is a system in which the heads of states and governments can show themselves in the international arena. Political goals and plans of the countries, which become the president of the Council of the European Union during this period, are confronting as an element that affects the decision-making mechanism of the EU and allows for policy formulation.

Within the concept of this study, firstly, the characteristics and the evaluation of the rotating presidency will be explained. The differences between the politics of general presidency system and the current president country's political aims will be determined. And finally, the politics of Bulgaria which is the last president of Trio will be analyzed.

The Council of the European Union

There are five important institutions within the European Union. The European Parliament represents the EU's citizens and it is directly elected by them. The Council of the European Union represents the governments of the individual member countries. The Presidency of the Council, which is about the presidency system, is shared by the member states on a rotating basis. The European Commission represents the interests of the Union as a whole. These three institutions are related to the legislative part of the EU. The European Council defines the general political direction and priorities of the European Union. The Court of Justice of the European Union is an institution which ensuring EU law is interpreted and applied same in every EU country. There are also some other institutions such as European Central Bank, European Economic and Social Committee, European Committee of the Regions, European Investment Bank and European Ombudsman. But the presidency system is related to the Council of the European Union which is one of the legislative institutions of the EU (Saygin, 2013, 229).

The meetings of the Council of the EU are generally attended by foreign ministers. However, according to the nature of the issues to be discussed, other ministers can also participate in the meetings. Increasing the participation of ministries in technical matters is aimed at the EU Council in order to reduce the influence of foreign ministers. However, this has diversified the configurations of the Council of the EU and led to an increase in the number of meetings the ministers would attend. For this reason, conflicts have begun to occur at meetings.

At the December 1999 Helsinki Summit, it was stated that the maximum number of Council configurations would be 15 (Helsinki European Council, 1999). At the June 2002

Summit in Seville, it was decided that there should be 9 Council configurations and their names are stated as follows (Seville European Council, 2002, 22):

- General affairs Council (GAC)
- Economic and Financial Affairs Council (ECOFIN)
- Justice and Home Affairs Council (JHA)
- Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council (EPSCO)
- Competitiveness Council (COMPET)
- Transport, Telecommunications and Energy Council (TTE)
- Agriculture and Fisheries Council (AGRIFISH)
- Environment Council (ENV)
- Education, Youth, Culture and Sport Council (EYCS)

The meetings which held under these configurations are chaired by the president country, so meetings of the Council of Europe are usually held in the territory of the country holding the presidency (Günuğur, 2007, 257).

The Presidency System of the Council of the European Union/TROIKA

The presidency system of the Council of the European Union was called as 'Troika'. The meaning of troika is a Russian vehicle pulled by a team of three horses. So, according to the troika system, the old president country, the current president country and the next president country work together in order to manage coherent and sustainable policies (The Presidency of the Council of the EU, 2018).

The country that holds the presidency has certain responsibilities. These responsibilities have become increasingly prevalent because of the continuous enlargement and deepening of the Union. It is possible to list the responsibilities and authorities of the presidency as follows (Bozkurt et.al, 2011, 105):

- Planning and chairing meetings in the Council and its preparatory bodies,
- Representing the Council in relations with the other EU institutions,
- Trying to resolve disagreements between the member states by means of consensus,
- Ensuring consistency and continuity in decision making.

The term presidency is as old as the European Union itself. Founding countries thought that it would be more useful and functional to have a rotating president instead of a general president. The Treaty establishing the European Coal and Steel Community decided that presidency period should be for 3 months, while the European Economic

Community Treaty decided to extend these periods to 6 months. Since the 1970s, criticisms have been made on the presidency system. It is seen that the presidency system is criticized because of the difficulties in achieving continuity, late arrival of the presidency due to a large number of members, the possibility of abusing the political nature of the president, the decisions which are not fully organized due to the insufficient preparation time, and the increased labor force. There is not enough preparation time for the formation of policies because the works and tasks of the presidency are increased while the duration is limited to six months (Vanhoonacker and Schout, 2013, 4). The Tindemans Report was published in 1975 to find solutions to these criticisms. The Tindemans Report has suggested extending the period of rotating presidency to one year, giving certain duties to the responsibility of a single country or a single individual (Report by Leo Tindemans, 1976). However, a change similar to this suggestion was only possible with the Lisbon Treaty. A decision taken in 1995 determined the order of the presidencies until the year 2003. The order to be made after this decision has been decided to proceed in line with this determined framework (Official Journal of the European Union, 1995).

The Presidency System of the Council of the European Union/TRIO

When the Lisbon Treaty has entered into force, the group of three member states which is called the “trio presidency” determines a common work program for a period of 18 months. This mechanism of coordination over a longer period of time aims for the continuity of the Council’s work (The Presidency of the Council, 2018).

The rotating presidency has been on the agenda of the Union since the beginning, but the process of Trio has eventually changed and gained its last version by the Lisbon Treaty. With the Lisbon Treaty which signed in 2007 and entered into force in 2009, the presidency system has been changed. The first amendment to the system is related to the decision of the European Council with a qualified majority, while the second amendment is about the functioning of the presidency system (The European Council and the Council of the EU Through Time, 2016, 31-32). According to the declaration on Article 16(9) of the Treaty on European Union concerning the European Council decision on the exercise of the Presidency of the Council, the new mechanism of the presidency is explained as “The Presidency of the Council, with the exception of the Foreign Affairs configuration, shall be held by pre-established groups of three Member States for a period of 18 months. The groups shall be made upon a basis of equal rotation among the Member States, taking into account their diversity and geographical balance within the Union. Each member of the group shall in turn chair for a six-month period all configurations of the Council, with the exception of the Foreign Affairs configuration. The other members of the group shall assist the Chair in all its responsibilities on the basis of a common programme. Members of the team may decide alternative arrangements among themselves.” (Declaration on Article 16(9) of the Treaty on European Union, 2008, 339)

After 2009, member states which are holding the presidency work together closely in groups of three again. But the name of the system becomes 'Trio' after this date. The trio sets long-term goals and prepares a common agenda determining the major issues over an 18 month period (Batory and Puetter, 2011, 2). The council presidency is responsible for driving forward the Council's work. Each member state will take on this role and ensure continuity in the Council's Agenda. So, the presidency officially lasts 6 months, but practically the other countries are being a part of trio system for 18 months (Official Journal of the European Union, 2009).

There are some advantages to having the presidency in three grouping countries over 18 months. In the new system, it will be possible to share the workload and responsibility with the other countries in the trio. The longer duration of the presidency will increase the possibility of reaching the conclusion of long-term policies (Vanhoonacker, Pomorska, and Maurer, 2011, 1). In addition to these advantages, there are also some weaknesses in the trio system. For example, disputes may arise while selecting countries that will take responsibility for prestigious policy areas. The existence of different countries in the new trio system may cause technical problems and some coordination problems between countries due to the translation of bureaucratic processes into different languages (Vanhoonacker and Schout, 2013, 12-13).

Bulgarian Presidency

Bulgaria, which became an EU member with Romania in 2007, assumed the EU Council presidency from 1 January to 30 June 2018. The beginning of this Trio was started by Estonia's presidency, on January 2018 Bulgarian presidency has begun and finally, Austria took the presidency on July 2018. According to the official Trio Program announced on June 20, 2017, these 3 countries which will work in close cooperation for 18 months have decided to concentrate on policies in the framework of security, strengthening of EU border controls, economic growth, and competitiveness. This trio program is based on the European Council's "Strategic Agenda for the Union in Times of Change" of June 2014 (The Presidency of the Council, 2018).

On November 10, 1989, Bulgaria has passed to a multi-party revolt with the end of communism. Bulgaria, which applied for the EU membership in 1990, became a member of NATO on 29 March 2004, and the EU on 1 January 2007. Along with the process of democratization in the country, the process of cohesion with the EU has also been experienced. Bulgaria shows its enthusiasm to adopt the European perspective and the core values of the Union. During its first presidency of the Council, it has set targets for raising the values of the Union in the framework of EU policies (Bulgaristan'ın AB Dönem Başkanlığı, 2018).

When Bulgaria's presidency priorities are examined, it can be seen that the country has used its historical and cultural values as the slogan of the EU Council's rotating presidency, which is identified with the values of the Union and is the national slogan of

the nation, "United we stand strong" (The Bulgarian Presidency, 2018). Bulgaria has set four priority areas for its presidency: the future of Europe; security and stability; Western Balkans and digital economy (Programme of the Republic of Bulgaria for the Presidency of the Council of the European Union, 2018).

The Future of Europe

Bulgaria underlines that European security is "fragile" because of the refugee crisis and terrorist attacks that have happened in previous years. The Bulgarian presidency program emphasizes the need for a stable Union to remind citizens that the EU is a welfare center. Finally, considering the necessity of solidarity among the member states, Bulgaria states that the most important way to survive the crisis is to become a united Union. According to Bulgarian policies, in order to meet the three key elements of the future of Europe, member countries need to be able to take joint decisions, increase their competitiveness and develop coherence capacities. It is stated that the future of Europe will be shaped by two basic elements. The former of them is economic growth, the latter is social cohesion. If new jobs are created in the EU, and investments are increased, it is thought that the future of the Union will be better (Future of Europe and Young People, 2018).

Security and Stability

In order to be successful in security and migration policies, there should be consensus and joint efforts. It is necessary to produce long-term and fair solutions in readmission and asylum policies. According to Bulgaria, there is a need for security and stability to refresh the confidence of European citizens in the Union. It is also emphasized that strengthening border security is also very important. So it is vital to work towards efficient, fast and fair justice (Security and Stability, 2018).

Western Balkans

It seems that Bulgaria aims to take more concrete actions within the framework of the Western Balkans policy. In this direction, it is aimed to strengthen relations between European Union member states and the Western Balkans in terms of transport, energy, education and the digital market. For this, Bulgaria has made some proposals such as increasing the use of broadband internet in the Western Balkan countries or gradually reducing the roaming fees. It seems that Bulgaria aims to provide both geopolitical and economic support to the Western Balkans (Western Balkans, 2018).

Digital Economy

The digital economy is the fourth priority of the Bulgarian presidency. This title is also one of the main titles in the overall program of the Trio of Estonia, Bulgaria, and Austria. In this respect, issues such as electronic communication, cross-border services, cybersecurity, intellectual property rights and Digital Single Market have been taken into

the priority field of Trio. Bulgaria underlines the necessity of educating the young population on this issue (Digital Economy, 2018).

The EU presidency system is seen as crucial for declaring the political priorities of the president country of the trio in the international arena. In 2017, the EU has mostly faced with populism and Euroscepticism. This situation has led to the questioning of the future of the EU. Discussions on how enlargement policies and the integration process will continue being on the agenda of the presidents of the trio in 2018. Thus it becomes inevitable for the trio formed by Estonia, Bulgaria, and Austria to determine priority areas for the future of the European Union.

It appears that the policies in the presidency of Bulgaria are generally compatible with the policies of the Union. The unity that is a priority for the Union is also highly emphasized by Bulgaria. That is why Bulgaria tries not to be seen in the political sense because it is one of the poorest and smallest countries in the Union. So, Bulgarian presidency policies have not differentiated from Union policies.

Conclusion

With the presidency system, member states are given the opportunity to have high-level representation in the Union, as well as the contribution of each country to the formation of Union policies. Although the presidency system holds the presidency for a period of 6 months, in fact, the presidency has now extended to a total of 18 months. Thus, the trio countries were actually allowed to operate for 18 months. However, given that the presidency has been set in advance years, it is thought that the longer the preparatory phase is started, the more steps it can be taken.

It is discussed whether the countries that are geographically small and politically weak can be able to effectively represent the Union both within the Union and in the international arena or not (Svetličič and Cerjak, 2015, 5). The priorities and policies have been decided generally by the trio, but sometimes countries can suggest some different policies during their presidency period. But this situation can only be possible in the powerful countries' presidency period. If a country is not a powerful country and if it is a small country like Bulgaria, we can say that it is not possible to be a pioneer country in the European Union policy area. We haven't yet known if the Bulgarian Presidency policies are successful or not. We only saw their priorities and activities, but we did not see their final report. It is Bulgaria's first presidency, so the politicians don't have so much hope about the political activities of the country. It is thought that Austria can be more effective with the other members of the trio.

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