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## ROMANIA TAKES OVER EU PRESIDENCY AMID STRAINED RELATIONS WITH BRUSSELS

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Brussels is already at loggerheads with the increasingly populist government in Bucharest on multiple fronts and Juncker's comments highlight some of the strains.

Romania will be in charge for the next six months as the European Union faces a series of tricky tests - most notably Brexit, European parliamentary elections, and wrangling over the next budget.

The Eastern European nation, which takes the presidency for the first time as it succeeds Austria, has been one of the EU's most consistently europhile member states since it joined in 2007.

But its left-wing government has recently begun to adopt the sort of nationalist rhetoric expounded by nearby Hungary and Poland.

All three are embroiled in disputes with the EU over controversial reforms that critics say undermine the rule of law.

Liviu Dragnea, head of the ruling Social Democrats (PSD) and widely seen as Romania's most powerful man, has slammed the EU as "unfair", claiming Brussels is seeking to deny Bucharest the "right to hold its own opinions".

Row over amnesty decree

In remarks to Die Welt on December 29, Juncker said that even if Romania was "technically well prepared" for the presidency, the "Bucharest government has not fully understood what it means to preside over the countries of the EU".

The EU presidency "requires a willingness to listen to others and a willingness to put one's own concerns in the background. I have some doubts about this", Juncker said.

One of the main reasons for the cooling of relations between Bucharest and Brussels is the PSD's planned overhaul of Romania's judiciary, which the government says is aimed at clamping down on "abuses" by judges and magistrates.

But the European Commission wants the reforms scrapped, saying they undermine the fight against corruption in one of the EU's most graft-prone states.

EU officials "have the feeling, perhaps justifiably, that these reforms are for the benefit of Dragnea", political scientist Andrei Taranu told AFP.

The government has proposed a criminal amnesty for politicians including Dragnea, who was given a suspended jail sentence for electoral fraud in 2016 and is being investigated in two other criminal cases.

The amnesty decree is expected to be issued soon, with a European source warning that such a step would cross a "red line" for Brussels.

Polarised and divided

Moreover, Romania may find it difficult to speak with a united voice, given the tug-of-war between the government of Viorica Dancila [ ] third PSD prime minister since 2016 [ ] centre-right President Klaus Iohannis.

Iohannis, a keen pro-European who has frequently clashed with the government, represents Romania on the European Council.

The PSD won a comfortable election victory in 2016, but quickly sparked the country's biggest wave of protests since the collapse of communism with an attempt to water down anti-corruption laws.

Demonstrations have continued in the capital Bucharest but the PSD still enjoys solid support in poorer and more rural parts of the country, which have benefited from recent rises in wages and benefits.

Political analyst Radu Alexandru describes Romanian society as "very polarised and divided".

As well as being one of the EU's poorest countries, Romania also suffers from huge inequality.

The country has received 32 billion euros in EU cohesion funds, part of which went to supplying running water to 40 percent of rural homes [ ] from just one percent at the fall of communism in 1989.

But as sociologist Iulian Stanescu of the ICCV research institute points out, "EU membership can't solve everything."

<https://www.france24.com/en/20190101-romania-takes-over-eu-presidency-tensions-brussels-juncker>

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