

To Prime Minister Viorica Dăncilă &
European Council President Donald Tusk
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B-1048 Bruxelles/Brussels
Belgium/Belgium

Berlin, 2019-02-26

Open Letter: Coca-Cola's partnership with the Romanian Presidency of the Council of the European Union

Dear Prime Minister, dear President,

Since 1 January 2019, Romania – for the first time – holds the rotating Presidency of the Council of the EU. This is not only an important moment for Romania, but decisions made during these six months have an impact on over 500 million EU citizens.

These EU citizens must be able to rely on their common interests being at the heart of the decisions that are taken, not least of which about the integrity and safety of their food system.

The Romanian Presidency's website¹ stresses that “the Presidency must, by definition, be neutral and impartial in the exercise of its mandate”. This neutrality is not only towards the various European countries, but should also apply more broadly to serving the interests of the European citizen. Neutrality from the influence from the interests of companies, for example, must be strictly observed. Even the appearance of conflict of interest must be avoided.

foodwatch is therefore surprised that commercial companies are sponsoring regularly the EU Presidency and is calling attention to the current case of Romanian Presidency. As a “platinum sponsor”², Coca-Cola has a prominent position in the Romanian Presidency, and is even described as a “partner”. This is remarkable for a company that has vital business interests in various topics that are currently on the political European agenda.

¹ <https://www.romania2019.eu/the-role-and-duties-of-the-presidency-of-the-council-of-the-european-union/>

² <https://www.romania2019.eu/partners/>

It is also remarkable because the European Union has noticed alarming health problems on Non-Communicable Diseases (NCD's) ³. The World Health Organization concluded⁴ in an earlier stage: *“Not one single country has managed to turn around its obesity epidemic in all age groups. This is not a failure of individual will-power. This is a failure of political will to take on big business.”*

The Romanian Presidency sets out in its work programme that the aims of the Presidency are to work towards: *“Guaranteeing food security and safety for European citizens at reasonable prices and higher quality”* and *“protect(ing) the European agriculture model that is based on the principles of food sovereignty, sustainability and capacity to respond to the real needs of European citizens, be they farmers or consumers”* within the Common Agricultural Policy.⁵ It also states that *“The transparency of the EU system for assessing food chain risks, the decision-making process, effective and consistent communication, and bringing these processes closer to citizens are topics that will be addressed with particular attention by the Romanian Presidency.”*⁶

Next to this specific programme, within the next months, EU Politicians will consider revisions to the General Food Law, which sets standards on food and health for all EU countries. Also the important issue of nutritional labeling on food packages is on the agenda, as well as finally define nutrient profiles. Other issues that may arise at the EU level during the Romanian Presidency include the sugar tax/levy on sweetened drinks and the marketing of unhealthy foods to children.

May we remind you on the leaked strategy of Coca-Cola to ‘fight back’ on sugartax/levy⁷, which strategy could include these kind of sponsoring, or lobbying? These issues that affect the health and freedom of choice of all EU citizens, deserve the unbiased attention of politicians.

³ https://ec.europa.eu/health/non_communicable_diseases/overview_en

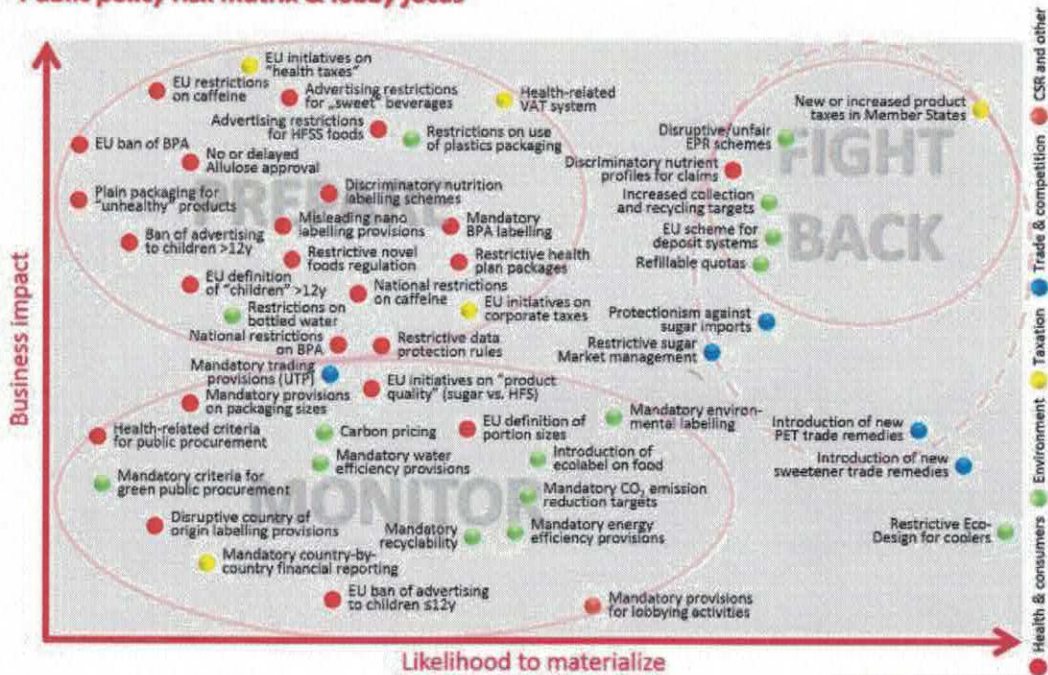
⁴ https://www.who.int/dg/speeches/2013/health_promotion_20130610/en/

⁵ https://www.romania2019.eu/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/en_rogramme_ropres2019.pdf, page 51

⁶ *ibid.* page 53

⁷ <https://medium.com/cokeleak/new-email-leak-coca-cola-policy-priorities-390eb1dfda82>

Public policy risk matrix & lobby focus



Classified - Internal use

Coca-Cola Europe

Picture: Leaked internal graph of Coca-Cola Europe on their position on political issues, e.g. fight sugartax

Coca-Cola has direct interests in all these areas. This interest is generally at odds with the interests of European citizens when it comes to a healthy diet and the availability of unbiased nutritional information. For this reason, it is highly undesirable for a company like Coca-Cola to sponsor such an important political position.

Poor nutrition, including excessive consumption of sugary drinks, is costing the health of millions of Europeans, and associated health care costs are already considerable and rising sharply.

For this reason our questions for the Romanian presidency are:

- How much money in total is involved in the sponsorship of the Romanian Presidency of the Council of the EU from all commercial interests?
- How much does Coca-Cola contribute in money and/or in products and services?
- What (visibility and other advantages – such as access) does Coca-Cola get as a consequence of this support?

- For reason of transparency, sponsorship should be made public. What is your policy on that and when are these contracts being made public?
- What is Romania's position and policy on the NCD crisis?
- What is Romania's position and policy on the leaked policy of Coca-Cola of fighting back sugar tax/levy?
- Did the Romanian Presidency assess potential conflicts of interest in the sponsoring by Coca-Cola? If so, will you make your analysis public?
- What lobby meetings have taken place between the Romanian delegation and Coca-Cola between Jan 1st 2017 and the present time, and what was the outcome?
- Would you support a EU policy that clarifies rules for all Member States regarding sponsorship of political events?

Our questions for the European Council President are:

- Do you believe sponsorship funding from commercial interest of the Presidency of the Council of the European Union is appropriate in general?
- How does such funding from private interest companies fit with the mandate of EU-bodies to work for the common interest of over 500 Million Europeans?
- How does the sponsorship of Coca-Cola fit in EU NCD-policy? Are there conflicts of interest that should be considered? Is it appropriate for EU institutions to be part of the marketing for non-healthy food like Coca-Cola?
- Would you support a EU policy that clarifies rules for all Member States regarding sponsorship of political events?

As foodwatch we stand for a democratic European policy that puts the interests of its citizens first. The blatant lobbying, sponsorship and influence of the industry must stop. Any improper influence of companies on political decision-making, including the appearance of conflict of interest, must be avoided.

With respect to this, we see the sponsorship of the Presidency by Coca-Cola as inappropriate and concerning. Such sponsorships are therefore highly undesirable, and even more so at a time when trust in politics and decision-makers is being very much challenged.

foodwatch therefore asks you to terminate this sponsorship with immediate effect and to put in place a policy with clear rules for future Presidencies in order to ensure that potential conflicts of interest are effectively and transparently avoided and that such undesirable sponsorships are not accepted anymore.

We are looking forward to your response. Please note, that at the same time we are sending you this letter, we start an email-action. For transparency matters, we allow ourselves to publish this letter as an open letter as well as the responses that you will provide.

Yours sincerely



Thilo Bode

Executive Director foodwatch International