

DEMOCRACY AS TRIAGE

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Abstract

The text below is a partial transcript of the lecture given by Professor Ronald King at the Faculty of Political Science, Babeş-Bolyai University, on June 15th, 2011. Professor King presented the volume "Romania under Basescu," co-edited with Paul Sum and published by Lexington Books. He elaborated on the concept of triage democratization that is found in the introduction to the book. Professor King teaches political science at San Diego State University. His main interests lie in American Politics and Public Policy, but he has been a close observer of Romanian politics. In the 1990s, he served as senior consultant for social science curriculum development to the Faculty of Political and Administrative Sciences, Babeş-Bolyai University in Romania, and he has received a certificate "For Nurturing Romanian Political Science" from the Romanian national political science association. In Summer 2007, Professor King was awarded an honorary title by Babeş-Bolyai University.

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It is good to be back in Cluj. This Faculty has been a second academic home to me for more than a decade. I am pleased to see so many friends and colleagues in the audience.

I want to speak today about a book that Paul Sum and I recently edited, "Romania under Basescu," published by Lexington Books. There are seventeen separate contributions in the volume. They are divided into three sections, addressing issues of governance, of civil society, and of public policy. The authors come from both Europe and North America. Some of them are here in this room. Beyond summarizing the book's main focus, I also have another, methodological goal that will become clear as I talk.

Every study must somewhat arbitrarily specify the period selected for analysis. "Romania Under Basescu" examines Romanian politics and policy during period of the first Basescu presidency (2004-2009). In terms of governance, its scope includes the original Truth and Justice Alliance and its collapse, the fragile Tariceanu-II minority government, and the first Boc government in complex alliance with the Social Democrats. Events after the

2009 presidential elections are outside the scope of this analysis.

One of the objects of the book is to think somewhat carefully about democracy in Romania, analyzing its progress along a number of dimensions. By most conventional measures, Romania certainly qualifies as a consolidated democracy. There are no signs that it might revert back to authoritarianism. By the standard criteria of evaluation, Romania has achieved a successful transition. Yet we also need to go beyond mere thresholds in order to assess achievement. In 2009, according to World Audit, Romania ranked as the 51st most democratic country in the world, slightly below Bulgaria and Serbia, slightly ahead of Peru, Lesotho, and El Salvador. The story of Romanian politics and policy since 1989 has been one foot placed confidently in the future while the other is rooted firmly in the past. This becomes clear when we examine Romania's progress along a number of sub-dimensions that constitute the democracy project.

When Basescu was elected, as you all know, many commentators expressed great optimism. Allegedly, this was going to be the first post-transition government. The communist-successor party had finally been defeated. There would be a new regime, transparent and accountable, promising to combat corruption and advance the rule of law. There have been achievements but also continuing frustrations, disappointing to those excited by the aspirations expressed. Basescu's first presidential term was a period in which Romania finally joined the European family of nations, but it was also a period remarkable for bitter political controversy and limited reform success.

"Romania Under Basescu" is not an examination of the complex personality of the president. Of course he is a difficult person, aggressively self-promoting and defensively self-righteous. Like many modern presidents, he strives hard making sure that the spotlight is on him. Equally, the book is not a simple attempt at evaluation. There are too many analysts who interpret this period in the dichotomous language of good-or-bad, in which the president is cast either in the role of devil or angel. Such an approach does not get us very far. We know that all coins have two sides. The object for scholarly work is to understand both sides simultaneously and to see how they constitute an integrated whole.

Explicitly, "Romania Under Basescu" is a work of social science. Its announced intention is to apply social science models and social science theory to the contemporary Romanian context. In that way, it goes beyond

popular commentary. Intentionally, the book is an attempt to demonstrate how rigorous academic analysis improves our understanding of popular events. (*Professor King then proceeded to discuss many of the individual chapters of the book, contributed by scholars in Romania and abroad.*)

This leads to the second theme of my talk. The first theme was to introduce the book to you. I think it is a valuable book and I hope you will read it seriously. The second theme is more general and concerns what we should be doing as social scientists, who take it as our responsibility to analyze society in a useful and meaningful manner. It is necessary to consider what this entails. I want to stress is that social science requires far more than telling a narrative story. Narratives that recount what happened are beneficial, but they are narrow. Our goal as social scientists is not just to tell a story, but to show why this is the right story to tell (compared to alternative possible versions), to demonstrate why the conclusions arrived at are valid (compared to alternative possible conclusions), and how this story links to other stories to form a coherent interpretive conception. Put differently, the 'story-about-the-story' is as important as the 'story-in-itself'. It is the integration of subject, method, and theory that makes social science distinctive and gives it a fundamental and positive role to play within democratic debate and deliberation.

In particular, I want to defend the importance of modeling within the social science project. Models are an abstraction from reality, serving as an *a priori* conceptualization intended to capture key elements and relationships. We then derive hypotheses from models and test them empirically. If a model tests well, it provides a framework capable of enhancing general understanding.

At one time, political science was mainly about telling narratives. It was deemed essential to describe in detail various government institutions and practices. It was felt necessary to record what happened in politics and who engaged in what action. Experts amassed a great wealth of knowledge about, for example, each separate president of the United States. They could describe the version of parliamentary government utilized in New Zealand or the semi-presidential form adopted in France. They would tell you the history of the Social Democratic Party in Sweden and the share of votes obtained by that party in every Swedish election. Times have changed. Now anybody with an Internet connection can research and report such basic stories. Information is far more available than ever before.

The accumulation of important facts no longer is the sign of a qualified scholar.

The next generation of political scientists made comparisons. They put narratives together. They said, this is how the health policy is organized in Poland as opposed to Hungary. This is how Peru structures its legislature as opposed to Bolivia or Uruguay. This is how presidential government works in the United States compared to Mexico. This is the pattern of democratic participation in Bulgaria opposed to the pattern in Chile. Sometimes they put narratives together in studies of two or three observations; sometimes they put them together in groups of 20, 50 or 200. These are still comparisons, whether the methodology is qualitative or quantitative. The purpose of a comparison is to identify similarities and differences across cases, and to offer rigorous explanation for the variation observed.

The third generation of political scientists went beyond aggregating narratives into causal comparisons. The emphasis shifted to modeling theoretical structures, developing formal conceptualizations so that the whole being analyzed emerges as more than a mere compilation of the parts. There are a number of models presented for empirical testing in the volume, "Romania Under Basescu." They address, for example, the reasons for systematic conflict between president and prime minister in semi-presidential government systems, the incentives to establish catch-all political parties, the hypothesized impact of education and of international travel on civic values, and the role of competition in promoting the rule of law. These models are then tested with the use of Romanian data.

I am going to be very blunt. Without such modeling, political stories are generally uninteresting and quickly tend to become irrelevant. In a year or two, few will remember today's headlines or the intensity that surrounds them. How many of us now recall the details regarding the controversial reshuffling of cabinet ministers during the government of Victor Ciorbea? How many can recall the exact percentage of the vote obtained by Vadim Tudor in the December 2000 presidential runoff election? These events now appear as ancient history. Even the attempted impeachment of President Basescu in 2007 largely has faded from mass consciousness and has little impact upon contemporary politics given that the President's popularity has fallen considerably from that time. I promise that, in thirty years or so, few will remember the Basescu period except as a moment mentioned in the history books. From the perspective of social science, however, the first

Basescu presidency does and will continue to have significance, not as a story in itself but instead as a source of data useful for the formulation and evaluation of models helpful to us as we seek to understand reality.

Speaking personally, you all know far more regarding Romanian politics than I do. I am a foreigner who cares about Romania, but my studies tend to be at a distance. My goal is never to attempt teaching you the details of Romanian politics, for I could not possibly do that. But I am a trained political scientist with some skills in research modeling and methodology. Working in cooperation with Romanian scholars, I sometimes contribute to the published literature in the field. I report with pride and optimism that the quality of Romanian political science has improved dramatically over the past decade and that this Faculty has been at the forefront of the progress made. Increasingly, the methods are becoming more sophisticated, the data are more accurate, and the models are more penetrating, complex, and relevant to practical problems. "Romania Under Basescu," far more than a compendium of analyses regarding Romanian politics and policy during a specific period of time, can be considered as an indicator of the capacity of rigorous academic investigation to go beyond bounded narratives in the attempt to establish more lasting findings.

Let me now put the two themes of this talk together by means of a concrete illustration. The Introduction chapter to "Romania Under Basescu," written by Paul Sum and myself, contains a model of triage democratization that we believe is quite relevant to contemporary Romania. Usually, democratization is analyzed by situating countries in an ordinal ranking or along a linear scale. The problem is that all the various components of democracy are thereby compressed into a single, summary indicator, thus losing subtlety and distinctions. An alternative method is to code democratization in multiple dimensions. Linz and Stepan, for instance, examine separately the potential for violence, the extent of regime legitimacy, and the degree to which the rule of law is enforced. The problem now becomes complexity in evaluation, as a country can be ranked high on some dimensions of democratization but low on others.

In the Introduction, Paul Sum and I adopt a different approach. We conceptualize democratization as proceeding through possible various paths, each of which combines features in different qualitative combinations. One particular path seems especially relevant to Romania, although it is not exclusive to Romania. (As an aside, I believe that the pattern also applies quite well to certain countries of Latin America.

Eastern Europe/Latin America comparisons seem very interesting and I encourage you to pursue them in your empirical research.) The concept of “triage democratization” can be understood by analogy to the emergency room in a hospital, where there is crisis and after crisis coming through the door. The doctors in charge quickly have to insure that the bleeding is stopped and the patient lives. Once they are confident that patient is stable, they rapidly move on to the next person in danger. And if, perchance, there are no immediate crises pending, they can relax for their task is essentially reactive rather than proactive. Triage democratization is not intended as a comprehensive model, but it does help us understand how Romania and many other countries encounter democracy.

Triage democratization entails a politics of sequential stimulus-and-response rather than planned and coherent action. It entails compartmentalized and non-linear transition, determined by the latest crisis situation. Minimum standards are met, to comply just enough with visible pressures and achieve desired relief, but there is neither time nor inclination to do more than meet minimal standards. Sectors not facing such pressures tend to remain inactive. Deep social transformations are often ignored as they involve more extensive and penetrating surgeries, beyond what is demanded by the latest pressing agenda.

The effects of triage democratization are simultaneously substantive, political, procedural, and personal. Substantively, a topic appears on the active agenda primarily because of pressing necessity, not because of cost-benefit analysis or the result of long-term planning. The assumption is that without crisis pressure, little would be done. Similarly, once pressure disappears, action largely stops. Politically, triage tends toward weak and shifting alliances, which exist under emergency conditions when unity is essential to achieve the minimal capacity for governance. Yet there is a return to partisan and factional squabbling once conditions shift. Procedurally, triage democratization entails transparent decision-making under the rule of law only under necessity, when someone is watching and there are probable penalties for non-compliance. Transparent procedures do not become entrenched as a matter of principle, resulting in inconsistency and cynicism. Finally, triage democracy produces triage democrats, whose personal interest in reform exists primarily when there are emergency threats to the system they are responsible for administering. Otherwise, they resort to customary and comfortable traditional behaviors. The triage model is offered as a proposed explanation for slow and uneven democratic transition, one that simultaneously advances forward yet

remains rooted in the past. It is not the only model operating in Romania, we assert, but it is an important tool for understanding the complexity of Romanian political reality. I will quickly review the main points.

The triage pattern has its origins in the Communist past, under the Sultanism of Ceausescu. Sultanism is characterized by celebrated, centralized, and capricious personal authority. All policy flowed downward from the ruler, whose imperious power compelled submission and collaboration. A critical consequence was that the leadership class became experienced in currying favor, practiced in clientele relationships, and oriented toward satisfying demands placed from above. The result was a politics of secretive and self-serving opportunism.

The Romanian revolution of 1989 was complex and chaotic, yet it was decidedly more anti-sultanistic than pro-democratic. Its main object was to remove Ceausescu and his supporters from power. There was little else contemplated at the moment. The shift towards the West was more a matter of triage than of firm principle or careful planning. The West symbolized the rejection of communism, and there were far more resources flowing from the West than from the convulsing East. The transition period thus witnessed the politics of non-ideological accommodation, which proved sufficient for ensuring post-revolutionary legitimacy and stability yet it left many former elites in power, combining new democratic forms with a disillusioning reinforcement of conventional hierarchies.

Later on, international opportunities guided the pace and direction of Romanian democratization. Policy reform and procedural transparency advanced largely under the conditions set for NATO and EU accession. International actors came with different, sometimes overlapping and inconsistent priorities and plans for Romania to implement. In the face of multiple demands, Romanian leaders applied resources to the sectors deemed most necessary to secure approval. The reforms were not purely cosmetic, but they often merely followed the letter rather than the spirit of the mandated improvements. Leaders adopted the long Romanian tradition of acquiescence to foreign pressures while in practice attempting to ignore or frustrate their implementation.

This brings us to the first Basescu presidency, the period covered in the edited volume under discussion. At the time of his election, Romania widely was recognized as a laggard state within Europe. Despite the President's well-articulated reform campaign, the key political element

during the period was partisan conflict and deadlock. The Truth-and-Justice Alliance lacked a governing majority. Its collapse led to a bitter three-party stalemate in which prospects for accommodation were slim. The more entrenched the stalemate, the more incentive the various sides had to accuse, condemn and revile each other in the hopes of winning advantage. In this context, triage again emerged as a plausible practice. Minimum political cooperation occurred only when strategically imperative to preserve core regime legitimacy and the pretense of governability. Thus the fragile Democratic-Liberal alliance was sustained only through the final steps of EU accession and it collapsed immediately afterward. The odd-partners Democratic-Social Democratic alliance constructed in 2009 served to reassure private investors and obtain IMF emergency funds, and it dissolved without compliant as the next electoral contest approached.

The conclusion is that triage democratization proceeded differently in Romania during the different phases of its development, but the general tendency has remained invariable. The resulting political arrangement is neither secure nor satisfying. It has raised citizen expectations while simultaneously frustrating them. It has helped Romania to join the family of Western nations but condemned it to the position of poor relation. Recourse to the triage pattern has been a plausible response by Romanian elites seeking to cope, without anticipation or preparation, with the complex dynamic of political transition. The paradox it creates is a society lurching toward the future but simultaneously tethered to the past. The past has left entrenched state beneficiaries and standard operating procedures. The future holds promise that is approached only through the uncertainties of crisis management. It would have taken a far more committed leadership, guided by a clearer vision of democratic progress, for Romania to have ventured down an alternative path. Instead, triage has become a most convenient pattern.

Finally, I will extend the analysis with speculations regarding Romanian politics today. The triage pattern is complex and uncomfortable, but it can be maintained as long as resources are abundant. Abundance enables the government to sustain triage necessities by meeting the demands of external agents monitoring performance while simultaneously maintaining the flow of benefits expected by those established constituency and clientele networks essential to political support. The situation changes dramatically, however, once economic collapse makes discretionary resources largely disappear. Accommodations are no longer facilitated and

hard choices are required.

Romania's economic forecasters did little in 2009 to prepare its citizens for the onrushing world economic recession. The rigid austerity program demanded by the International Monetary Fund as a precondition for promised loan funds thus appeared as a shock. The implication was that the Romanian political system was not trusted to adopt fiscal restraints on its own, absent emergency triage conditions. This time, however, triage was certain to upset domestic arrangements, at the center of which sat public expenditures. With austerity, the government's popularity dramatically and predictably has fallen. Yet politics in Bucharest remains that of personalized denunciation and condemnation, a reflection of the absence of any coherent policy proposals from the main political parties, none of which can imagine a domestic program that would satisfy international observers while equally preserving voter support. Stalemate and bickering persist unabated, largely void of policy content. It is not a happy situation for the country. Perhaps this will be the subject for the next book, addressing Romanian politics and policy during Basescu's second presidential term in office.

I will conclude this talk where I began. The Political Science Faculty in Cluj has a reputation for high quality teaching and research and for its openness to international collaboration. As someone with long-term experience in this collaboration, I have learned far more than I have contributed. It is always a delight to return to the Faculty, to observe the progress made and to participate in its programs. I sincerely hope that this will continue into the future.

