

“RUSSIA MAY HAVE A MUSLIM MAJORITY BY THE MIDDLE OF THE CENTURY”

Interview with Professor Charles King

Professor Charles King teaches Government and International Affairs at Georgetown University. He has been a close observer of Central and Eastern European affairs in the past two decades, collaborating with major media institutions such as CNN or the BBC and authoring numerous articles in prestigious publications such as the Washington Post, Foreign Affairs, Foreign Policy or the Los Angeles Times, as well as in leading academic journals. He is also the author of five books dealing with relevant issues for the region. In this exclusive interview for *Europolis*, Charles King speaks of Romanian politics, the state of inter-ethnic relations between Romanian and Hungarians, Romania’s relations with Moldova, the EU or the US and provides relevant insights on the security perspectives in the Caucasus, all the more important following the recent bombings in Moscow.

- Professor King, you have been a careful observer of Romanian and Eastern European affairs for the past two decades. How would you assess the social and political development of Romania since the fall of communism? In what way, if any, is Romania different today compared to the beginning of the ‘90s?

Romania is of course a transformed country. It has gone from being a one-party state to being a multiparty democracy. It has joined its neighbors inside the European Union. Health care, foreign investment, social services, public and private education, defense, and other spheres are unrecognizable compared to their early 1990s equivalents. That does not mean that everything in the country is going well. The global financial crisis has hit Romania hard, high-level corruption remains a problem, and job creation and foreign investment are still lower than in many neighboring states. But Romania has accomplished in a relatively short time something that, in the early 1990s, many observers believed was impossible: to dismantle one of Europe’s most repressive communist governments and to replace it with a functioning democracy.

- European integration played an important role in the modernization of Romania and of the other former communist states. However, we still seem to be lagging behind, a clear indicator being the recent postponement of Romania and Bulgaria's accession in the Schengen area, due to the problems of corruption and judicial affairs. Do you believe Romania is truly a Europeanized country, compared to the other Central European states?

Romania has clearly lagged behind some of its neighbors to the north, such as Hungary and Poland, but this was to be expected. After all, the real economic and political reforms only really began in Romania after 1989. Hungary and Poland were already experimenting with market economics, agricultural reform, and relative political openness from the 1970s forward. Romania and Bulgaria have both had to play catch-up. The Ceausescu period—regardless of its oppressive policing and authoritarian politics—actually greatly weakened the Romanian state, that is, Romanian state structures were notoriously inefficient and poorly organized. Romania has thus been engaged not only in democratizing itself for the past twenty years, but also with building wholly new political institutions. That sets it apart, in many ways, from its northern neighbors.

- At the official level, ethnicity no longer seems to be a salient issue in Romania. After a rather rough start in the early '90s, the Hungarian alliance has been in government almost without interruption since 1996. However, autonomy – either political or cultural – remains the main demand of Hungarians in Romania, while the majority and “Romanian” parties strongly resist it. Do you believe that these discursive contradictions can lead to an aggravation of interethnic relations in the future or are they on a definitive right path?

Successful multiethnic societies are always engaged in an internal conversation about identity, rights, and the place of minorities in the wider society. In the United States, that takes the form of perennial discussions about race and language use (e.g., the role of Spanish in American public education). In Spain and France, it takes the form of discussions about immigration and national minorities such as the Basques and Catalans. The difference in Romania is that there is a powerful political party that sees itself as the spokesperson for the country's largest ethnic minority. That party has been a key player in political affairs since the early 1990s, and it will likely remain a major voice in Romania's political affairs. Over time, I don't foresee the demand for autonomy going away. It has long been a part of the UDMR's platform, and there is no reason to believe that will change—much like the Scottish National Party's demand for Scottish

independence from the UK will remain a part of that party's platform, even though it is a plank that is more or less emphasized, depending on the political circumstances. However, I expect that the Hungarian issue will change immensely as Romania becomes even more fully integrated into the European Union. If European unification progresses, the power of the nation-state will naturally decrease. That is, the stakes in discussions over autonomy will lessen, as states no longer see autonomy movements as necessary threats to the power of central governments or to definitions of the nation. In Europe today, it is perfectly normal for people to have multiple political loyalties. That is a relatively new concept for Romania (and many other European states), but I think it is an inevitable part of European unification.

- Moldova has been at the core of Romanian foreign policy after 1990. But Romanian-Moldovan relations have been constantly influenced by the allegiances of the Moldovan governments throughout time and their relations to another crucial actor – Russia. Given the ongoing political instability in Chisinau in the past few years, how do you see the future of Moldova? Is European integration, as desired by Romania, a plausible scenario at least on the medium term?

I think I would disagree that Moldova has been at the core of Romanian foreign policy. I think Moldova has been an important rhetorical issue in Romania from time to time—the idea of “two Romanian states,” the desire to regain the lost territory of Bessarabia, etc. But there are several other foreign policy issues that I think have usually trumped relations between Bucharest and Chisinau (such as Romanian-Hungarian relations, Romania's bid for EU membership before 2008, NATO accession, and so on). These were far more significant to Bucharest politicians than the relationship with Moldova. I do believe that Moldova faces a whole series of very difficult challenges. Its population is shrinking, more people are leaving than are entering, there is little prospect for resolving the Transnistria problem, political institutions remain only minimally functional, and the economy is among the weakest in eastern Europe. The fact that there is currently a state called Moldova is probably the greatest guarantee of its continuation—that is, the mere fact of independence has created a whole set of interests in its continuation. I don't foresee Moldova disappearing (such as by uniting with Romania)—in part because this would not be a desirable outcome for at least a plurality of Moldova's population and because Romania, too, would find it impossible to integrate one of Europe's poorest states without creating huge problems for Romania

itself. So, over the medium-term, I think we're likely to see more "muddling through" in Moldova.

- Beside the states that used to be part of the USSR and are now part of NATO and the EU (or under their influence, such as Georgia), Russia seems to hold a tight grip of former USSR-states in Central Asia. However, this region is at the crossroads of Russian influence and that of radical Islamist movements. Chechnya is probably the most obvious example. Do you believe that this specific area of the world can become a future "powder keg", especially given its vicinity with China and the Middle East?

"Powder keg" regions are only problems if what happens there affects the interest of major regional powers. Otherwise, they are likely firecrackers—a little bit of a bang but without much real consequence. That was the case in Chechnya: two bloody wars that left tens of thousands of people dead but that had very little impact on regional politics (Iran, Turkey, Central Asia) and virtually no impact on global politics (such as via the Russia-U.S. relationship). I think this is likely to be the trend over the longer term. Things in Russia's North Caucasus region are getting worse—not in Chechnya, where the situation is now reasonably quiet, but in the neighboring republics of Ingushetia, Dagestan, and Kabardino-Balkaria. The combination of local grievances and an Islamist insurgency will present significant challenges for Russia in the future, if only through the persistent violence that plagues the region and occasionally leeches out into the rest of Russia as well (such as via last year's Moscow subway bombings). In my view, Russia's longer-term challenge is to accommodate itself to its own multiethnic and multi-religious reality. If current trends continue, Russia will likely be a Muslim-plurality or even Muslim-majority country by the middle of this century. (Moscow already reportedly has the largest Muslim population in Europe.) That is a demographic fact that Russian policymakers and the Russian public at large have not even begun to fathom.

- I would like to come back to Romanian politics for a moment. The political spectrum is quite divided along a cleavage represented by loyalty towards president Traian Basescu. Ideology seems to be rather irrelevant in guiding the actions of parties. Only a few days ago, the Liberals, the Social-Democrats and the Conservatives announced they are forming an alliance meant to remove from power the Democrat-Liberals – a right wing party – and even impeach president Basescu. Is this a sign of political maturity or a throw-back in the years of high political volatility that marked the beginning of transition 20 years ago?

The real disappointment in Romanian politics is the absence of durable political allegiances that are based on something other than personality. Romania has yet to develop a stable party system based on a clear left-right divide. This means that politics continues to be intensely personal, with little basis in ideology or demographic constituencies. (The exceptions are the far-right parties and the UDMR, both of which have relatively stable constituencies but for very different reasons.) It also means that politicians look up rather than down: they are mainly concerned with expressing loyalty to a more powerful political patron than with serving their constituents in their electoral districts. Current debates about President Basescu are a symptom of this bigger phenomenon. I don't see this changing in the near future, if for no other reason than that many European countries find themselves in a very similar position.

- The opposition often resembles president Basescu with Vladimir Putin, because of his style of leadership. Knowing both countries and political contexts, do you believe this comparison is legitimate?

The comparison is frankly ridiculous. One might find President Basescu overbearing or dislike his personal style, but the Putin comparison makes little sense to me. Prime Minister Putin is a clearly authoritarian leader who, most recently, has manipulated the Russian judicial system to attack a personal rival. Romania has nothing close to this.

- Finally, I would like us to approach the Romanian-US relations. I already mentioned in the beginning the fact that Romania's accession in the Schengen area has been postponed, due to opposition coming from Germany and France. However, Romanians already enjoy a reasonable degree of freedom of movement throughout Europe. Meanwhile, relations between Romania and the US have grown increasingly closer in the last decade, going from being called a strategic partner to being chosen for employing parts of the anti-missile defense system. Nevertheless, Romanians still need a visa for travelling to the US. I think the key element here is trust. How come Romania, as a state, is regarded as trustworthy enough to be such a close ally or the US in the region, but Romanians are not trustworthy to be accepted in the US without a visa? Furthermore, do you think Romania is getting enough out of its relation to the US, given that its own citizens do not benefit from a basic sign of trust, such as freedom of movement on the territory of an allied state?

Visa regimes should not be seen as bellwethers of overall relations between two states. In some instances, they are part of a quid-pro-quo relationship between two governments, with the two governments treating each one in a reciprocal fashion with respect to visa bureaucracy. (For example, as a U.S. citizen, I have to buy a visa when I travel to Turkey—a small bit of bureaucracy that says nothing about the U.S.-Turkish relationship.) In Romania's case, I think the visa regime says little about how much the U.S. government trusts Romania or Romanians. It does say something, however, about the confidence of the U.S. government in two things: the ability of the Romanian state to control its own borders and the likelihood of large-scale migration from Romania to the U.S. were there to be visa-free travel between the two countries. I do foresee a time when Romanians will have a visa-free relationship with the U.S., but Romanian border controls will have to be significantly professionalized before that will happen, I believe.