

A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF THE POLITICAL DISCOURSE OF PRESIDENT TRAIAN BĂSESCU

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Abstract

The purpose of the present article is to provide a critical analysis of two instantiations of the political discourse of the President of Romania Traian Băsescu during his first electoral mandate. Băsescu is a ‘player president’² who uses his public position as President to gain legitimation for his political party and more than that, for his own political agenda.

Keywords: legitimation, power, deconstructive meaning, rhetoric

Introduction

This article is an analysis of the official discourses of the President of Romania in of the two chambers of the Parliament. The first discourse was held on the 14th of February 2007 and the second one on the 30th of May 2007. We have chosen these discourses because they mark two key moments: the former has caused the procedure of suspension of the President from his attributes; the latter represents the comeback full of triumph of the President in front of those who have suspended him.

Situational context

The relationship between President Traian Băsescu and the Romanian political class has begun to show its weaknesses after the parliamentary and presidential elections in 2004. The Coalition DA (translated from Romanian: ‘Justice and Truth’) did not managed to get the majority in Parliament, and, according to the seats won in Parliament, the Prime Minister was to be assigned by PSD (the Social

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² On 6 October 2004, in the final debate for his first presidential mandate, Mr. Băsescu stated: “I intend to radically change the institution of presidency (...) I want to be a player president, not a spectator president” (my translation, *Adevărul* newspaper, 7 October, 2004).

Democratic Party). Traian Băsescu won the elections for presidency and his ambition was to eliminate PSD from the first position on the political scene. Consequently, the coalition between PSD and the Conservative Party was destroyed and the Conservatives were invited to join the coalition DA-UDMR (the Democratic Union of Hungarians in Romania) with the main purpose of forming a new majority in Parliament. This movement allowed the President to name Călin Popescu Tăriceanu, the president of the PNL (National Liberal Party) for the position of Prime Minister.

The fragility of the governmental coalition was obvious from the very beginning, particularly when two PSD members were named presidents of the two Chambers of the Parliament: Nicolae Văcăroiu for the Senate and Adrian Năstase for the Chamber of Deputies. We believe this is the starting point of the disputes between the President and the governmental coalition, Băsescu naming repeatedly the Conservative Party “the immoral solution” of the coalition.

The attitude of President Băsescu, an “active player on the political scene”, as he named himself in the first discourse held as a President, made the government feel very uncomfortable, because it left the impression that it was not only under close supervision, but also censored in most of its actions. The fierce criticism of the Tăriceanu government, the explicit or implicit allusions made on several occasions regarding the relations between the government and the groups of interests, all of these have contributed to the increase in animosity between the Prime Minister and the President, on the one hand, and between PNL (the party of the Prime Minister) and PD (the Democratic Party – the party of the President).

The economic problems Romania faced in 2005 and 2006 (mainly caused by floods), together with its performance on an international level, deepened even more the differences between the President and the Prime Minister. The events that offered Romania international exposure had a strong emotional impact on the Romanian public: the kidnapping of the three Romanian journalists in Iraq in March 2005, the crisis being solved under the direct surveillance of the President, the adhesion to EU (on 1st of January 2007) and the condemnation of the communism by the President (on the 18th of December 2006), his decision to open the Romanian Secret Service’s secret files, which led to the bringing to light of many politicians as having collaborated with the Secret Service during the communist period. The refusal of the Prime Minister to resign (in 2006) and to organise new elections made the President arrange a counter attack against the government and the Parliament, two institutions which accused him either of corruption or incompetence.

Even though the socio-political background behind his discourses was different, the ideology promoted is the same. Traian Băsescu can be considered a politician with a very powerful discourse. His discourse reflects the way he uses rhetorical

devices to mix valid information with his own set of opinions. We are trying to see how the political discourse of the president tries to legitimize the beliefs and personal interests of the politician Traian Băsescu.

Literature Review

According to Max Weber, legitimation refers to an act, process, or ideology that becomes legitimate by its attachment to norms and values within a society. Legitimate power is the ability to influence through authority. If some individuals attempt to convince others that something is right, they can invoke generally accepted arguments that support their agenda (Weber, 1964). In our case, Băsescu asserts his legitimacy to ask the resignation of the 322 MPs who voted against him because he invokes the will of the people.

Jürgen Habermas is also preoccupied with the public domain during crisis periods and he talks about how legitimation contributes in such periods (Habermas, 1976). He traced the growing intervention of formal systems in our everyday lives as parallel to the development of the *welfare state*, corporate capitalism and the culture of *mass consumption*. These reinforcing trends rationalize widening areas of public life, submitting them to a generalizing logic of efficiency and control (Habermas, 1984).

As routinised political parties and interest groups substitute for participatory democracy, society is increasingly administered at a level remote from input of citizens. As a result, boundaries between public and private, the individual and society, the system and the *life-world* are deteriorating. Democratic public life only thrives where institutions enable citizens to debate matters of public importance (Habermas, 1984).

Rhetoric is the art of persuasion, but persuasion depends on communication, which in turn depends on meaning. On a theoretical, as well as a practical level, it is about how humans use language or discourse to alter or shape our understanding of reality. It is this latter use that is often used in describing Discourse Analysis.

Discourse Analysis can be characterized as a way of approaching and thinking about a problem. In this sense, Discourse Analysis is neither a qualitative nor a quantitative research method, but a manner of questioning the basic assumptions of quantitative and qualitative research methods. Discourse Analysis does not provide a tangible answer to problems based on scientific research, but it enables access to the *ontological* and *epistemological* assumptions behind a project, a statement, a method of research, or a system of classification. In other words, Discourse Analysis will enable us to reveal the hidden motivations behind a text or behind the choice of a particular method of research to interpret that text.

Critical or Discourse Analysis (CDA) is nothing more than a deconstructive reading and interpretation of a problem or text (while keeping in mind that postmodern theories conceive of every interpretation of reality and, therefore, of reality itself as a text. Every text is conditioned and inscribes itself within a given discourse, thus the term Discourse Analysis.

Norman Fairclough envisages CDA as a trans and interdisciplinary discipline. As he puts it:

the overriding objective is to give accounts – and more precise accounts than one tends to find in social research on change – of the ways in which and extent to which social changes are changes in discourse, and the relations between changes in discourse and changes in other, non-discoursal, elements or ‘moments’ of social life (including therefore the question of the senses and ways in which discourse ‘(re)constructs’ social life in processes of social change). The aim is also to identify through analysis the particular linguistic, semiotic and ‘interdiscursive’ features of ‘texts’ which are a part of processes of social change, but in ways which facilitate the productive integration of textual analysis into multi-disciplinary research on change. (Fairclough, 2006- 2007)

Discourse Analysis is meant to provide a higher awareness of the hidden motivations in others and ourselves and, therefore, enable us to solve concrete problems – not by providing unequivocal answers, but by making us ask ontological and epistemological questions.

Discourse Analysis

In the first discourse on the 14th February 2007, Bănescu takes a stand as to the accusations of causing moral prejudices to the government. The themes he brings into discussion have impact on the common people, and not so much on the direct audience, i.e. the Members of Parliament. In all surveys, the Parliament is one of the institutions that have the worst public image, mainly because of the very themes mentioned by the President: corruption, the use of political power for personal interests. Bănescu places himself in the position of defender of democracy, the one who fights corruption at all levels.

All throughout the discourse, Bănescu refers to “Romanians”, “people”, “citizens”, emphasizing that he is responsible only in front of the Romanian electorate. We should take into account that this joint session of the Parliament was broadcast live on most Romanian TV channels, and therefore, the discourse has a wider audience than the Members of Parliament. He takes full advantage of this public aspect of the discourse and uses the presence of the MPs to give weight to his political

agenda in front of the real audience, the TV viewers, the ones with the 'real' power, that of the vote. It is thus, a stroke of a political genius, transferring the power of the Parliament, a legislative one, to the people, who have democratic power. He overlaps two distinct types of power to suit his own interest.

He mentions from the very beginning that his relationship with the Parliament is an institutional one and that he has always considered it fair. This is an asserted fact, put in a categorical statement, placing himself in a superior position, legitimizing his authority beyond any reasonable doubt.

The explanations given to the MPs, who are not as popular as him, are formulated more as accusations, telling them that they have exaggerated and they have over interpreted his declarations. His statement – “politicians who make laws for criminals” – refers, in his opinion, not to the Parliament, but to politicians that are not only in the Parliament but also in local councils, and in the government. It is interesting that he makes this clear distinction between the Parliament, which is an institution, something abstract, and the MPs, whom he places in the category of corrupted politicians; consequently, the Parliament and the MPs are in opposition, inducing the idea that the latter do not belong there. He also wants to avoid being accused again of not showing respect for the public institutions:

Cred, totuși, că ați exagerat și ați fost excesivi în interpretare. Eu nu m-am referit la Parlament, ci la „politicienii care fac legi pentru infractori”. Și acest lucru nu ține doar de politicienii aflați în Parlament, ține și de politicienii aflați în consiliile locale, în guverne. Boala este extinsă în tot sistemul nostru politic și administrativ, iar cele peste o sută de interpelări ale parlamentarilor din tot spectrul politic pe tema corupției se constituie și ele într-o mărturie solidă. (Dezbateri parlamentare, February 2007)

The theme of corruption is a recurrent motif in Băsescu's political discourse, which sets itself in the requirements Romania had to fulfil to adhere to the EU. The accusations regarding corruption have been present also in the media, being something highly commented upon, but never really solved. The radical discourses, which nominate corrupted people or which offer radical solutions to eradicate the phenomenon, have always been appreciated by the general public. Băsescu tries to further explain his statement that MPs actually encourage acts of corruption by giving specific examples:

Vă voi da doar câteva exemple pentru a vă convinge că de multe ori și Parlamentul a fost atras în aceste realități ale corupției, deși cea mai mare parte a parlamentarilor nu a avut nici informațiile necesare, dar nici voința de a se documenta pentru a vota în cunoștință de cauză. Din 2000 până în 2007 s-au emis frecvent ordonanțe prin care agenții economici sunt scutiți sau amânați de plata obligațiilor către stat. Niciodată nu a

existat o explicație de ce pentru unele societăți s-au aplicat aceste scutiri, iar pentru altele nu.

Anul acesta a fost o puternică dezbatere privind privatizarea PETROM, aprobată prin lege de Parlamentul României. Este inacceptabil faptul că parlamentari care votează nu știu conținutul legii de privatizare, nici detaliile acestei privatizări.

O altă lege inițiată de un parlamentar pentru grațierea a circa 5.000 de infractori, o altă lege inițiată de alți trei parlamentari pentru modificarea Legii nr. 78/2000 pentru prevenirea, descoperirea și sancționarea faptelor de corupție și a celor conexe acesteia. Am returnat Parlamentului această lege, pentru că dezincrimina utilizarea pentru altă destinație a creditelor angajate și, în același timp, dezincrimina nerespectarea normelor bancare. (ibid.)

As seen from the quotation above, President Băsescu states that the Parliament was drawn into the phenomenon of corruption, since the majority of MPs were not interested in acquiring the necessary information to make a sensible decision or in properly investigating the cases into discussion. He mentions that from 2000 to 2007 ordinances were frequently issued so that businesses are exempt from paying their obligations to the state, yet no explanation was given regarding the criteria of applying those exemptions, since only some businesses benefited from those ordinances. President Băsescu points out the privatization of Petrom, Romania's largest oil and gas company, which was voted for in the Parliament by MPs who were unaware of the details of the privatization law.

Băsescu carries on his discourse providing more examples, but avoids naming culprits and keeps his discourse at a general level. He says that all parties are responsible for this situation, gaining more credibility by including his own party into this phenomenon:

(...) astfel de acte sunt transpartinice și beneficiază de susținerea întregului spectru politic de cele mai multe ori. Veți vedea la inițiatori că toate partidele sunt reprezentate... (ibid.)

The President links the corruption of the MPs, the governmental structures and the groups of interests with another theme, that of the European funds. He tries to legitimize again his position of prosecutor by bringing into discussion a higher authority, the European Union. Băsescu states that another form of corruption is the dissemination of public information on accessing European funds, channelled mainly towards people in the close proximity of politicians:

O altă modalitate prin care se manifestă corupția este transmiterea informațiilor de interes public, în mod preferențial, respectiv, către protejații din imediata apropiere a oamenilor politici. În actuala situație,

aceștia vor fi beneficiarii fondurilor de la Uniunea Europeană. Mergeți în comunele din circumscripțiile dumneavoastră și vedeți câți primari, câți cetățeni cunosc la această oră modalitatea și condițiile de accesare a fondurilor europene... (ibid.)

President Băsescu does not forget to make an implicit reference to the Prime Minister, when he emphasizes the close connection of “some businesspeople” (to read Dinu Patriciu, president of Rompetrol, the second largest oil company) and “some politicians” (to read Prime Minister Tăriceanu), their connection being by now common knowledge. However, no names are mentioned and the discourse is once again generic. Thus, some businesspeople have acquired a powerful influence over a part of the politicians in high positions. The latter should, however, remember that they serve the interests of the people and not that of a clientele:

Aș mai menționa legătura strânsă între unii oameni de afaceri și parte din oamenii politici, tandem prin care s-a reușit un transfer de putere politică dinspre politicieni spre respectivii oameni de afaceri. Sunt aceiași oameni de afaceri pe care-i găsim la putere continuu prin influența pe care au dobândi-o asupra oamenilor politici la vârf. În plus, oamenii de afaceri sunt aceia care declanșează și opresc vaste campanii de presă. Din acest punct de vedere este esențial ca politicienii să se decupleze din acest tandem și să lucreze pentru interesul general și nu pentru interesele acestei clientele. (ibid.)

Next, Băsescu distinguishes the corrupted politicians in the government from the rest of the honest business people, who are mentioned in a positive context created by the association with the following key terms: competition, market economy, prosperity. However, the statements are general, and there is no clear reference of who is part of this honest business community:

Este un lucru esențial, atât pentru fiecare român, cât și pentru cea mai mare parte a oamenilor de afaceri, care muncind cinstit, înțelegând corect competiția, își asumă riscurile unei economii de piață, creând, în același timp, prosperitate. Această comunitate cinstită a oamenilor de afaceri este cea care are nevoie să fie stimulată, să se asocieze pentru a face față competiției cu marile trusturi europene. Comunitatea oamenilor de afaceri nu trebuie să aibă grija competiției neloiale, a influențelor politice autohtone, care pot distruge investiții și efort făcut ani în șir.³ (ibid.)

³ “It is essential for every Romanian, as well as for the majority of businesspeople, who, through hard work and fair comprehension of competition, take the risks of a market economy, creating at the same time prosperity. This honest community of businesspeople needs to be stimulated, to work together to face the competition from big European trusts. The community of businesspeople needs not concern about disloyal competition, about the influence of the local politics that can destroy investments and years of effort.” (my translation)

Another important theme is that of the uninominal vote system, which is meant to intimidate, if not threaten MPs on the one hand, and to gain the sympathy of the electorate, who is empowered, on the other. The mere mention of the uninominal vote underlines the confidence of the President in his authority. He sees it as the only possibility of reforming the political class and he asserts that this type of vote shall reverse the power ratio within the Romanian political environment by shifting the power from political parties to the local electorate, who choose and vote for an MP:

Votul uninominal va inversa raporturile de putere în cadrul politicii românești printr-un transfer de putere de la conducerea partidelor către electoratul de la nivel local, care-l votează pe parlamentar. (ibid.)

The uninominal vote is important as far as it is connected to the reform of the political class, another sensitive subject. The political class is amongst the categories commonly associated by the citizens with incompetence and corruption, usually perceived as paying tribute to people with money, to whom parties offer in exchange seats in Parliament and the possibility to continue their illegal businesses, sheltered by diplomatic immunity. Therefore, the uninominal vote is essential for the reformation of the political class, so that party leaders depend on the support of MPs and not the other way around. In Băsescu's opinion, this vote is the only solution viable to avoid losing peoples' trust in all Romanian politicians. Romania is part of an accelerated process of reformation, and politicians must also be a part of it:

*Votul uninominal va inversa raporturile de putere în cadrul partidelor, ajungându-se la situația în care conducerea partidului va depinde de sprijinul parlamentarilor, nu parlamentarii de sprijinul conducerii.
În lipsa unei măsuri imediate de reformare a clasei politice, există riscul pierderii totale a încrederii în clasa politică, precum și riscul unui vot de blam generalizat la adresa politicienilor români.
Trebuie schimbată percepția că, în ciuda procesului accelerat de reformare a României, politicienii încearcă să se sustragă acestui proces. Singura soluție pentru corectarea acestei percepții este introducerea votului uninominal pentru Parlamentul României. (ibid.)*

He emphasizes his legitimacy by mentioning the exact article in the Constitution which gives him the right to ask for the introduction of the uninominal vote. Hence, article 90 in the Romanian Constitution and articles 11 and 12 of Law no.3/ 2000 on the organisation and holding of the referendum, as well as the Constitutional Court's decision no. 567/2006 gives the President the right to 'consult' the Parliament on the matter in question. The word 'consult' is repeated in order to highlight the fact that the Parliament has no power of decision over this issue.

În baza articolului 90 din Constituția României și a articolelor 11 și 12 din Legea nr. 3/2000 privind organizarea și desfășurarea referendumului, precum și a Deciziei Curții Constituționale nr. 567 din 2006, vă consult, repet, termenul constituțional este "vă consult" cu privire la organizarea unui referendum legat de introducerea votului uninominal la Senat și Camera Deputaților începând cu următoarele alegeri parlamentare. (ibid.)

The discourse given on the 30th May 2007 belongs to a winner. If the one on the 14th February underlies the main reasons for which Băsescu was, supposedly, suspended, the one on the 30th May is directly oriented towards the ones who have suspended him. The President considers he is responsible for voicing the will of the Romanian people. Mainly, the entire discourse is centred on the organisation of new Parliamentary elections, and the introduction of the uninominal vote, which are validated, according to Băsescu, by the referendum of 19th May 2007.

This time, the President no longer uses a vague language, allowing the listener to make the assumptions, but he uses a direct approach, full of categorical statements. Once again, he places himself in a legitimate position, recognised by both the Constitutional Court and the Romanian electorate. He accuses the 322 MPs who have voted for his suspension that they are directly responsible for spending public money to organize the referendum, that they have started a process with no popular support, and that they have distracted the attention from the real problems and needs of Romania. Furthermore, they are also to blame for deteriorating the institutional relation between Parliament and Presidency, between Government and Presidency.

*Imediat după intrarea țării noastre în Uniunea Europeană, s-a format în actualul Parlament o majoritate de conjunctură, a cărei cifră 322 a făcut ocolul României și chiar al lumii. Această majoritate a hotărât suspendarea din funcție a președintelui legitim ales prin votul popular din 2004, chiar dacă avizul Curții Constituționale arăta clar că **acuzățiile împotriva mea**, ca șef al statului român, nu aveau nici o bază constituțională. Decizia dumneavoastră a costat bani, bani publici pentru organizarea referendumului și a generat deturnarea vieții instituționale normale către o temă fără susținere populară. De asemenea, această decizie a deteriorat **relația instituțională dintre Parlament și Președinte și între Guvern și Președinte**, prin angajarea fără rezerve a primului ministru și a celor două partide aflate la guvernare, în coaliția antiprezidențială. Practic, s-au înlocuit, printr-un abuz de putere al Guvernului, alegerile pentru Parlamentul European, cu referendumul pentru **destituirea președintelui**. (Dezbateri parlamentare, May 2007; my emphasis)*

He repeats the same rhetorical device, the distinction between institutions and the people who represent them. If he wants to place himself in a superior position, and to legitimate his rights, then he refers to the MPs' accusations as attacks against the President or against the Presidency, i.e. an institution of the state. If he wants to be seen as a victim of their illegitimate, unconstitutional accusations, then he talks about himself in the first person singular: "against me", "8 million people who voted for me have reconfirmed my confidence".

Furthermore, the main claim of Băsescu's discourse, the resignation of the government and the new elections, are in contradiction with the so-called consultations at Cotroceni (the residence of the Romanian President) between the President and representatives of political parties.

Mr. Băsescu's rhetorical discourse is very well structured and his arguments are valid. Although he mentioned a lot of coherent and correct things, he starts from a premise that is essentially false: the fact that, at the 19th May referendum, the Romanian people voted for the 9 point programme presented by Băsescu (his own political platform for the 2004 elections) with the main focus of dissolving the Parliament. The people who voted for Băsescu and against his designation did so for their own reasons, not for political revenge. They voted for the person Băsescu, and not for President Băsescu, since this is an institution that could be represented, theoretically, by anyone with a Romanian citizenship. His conclusion is that the person Traian Băsescu, President of Romania and spokesman of the Romanian People, is entitled to ask the MPs to resign, as they are an insignificant minority that cannot decide for 22 million Romanian citizens.

Românii nu au votat pe 19 mai pentru persoana Traian Băsescu și nici împotriva unor lideri politici. Ei au spus nu corupției și abuzului politic, ei au votat pentru ca România să fie mai bine guvernată.

Personal, cred în schimbare, în dialog și negociere sinceră, în vederea binelui comun, dar vă rog să nu-mi cereți atitudini care pot compromite speranța și încrederea cu care milioane de cetățeni m-au reînvestit pe 19 mai. În numele lor, vă adresez chemarea de a răspunde urgenței acestui moment. În numele lor, vă invit să luați deciziile pe care poporul român le așteaptă. (ibid.; my emphasis)

Conclusion

In conclusion, Traian Băsescu exploits to full extent the semantic features of the text for rhetorical purposes. Despite the fact that these are official discourses held in front of the Parliament of Romania, his style is semi-formal, emphasizing the populist origin of his political discourse, which is at the same time an instantiation

of the voice of the people and a political speech for the people who is about to go to vote.

The themes he draws upon are classic. He says nothing new, corruption, immoral behaviour, incompetence, irresponsibility are as old as the hills for the Romanian people, who has lived 40 years in communism. However, the way in which he takes advantage of the social, economic and political context is original. He mixes general statements with individual culprits, asserted facts with assumed facts, explicit assertions with implicit ones, with the main purpose to persuade his audience.

His discourse is intended to be argumentative, but the premises are, in most cases invalid. He identifies the will of the people with his own personal ambitions, and uses the position of President of a democratic state to legitimate his political goals. He uses categorical statements, avoiding the passive voice to show that he is an active player of the political game and to reconfirm his authority.

All in all, Traian Băsescu is an excellent rhetorician, possessing confidence and persuasive power, and therefore, having a strong impact on the large masses.

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