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Triage Governance in Romania: Contemplating Boc's Resignation

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PAUL E. SUM, FEB 11 2012

On February 6, 2012 Emil Boc resigned as Romania's Prime Minister. Boc represented the Liberal Democratic Party (PDL), which maintains a narrow plurality of seats in the Chamber of Deputies. His resignation and the subsequent collapse of the Cabinet can be counted as the latest political price levied by the Euro crisis, following countries such as Greece, Italy, and Slovakia. However, given the painful consequences of the Euro crisis and Romania's combative political environment, the more pertinent question is to ask why the Boc government was able to survive as long as it did.

The question is not trivial. Boc took the position of Prime Minister in December 2008. After a bruising start, Parliament voted no confidence in his government late in 2009. Boc remained in office as interim PM until January 2010 when he was reappointed, and received majority support from Parliament among the same Deputies who had voted no confidence some 12 weeks earlier. We might understand his ability to survive if Boc had been particularly popular among citizens. However, he was never able to draw strong public opinion support and at times his ratings dipped below 20 percent. In 2009, the Romanian economy contracted by nearly seven percent, after enjoying healthy economic growth for a decade and a relative "boom" of 7.8 percent growth in 2008. The austerity measures, an important factor that triggered Romanians to protest and led to his government's demise, were introduced in June 2010. At that time, a wave of demonstrations against the government's decisions was launched, and sporadic protests then followed until the most recent ones which began in January 2012.

What accounts for the longevity of the Boc tenure is, I submit, a characteristic of Romanian governments that has persisted since the process of democratization was proceeding: governance by triage. The primary object of governance by triage is to stabilize the patient, to stop the bleeding and maintain life support, and then quickly move to the next patient coming through the door. The consequence is a politics of sequential stimulus and response, rather than of coherent plans and comprehensive change. Governance becomes systematically chaotic, compartmentalized, and non-linear. Minimum standards are met, to comply just enough with visible pressures and receive desired relief or reward, but there is neither time nor inclination to do more than meet minimal standards. Sectors not facing such pressures tend to remain inactive, and deep social transformations are ignored as they involve more extensive and penetrating surgeries, beyond what is demanded by the latest pressing agenda.[1]

All post-1989 Romanian governments have followed this pattern; Boc's government was particularly adept at it. The balancing act moved from the anti-corruption campaign, to major infrastructure improvements, to the education system, and most recently addressing an all-but-collapsed health care system. Each issue has involved multiple actors with conflicting interests and contradictory demands. On top of this, the government worked within a hostile political environment among rival political parties. An additional pressure, seldom in the background, is a president who drives his own political agenda, which benefits from the quick movement of triage from one crisis to another. In nearly all instances, outcomes amounted to bold statements followed by cosmetic changes as the government mobilized its stretched resources and eroded political capital to tackle the next problem.

In his short resignation speech, Boc emphasized the difficult choices his government faced. We might consider many hard choices during his term but pledging to cut a 7.2 percent public deficit to 5.9 percent in exchange for the €20

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billion IMF loan could have been the most difficult. The objectives were clear: defend the national currency, ward off capital flight, and buy time before facing the consequences of a national budget that was terribly overcommitted. The loan saved the government for a time and the engagement in triage began again in earnest. However, government maneuverability was now severely constrained. The IMF became the patient that would demand, and receive, undivided attention in the midst of other patients arguably in more dire need of attention.

The decision to pursue the loan is one matter, the policy package to meet IMF expectations is quite another. Austerity measures ran deep, with 25 percent cuts to public sector salaries, a freeze on pensions, and an increase in the VAT from 19 to 24 percent. What remained off-the-table was Romania's 16 percent flat tax on income, applied to individuals and corporations. In the name of simplicity and a desire to attract foreign capital, business interests successfully defended this item.

Governance by triage cannot be a long-term approach. Eventually, time catches up with you and the system becomes untenable. The Boc government outlasted any expectation associated with the strategy but in the end, became overwhelmed. Future governments in Romania need to move away from crisis management, envision a future, and pursue that vision through coordinated policy. Party leaders from both the left and the right must discontinue their penchant for personality politics and mudslinging, and engage in debate over substantive ideas such as how to achieve better proportionality of the resources. The reliance on harsh austerity measures do not comport with the economic reality for many Romanians. Too many are living too close to the margin to be able to endure such shocks. The recent protests indicate that the time for triage has passed and it is time to wheel the patient into the hospital for comprehensive care.

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[1] See *Romania under Basescu: Aspirations, Achievements, and Frustrations during his First Presidential Term*, Ronald F. King and Paul E. Sum (eds.) Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, chapter 1, <https://rowman.com/> ISBN/9780739148563