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The Public Interest in Romanian Parliamentary Debate

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Abstract

From a discourse analysis standpoint, the contemporary administrativist approach and the discursive perspectives on the concept of “public interest” were brought together by Jacques Derrida (1967), as the deconstruction of discourse provides the researcher with the opportunity to identify the meaning or the purpose of discourse, having as starting point the meanings assigned by society to specific words or concepts. Consequently, the priority axis of our analysis revolves around the intentionality of political discourse, based on the assumption that the three basic elements (*cf.* Derrida) of discourse are intention, method and ideology, with public interest being a prerequisite for the democratic public sphere. The issue of discourse intentionality is the subject of pragmatic approach, as intentionality essentially defines the manner in which a discourse agent represents a specific matter (*cf.* Searle, 1983); it is thus understood in the context that the force of representation is intrinsic to the intentionality process of speech acts. The second core dimension specific to our study encompasses the social conditions which characterise the use of words/concepts, and the role played by the latter in determining discourse effectiveness, starting from the paradigm of illocutionary force (*cf.* J.-P. Austin, 1969, 1975) as well as from the significance of discourse context in relation with the paradigmatic competences of “the language of institution” or “authorized language” (*cf.* P. Bourdieu, 1975/2001). In practical terms, our study is concerned with the occurrences and manners of (re)presentation which are specific to the syntagm “public interest” in the context of deliberative discourse; thus, our study comprises an analysis of the political debates in the joint meetings of the Parliament of Romania between January-December 2012 – i.e. 24 meetings – and seeks to identify operational definitions for the syntagm concerned.

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1. Premises of the study

The studies conducted in recent years on parliamentary debates have focused mainly on the argumentative dimension of the parliamentary discourse (Holzinger, 2004; Smadja, 2009). Habermas (1997) considers the parliamentary debate to be a sine qua non condition of the public democratic sphere. Other studies have focused on identifying and using some grids of deductive coding on the deliberative discourse (Steiner, Bächtiger, Spörndli and Steenbergen, 2004) proving that the deliberative dynamic is the fundamental component of the parliamentary debate; the aforementioned study is strongly anchored in the Habermasian theory and it continues to be perfectly valid from a normative standpoint, but it raises significant question marks regarding the main Habermasian criterion for the deliberative discourse, namely the *sincerity*, which is hard to operationalize in empirical studies. From a discourse analysis standpoint, the contemporary administrative approach and the discursive perspectives were brought together by Jacques Derrida (1967), as the deconstruction of the discourse provides the researcher with the opportunity to identify its meaning or its purpose, having as starting point the meanings that society assigns to specific words or concepts. Consequently, the priority axis of our analysis revolves around the intentionality of the discourse, based on the assumption that the three basic elements (*cf.* Derrida) of the discourse are intention, method and ideology. The issue of discourse intentionality is the subject of pragmatic approach, as intentionality defines essentially the manner in which a discourse agent represents a specific matter (*cf.* Searle, 1983). It is thus understood in the context that the force of representation is intrinsic to the intentionality process of speech acts.

The second core dimension specific to our study encompasses the social circumstances which characterize the use of words/concepts and their role in determining discourse effectiveness starting from the paradigm of illocutionary force (J.-P. Austin), as well as from the significance of discourse context in relation to the paradigmatic competence of “the language of institution” or “authorized language” (P. Bourdieu, 1975/2001: 161). Bourdieu makes a clear distinction between acts of authority and authorized acts, his starting point being the symbolical (charismatic) or legal-rational “authority” of the discourse agent. The priority relationship is the one between agent-discourse and the institution authorizing the agent to utter the discourse. For Bourdieu, the essential feature of the authority discourse is the *acknowledgement* of the discourse agent, but it is not necessarily accompanied by comprehension from the audience; the acknowledgement is possible only if a set of “ritual” conditions are fulfilled: the agent is legitimate and authorized to utter the discourse in question which must be uttered in a legitimate context, namely “in front of legitimate recipients”, and the discourse presentation is also legitimate (*ibid.*: 167). Thus, the situation created is a situation of “public manifestation of authority” (*idem*) through authority discourse, which is not legitimate unless we have the “complicity” of the audience. This point of view is what differentiates Bourdieu from Austin, namely, for Bourdieu “authority language is merely the limit of legitimate language whose authority does not lie [...] in the intrinsic features of the discourse itself [as Austin believes], but in the social circumstances of production and reproduction of the distribution between classes of knowledge and of acknowledgement of the legitimate language” (*ibid.*: 167, 169).

The third core dimension, which is related to the notion of (political) discourse intentionality and concerns this study, is represented by *discursive influence*. The political discourse fulfils two main functions: axiological and of orientation. If its axiological purpose were to describe the political communication as a valuable entity and entity of value, the discursive orientation induced through the political discourse would transform this type of communication into a permanent negotiation of the strategies which can be used in order to reconfirm the status of the political representative as opinion leader.

2. Selected corpus

We have registered 45 interventions including the syntagm *public interest* or related phrases; eight of them belong to official representatives (one intervention of the President of the European Parliament (EP), Martin

Schulz, one of the President of Romania, Traian Băsescu, three interventions of the prime-minister Emil Boc, one of the prime-minister Mihai-Răzvan Ungureanu and two interventions of the prime-minister Victor-Viorel Ponta), and the rest of them belong to some deputies and senators. Therefore, we have determined the following distribution according to political affiliation and/or quality of the representation when the respective discourses were uttered: 20 interventions initiated by 13 representatives of the Democratic Liberal Party (PDL), 11 interventions initiated by 6 representatives of the Social Democratic Party (PSD), 8 interventions initiated by 5 representatives of the National Liberal Party (PNL), 2 interventions initiated by some members of Parliament who became independent during the 2008-2012 legislature, both being former members of PSD, one intervention of the leader of the National Union for the Progress of Romania (UNPR), the deputy Gabriel Oprea, one intervention of the leader of the Democratic Union of Hungarians in Romania (UDMR), Kelemen Hunor, one intervention in the allocution of the President of the European Parliament, Martin Schulz, who was invited in the Parliament of Romania on the 31st of October, 2012 and another intervention in the allocution of President Traian Băsescu, which was a response to the initiative of the Parliament to suspend him from office on the 6th of July, 2012.

3. Thematic categories defining the public interest

Having as starting point the definitions of the national/public interest that the main political leaders have suggested in their interventions, we have identified five thematic categories included in the two joint sessions of the Chambers of Parliament from January 2012, as follows:

- National interest = economic stability
- Romanians' interest = responsibility of the members of Parliament
- Society's general interest = social confidence
- National interest = fundamental democratic value
- National interest = unity

The definitions suggested are often used in order to emphasize the three dimensions of the political discourse, which are used for the contextualization of the present analysis, as follows: discourse intentionality, social circumstances of using words/concepts (and their role in establishing the discursive effectiveness) and discourse influence. The five categories of definitions originate in a specific social and economic context, in the sense that the first joint session of the Chambers of Parliament in January 2012 follows the manifestations in Bucharest and in the country and also a wave of social discontent which "requires" a specific axiological approach (on the level of discursive intentionality) in all interventions (from both the power and the opposition), as we are about to see. The path they choose is to use the public discourse in order to return to the fundamental values of the democratic state, which are considered to be the fundamental values of the democratic society. The context of the global economic crisis makes this historical incident an important reference point in extending the range of democratic values so that a new indicator is introduced – the economic stability.

The role play (power - opposition) is also found on the level of discourse intentionality because the attack is present in both the discourse of the power (the prime-minister's call for accountability to opposition representatives, invocation of national interest) and the discourse of the opposition (the specific social circumstances – the discourse of Victor Ponta, the PSD leader, and the manifestations – are used in order to justify the lack of effectiveness and legitimacy of power representatives). The UDMR leader, Kelemer Hunor, operationalizes the stake of the accountability given that it is shared by all the members of Parliament; then, he conceptualizes the approach as the general interest is, in his opinion, the social confidence.

The authority argument is used in the intervention of the UNPR leader, a young party which was in coalition with the power at that moment ("We have brought the national interest in the public debate and, after years, the entire political class remembers this value."). This perspective offers the speaker the opportunity to refer to another set of desired democratic values such as the social dialogue, the political balance and the social peace; in

this context, the national interest becomes an argument which creates the real based on examples, models and illustrations.

We should mention that the corpus selected includes only one instance of the syntagm “public interest” (during the whole year of 2012) in Emil Boc’s first intervention on the 23rd of January, as follows: “I repeat, beyond the discontent with austerity measures, the manifestations are a vote of censure against the entire political class, which must learn that it must change its behavior. *And the things that people denounce are arrogance, lack of communication and prevalence of personal interests in relation to the public interest*, and, I repeat, each one of us must learn this lesson”. The repetition at a distance, as figure of speech characterizing the deliberative political discourse, is here a form of legitimizing the symbolical universe of the power discourse. The prime-minister addresses the issue again at the end of the parliamentary sessions in January 2012, with a new meaning for national interest, meaning given through the call for unity, in binary opposition to the undesired disunity, under the turbulent social circumstances of that time.

4. Political context of the debate in 2012

In April 2012, the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies met in joint sessions twice (23rd and 27th of April) in order to present and vote the motion against Mihai-Răzvan Ungureanu’s Government. His interventions are prompt responses to the provisions of the motion proposed by opposition representatives, who become even more virulent against the power; thus, the use of the notion “interest” with different specific references acquires negative connotations, as we notice in a previous study (Pricopie, 2012) – the definition provided by the Romanian Explanatory Dictionary for the word “interest” has a negative connotation, contrary to the other Romance languages where the positive connotation prevails. The political (voting the motion against the Government) and social (the wave of distrust and generalized discontent of the Romanian society regarding the previous actions of the power) circumstances of enunciation favor binary oppositions (from negative to positive) and emphasize “various” interests which interfere with the national/public interest, as follows: “party interests”, “political interests”, “minority interests”, “economic interests”.

In fact, the main interventions of opposition representatives focus on the lack of legitimacy of the power; this perspective is related to a semantic mutation which inserts the “citizens’/Romanians’ interest” in the discourse, as a peripheral ad hominem argument against each of the power representatives and Government on the whole, as follows: “Through the politics sustained by the Government, instead of changing the wrong direction given by Boc cabinets, *the current Government has become a cabinet which is blackmailed, captive and acts against the interests of Romanian citizens.*” (Deputy Ciprian Minodor Dobre, PNL Mureş). Subsequently, the same phrase is found several times in the allocutions of another senator of the opposition, Lia-Olguța Vasilescu (PSD Dolj).

The power-opposition role play is privileged again: while opposition representatives use arguments which create the real such as examples and illustrations (regarding the bid rigging, in particular), power representatives prefer arguments based on the structure of the real, such as the argument of sacrifice (referring to both the Romanians’ social sacrifices in the context of the financial crisis and the image sacrifices of the Government); the latter is based on reciprocity and partial identity (as quasi-logical arguments).

After the motion against Ungureanu’s Government is voted on the 27th of April, the transfer of the power to the Alliance PSD-PNL-PC is performed under unique political circumstances which are initially marked by the local elections (the 10th of June); the new power is legitimized rapidly when it wins the local elections with over 60%. July is marked by two sensitive topics, from both internal and European perspectives – the vote of the Parliament for the revocation of the ombudsman Gheorghe Iancu in the extraordinary meeting of the Chambers of Parliament on the 3rd of July and the vote for the suspension of President Traian Băsescu, proposed in the extraordinary meeting on the 5th of July and voted in the third extraordinary meeting of the month, on the 6th of July. The proposal of the power to revoke the ombudsman is motivated primarily because, during his mandate, he has chosen to represent “the interests of the political powers which appointed him” (Deputy Florin Iordache,

vice-president PSD). In this case, the opposition chooses arguments built through notions dissociation or binary opposition in order to report the “abuse” of the power: “the Government’s own interest or your interest [power representatives]” vs. “general interest” (Ioan Oltean, PDL Bistrița-Năsăud); “own interests” or even “other people’s interests” (Daniel Buda, PDL Cluj) vs. the citizens’ interests. The subject of the President suspension brings him to the Parliament in front of the representatives of the two Chambers in order to respond to the allegations against him; thus, two new phrases are brought into the debate through his discourse: “the interests of the offenders” and “the interests of the corrupts”; there are direct references to representatives of the new parliamentary majority who could not keep their seats according to some court orders.

The sensitive political circumstances of the enunciation are contextualized on international level by taking into account the responsibilities that Romania assumed (regarding NATO and EU) and especially, as the President states, “following the rule of law”. Power representatives, through the agency of Crin Antonescu, transform the negative sense of the concern expressed on international level into a new beneficial perspective for Romania: “It is maybe more important that the US Ambassador to Romania and several important officials or western politicians have expressed their concern. *This fact makes me rejoice, because, at least, the concern shows interest, and we have always wanted it and I think it is always beneficial to have the interest of the US and the western chancelleries*”.

In November 2012, the political crisis worsens, especially since the referendum at the end of July on the president’s impeachment was invalidated and the parliamentary elections are set for the 9th of December; the conflict between the president and the prime-minister reaches its climax with the issue of Romania being represented at the extraordinary European Council meeting on the EU multiannual financial framework 2014-2020 and the debate over it. The president takes advantage of his constitutional powers and the prime-minister takes advantage of his responsibilities as head of the Government regarding the budget issue. Back from Brussels, Victor Ponta addresses the two Chambers of the Parliament in order to inform the members of Parliament about this essential European topic. His discourse mentions again his conflict with the president by skillfully inserting the peripheral ad hominem argument: “The only instance which is fundamentally different from the viewpoint of the president of Romania is when *I say that Romania’s national interest can be neither negotiated, nor subject to a compromise, as the president requests. I believe it is our obligation to defend our legitimate interests and be a respected country which receives equal treatment on European level. Together with you, ladies and gentlemen, I consider myself to be responsible for the way Romania defends these legitimate interests, the way Romania has allies in defending these legitimate interests, and I think that together we can achieve these most fundamental goals for Romania* [...]”. However, before this crucial decision for the future of Romania, it is important that all state institutions – the Parliament of Romania, the Government, and Presidency – think of the *national interest* and *the responsibility we have to those who have elected us*.” (Victor Ponta, the 20th of November, 2012).

The new syntagm is that of Romania’s “legitimate interests”, which appears again in axiological dimension together with the topic of national interest and responsibility to the electors. Călin Popescu Țăriceanu (PNL) completes the intervention by emphasizing the European dimension of a necessary parliamentary debate on the sensitive topic of the budget, which contextualizes the perspective of the national interest being valued in the European context, as follows: “*Thus, we must understand that Europe is a project of consensus where every country knows how to defend its interest and promote it among the other nations*.” (the 20th of November, 2012). This statement balancing the political forces on the national-European axis can also be interpreted as a response to the repeated accusations of anti-Europeanism that the former power representatives (PSD representatives, in particular) have made against the current Government.

The discursive universes, that the speakers in the parliamentary debate build symbolically, always take into account the dimension of authority and legitimacy of the parliamentary majority (the power) in binary opposition with the representatives of the other parties (the opposition). The essential strategy of the opposition is the attack by using arguments that creates the real (the illustration, the example) and the year 2012 is revealing in

this regard because the arena of parliamentary debates has recorded two major changes: the government change through the regrouping of the parliamentary majorities in April 2012 and then, the parliamentary elections in December. The legitimacy that the power gained by majority vote is supported on discursive level by a return to the core democratic values, and the connotations of the main topics (such as the national interest, the public interest) have a great axiological significance; on the other hand, the opposition would rather focus on phrases with negative connotation (both in the first half of the year and after the Government is changed).

5. Conclusions

The content analysis of the selected corpus of interventions with reference to the public/national interest makes us draw several conclusions which could be an invitation to further research in order to identify the key-moments of the parliamentary debate on the public/national interest, and especially after the accession to NATO and then to the EU, as follows:

1. Only about 3.3% of the parliamentary interventions in the joint meetings of the two Chambers of Parliament of 2012 make direct or indirect reference to the issue of national interest.

2. The nominated interventions are relatively balanced in number for both power and opposition representatives, with a prevailing tendency in discourse level regarding the representatives of centre-right parties.

3. The most frequently used syntagms on the selected topic are: *national interest, general interest, Romania's/the country's interest, the citizen's/the citizens'/the Romanians' interest, political interests, party interests, electoral interests, personal interests, interest groups*.

4. The syntagm *public interest* is mentioned only once in the selected corpus, proving, similar to the journalistic discourse, a quasi-absence of the debate on the public interest in contemporary Romania.

5. The phrases including the word *interest(s)* are inserted mostly through notions dissociation, producing binary oppositions which are actually text constructions with a performative goal on discursive level: *general interests* or *(our) common interest* vs. *personal interests, public interest* vs. *personal interest, politicizing interest* vs. *national interest, party interest* vs. *the citizen's interests* or *the interest of every citizen*.

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