

LIMINALITY AND FASHIONABLE CONCEPTS

THE USE OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS THEORIES AND CONCEPTS IN ROMANIA'S STRATEGIES

Radu-Alexandru Cucută

Romanian Liminality

■ Romania's position can be described as a liminal one. The concept of liminality has an established origin in anthropology (Warner 1959; Van Gennep 1960; Turner 1967). Van Gennep argues that every rite of passage includes "preliminal rites (rites of separation), liminal rites (rites of transition) and postliminal rites (rites of incorporation)", even though the importance and development of each sequence is contextually relative (Van Gennep 1960: 11). Moreover, the postliminal period becomes sometimes "systematized in the form of commemorations" (Van Gennep 1960: 149). Social life therefore entails multiple rites of passage, each of them marked by phases of separation, margin and aggregation (Warner 1959: 303). The liminal period is an "interstructural situation", a transition between states, i.e., "relatively fixed or stable conditions" (Turner 1967: 93).

Using the concept of liminality as a rite of passage in international relations is relevant for three reasons. First, the concept can be applied to polities, even though they do not fit the template of relatively small and stable social groups, where many rites are inherently connected with "biological or meteorological rhythms" (Turner 1967: 93), precisely because they "concern entry into a new achieved status" (Turner 1967: 95). Secondly, the value of the concept is given by the inherent ambiguity of the liminal conditions – the place of the liminal group or body is not fixed and it requires its own conceptualization and ontology: people in liminal condition "are no longer classified and not yet classified" (Turner 1967: 96). In Turner's words, "neophytes are neither living nor dead from one aspect,

and both living and dead from another” (Turner 1967: 97). Third, political developments are marked by transitions which do not only resemble rites of passage, but are ritualized as such, with discrete consequences resulting from the changing of the status which is supposed to mark the end of the liminal period. The debate about whether the Balkan region falls within the marginal, liminal or lowermost category (Todorova 2009: 18) highlights the usefulness of the concept. The best case to be made about the relevance of rites of passage and liminality is by looking at Romania’s integration process. Accession to the EU and NATO can be seen as a rite of passage, which entails a discrete separation from the previous “state” (Turner 1967: 93) – the identity and characteristics of Romanian communism. Democratization and the establishment of a market economy, the adoption and implementation of the Copenhagen criteria, become prerequisites of accession. EU and NATO membership status can thus be considered as a “state” quantitatively and qualitatively different from the previous one.

While Romania joined NATO in 2004 and the EU in 2007, it is possible to argue that liminality remains relevant. First of all, the post-revolutionary transition was a long period, which inevitably generates political and social consequences. Secondly, at least in the case of the European Union, the accession was marked by sui-generis conditionalities, such as the imposition of the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism (European Commission 2006). Moreover, the fact that Romania and Bulgaria still have to join the Schengen Area and eventually adopt the Euro (Official Journal of the European Union 2005) can be interpreted as a continuation of the liminal period either because all the liminal rites (rites of transition) have not been concluded or because all the postliminal rites (rites of incorporation) have not been performed. Romania is a member of the European Union, under a form of conditional verification and, in many regards, still a candidate (to join the Schengen and Euro Area). The symbolic value of liminality is highlighted by the manner in which the transition manages to dominate the political space: it is not ironic that immediately after Brexit, the Romanian president felt the need to talk about the importance of finding a post-accession project to guide Romanian politics (Iohannis, 2016), a discourse reminiscent of Turner’s argument that the liminal period “may partly be described as a stage of reflection” (Turner 1967: 105).

In addition to political liminality, there is also geographic liminality. Geography is a form of discourse that “spatializes” international politics, creating narratives which fit the socially constructed geographical space (Tuathail–Agnew 1992: 192). This form of discourse, which calls for specific policies to fundamentally manage an element, space, seen as unchanging and unaltered (Dodds 2019: 3), entails discrete characteristics of the peoples and polities inhabiting specific spaces. Nonetheless, the borders between the major geopolitical units, clearly defined in terms of identity, discourse and practice, are difficult to establish, thus creating a space of borderlands, with their peculiar position between the familiar and the significant Other (Goldsworthy 1998: 2–8). On the other hand, it is precisely the ambiguity of the border region – too familiar to be part of the *orientalist* construction

(Said 1979: 3–8), but different enough to be apart from Western self-depictions of politics and identity – which encapsulates the idea of liminality. Geographically, Romania remains between created spaces and practices. This liminal position explains also a paradox – first, this intermediary position nonetheless allows elites and societies alike to challenge the discursive divisions and practices – in a sense, accession to the EU and NATO becomes a geopolitical quest of disproving the geopolitical labels. The Presidency, for example, in its website presentation of Romania, is adamant that the country belongs to Central Europe, while being at its frontier with Eastern Europe and the Balkans. (Institute of Geography of the Romanian Academy 2021). Secondly, the self-perception of Romania’s position as a border or as a frontier, as a country at the intersection of several Empires, as a staunch defender of the Western Christian world, has a significant cultural and historical tradition (Boia 2001: 155–157). Additionally, there is the epistemic liminality to consider. The paper does not dwell on whether International Relations concepts are a Western-centered discipline or product (Acharya and Buzan 2010, Acharya and Buzan 2017). Alternatively, it is possible to consider the Romanian reaction to dominant theories and concepts a form of subalternity (Spivak 1988) or mimicry (Bhabha 1994). Concurrently, is difficult to argue against the relevance of investigating the incorporation of knowledge into official documents from a post-colonial perspective (Todorova 2009: 201, Filipescu 2015). Nonetheless, Romanian academic and political elites remain outside the Foucauldian power-knowledge matrix (Foucault 1977: 13) or, alternatively, subjects influenced by a Gramscian-like intellectual hegemony (Gramsci 1992: 12). The concepts and theories adopted are very difficult to challenge, but their relative meaning reflects the peculiar liminal position.

Fashionable Theories and Concepts

The use of fashion in the present paper is related to the perspective espoused by Libiseller (Libiseller 2023). Concepts and theories become fashionable independent of the people who author them, are a function of power and the prestige associated with their adoption by state or international institutions only serves to reinforce their fashionability (Libiseller 2023). The paper is agnostic in relation to the specific process by which a concept or a theory becomes fashionable, or, indeed, “dominant”.

However, I argue that because of the specific manner in which these theories and concepts are articulated and employed by their adopters, the process is not simply a direct one – the overt manifestation of a form of power dressed in academic terminology. The adopter, in this case, the academic and political elites, which are seen as a community of meaning (Yanow 2000: 10–13) involved in the drafting of the analyzed strategies, “adapts” and gives additional meaning to the fashionable concepts and theories, by interpreting and understanding his own

position. The analysis will highlight also that successive fashions are not mutually exclusive. In fact, liminality encourages the retaining of remnants of previous fashionable cycles of theories and concepts, resulting in but multi-layered intellectual constructs.

The adoption of fashion concepts is encouraged and influenced not only by their use by international institutions (resilience, in the case of the EU and hybrid warfare in the case of NATO), but also by liminality, specifically because the liminal position is one of ambiguity and uncertainty. The adoption of fashionable concepts and theories serves several purposes. On the one hand, their adoption is seen as a form of incorporation of the values and norms which define the end-state of the postliminal period. On the other hand, their adoption is facilitated precisely because, due to their vagueness and elasticity, they seem to cover a significant tract of the problems that liminality entails. In a quasi-feedback loop, the reference to fashion concepts is required by liminality and is also a solution to its vagaries.

At the same time, it is important to look at the symbolic and ritualistic nature of these strategies. In a sense, these documents do not only encapsulate a strategic narrative and play the role of trying to solve the identified problems within the ends, means and ways triad (Lykke 2001: 179). They can also be seen as the ceremony corresponding to a rite of incorporation, performed during the liminal stage: the multiple references to NATO and the EU, as well as the drafting of a defense or military strategy can be seen as ceremonies pertaining to incorporation rite, albeit in a liminal state.

Methodology

The methodology of the paper is a qualitative one, based on an interpretive textual analysis. Stepping away from the assumptions of epistemic neutrality, analysis can focus on the intersubjective meanings of concepts and discourses (Yanow 2000: 5–10). The paper will analyze the 2020 Romanian National Defense Strategy (hereinafter DS), the 2021 Military Strategy (hereinafter MS), as well as the 2021 Defense White Paper (hereinafter WP), in order to see how concepts and theories are employed, to ascertain their intersubjective meaning, within an interpretive methodological framework (Hollis 1994: 142–162, Hollis and Smith 1991: 1–7). The analysis will highlight how concepts such as “hybrid warfare” and “resilience” are used in an attempt to make sense of the international environment, its strategic challenges and how their employment frames Romania’s strategic efforts. The presence of additional theoretical frameworks, especially Realism, the perspective of the Copenhagen School and geopolitics, as well as liberalism and the influence of nationalism will also be investigated, in relation to the fashionable concepts. Last, but not least, the implicit influence of securitization is discussed within the larger framework of the paper.

It is also important to note the manner in which the Strategy has institutionalized a very peculiar interpretation of the Copenhagen School. The discussion regarding the nature of the sectors of security (Buzan 2016: 34-35, Buzan, Waever, de Wilde 1998: 8-9) or securitization as a speech act (Buzan, Waever, de Wilde 1998: 35-42) were perceived not as abstract instruments for a better understanding of International Relations, but as an explicit permission to include matters of political interest deserving of their own sector: beside national and regional security, the document discusses energy security and cyber security, critical infrastructure and historical and cultural heritage security (DS 2020: 7), as well as “environmental security” (DS 2020: 37), within the framework of “extended” or “multidimensional” security (DS 2020: 7, 19). The faulty understanding of the Copenhagen School’s perspective is highlighted by the manner in which the “societal” label is used: originally coined in order to discuss issues pertaining to identity (Buzan, Waever, de Wilde 1998: 119–120), the Romanian documents use it simply as a synonym of “social” or as a form of residual category. Everything fits this label if there is not a specifically designed institution to manage the problem. Hence document’s use of “societal resilience” (DS 2020: 11, 23) or “societal vulnerabilities and actors” (DS 2020: 12). In a sense, the sectors of security and the securitization process become the implicit methodology which accommodates the fashionable concepts into the strategic framework. Their prevalence is highlighted by their abundant use throughout the documents: “hybrid” is mentioned 19 times by the National Defense Strategy, 11 times by the Military Strategy, 10 times by the Defense White Paper. “Resilience” is mentioned no less than 33 times in the Defense Strategy, 28 times by the Military Strategy and 25 times by the White Paper.

Hybrid warfare

The use of “hybrid warfare” is close to the manner in which it was employed by NATO (Libiseller 2023) – Russian aggressive behavior consists of both actions of militarizing the Black Sea Region and hybrid ones (DS 2020: 7, 22). The vagueness and elasticity of the concept soon becomes apparent: unpredictable global security evolutions comprise not only pandemic or environmental ones, but also have a hybrid dimension (DS 2020: 8). Moreover, cyber threats are lumped together with hybrid ones (WP 2021: 16), as forms of interference in domestic matters (DS 2020: 18). The vagueness of the concept is increased – while “hybrid tactics” can be employed by hostile state actors, they comprise both threats of using force and asymmetric actions (DS 2020: 16, 20). Treating the hybrid dimension as both a tactic and a strategy, without clarifying the differences between them (MS 2021: 7), arguing that hybrid actions and strategies are characteristics of the operational environment further complicates the understanding of the concept. Hybrid actions are seen as capable of having strategic impact (MS 2021: 9), whereas “hybrid tactics” can be seen as a useful alternative given the low chances of major armed conflicts

(WP 2021: 12). In fact, “hybrid warfare” is used as a counterpart of both conventional warfare (MS 2021: 26) and a complement of asymmetric warfare (DS 2020: 6, WP 2021: 11). The vagueness and flexibility of fashion concepts facilitates their inter-connection. For example, educating pupils consolidates resilience, thereby decreasing their vulnerability to fake news and disinformation, specifically labelled as hybrid threats (DS 2020: 11); there is a need to increase resilience to asymmetric and hybrid threats (WP 2021: 28). Moreover, destabilizing propaganda can be part of “hybrid-type campaigns” (DS 2020: 28–29). Similarly, global unpredictability resulting from the changes of the balance of power can lead to the resurgence of frozen conflicts and multiple asymmetric and hybrid ones (WP 2021: 11).

Resilience

Resilience is defined as the capacity of individuals and communities to adapt to violent events, and to revert fast to a functional state (DS 2020: 11). The definition echoes the official EU definition (European Commission 2020) and its underlying study (Manca–Benczur–Giovannini 2017: 5). It is important to note that the elasticity of the concept can be traced also to the European perspective, which discusses four dimensions of resilience: social and economic, geopolitical, green and digital (European Commission 2020).

Resilience is seen both in teleological and instrumental terms. On the one hand, “transforming the country into a resilient state” is a paramount objective (DS 2020: 6). On the other hand, resilience becomes instrumental in ensuring that the Romanian state has the capacity to manage the multidimensional and ultimately unpredictable threats to its security, being linked with flexibility and adequate crisis response (DS 2020: 6). Furthermore, it is unclear what the difference between resilience and resistance actually is. The National Military Strategy defines resistance as the capacity to continue the mission in unfavorable circumstances whereas resilience is “the ability to withstand a blow, recover quickly and fight back decisively” (MS 2021: 25). Making use of the definition of resilience used by the National Defense Strategy, military resilience is defined as the “ability to absorb kinetic and non-kinetic shocks” as well as the ability to generate forces and operate after being surprised by an opponent (MS 2021: 26). The convoluted relation between resistance and resilience is expressed by the conviction that both are based on “the ability of organizations and citizens to survive and resist, by violent or non-violent means, to the occupying forces” (MS 2021: 27). Strategically, resilience can also serve as a deterring factor (WP 2021: 7).

The blending between the concepts is highlighted by the use of “societal resilience”, which can be increased by awareness raising measures, by changing the education curriculum and increasing digital competences (DS 2020: 23). There are also explicit mentions of the importance of increasing resilience in regards to asymmetric and hybrid risks and threats (DS 2020: 16), the “resilience of the medical

system" (DS 2020: 29), economic resilience (DS 2020: 8), state and national resilience (DS 2020: 10), critical infrastructure resilience (DS 2020: 11), fiscal system resilience (DS 2020: 27), low resilience to disinformation (MS 2021: 8), military system resilience (MS 2021: 13), military education system resilience (MS 2021: 18), resilience to asymmetric and hybrid threats and risks (WP 2021: 28). To complicate things further, the Romanian military is responsible for national resilience (MS 2021: 3), defense planning is expected to "ensure resilience" (MS 2021: 16–17), while having a "resilient defense information system" (WP 2021: 34). R&D is expected to ensure the resilience of the military (WP 2021: 48).

Civil society

It is important to note that the references to civil society are simply discursive elements simply meant to convey an air of legitimacy. Managing security entails "the participation of civil society" (DS 2020: 7), but this can only be possible within the confines of a "strong state" (DS 2020: 8). Moreover, both the state and civil society are involved in providing good governance (DS 2020: 9). However, civil society is not without its flaws: tolerance encouraging policies are needed (DS 2020: 16). It can be vulnerable to "hostile influence actions" (DS 2020: 25), whereas its low level of "security culture" is seen as a vulnerability (DS 2020: 29). References to civil society become another fashionable accessory with no significant institutional or political implications within the institutional and conceptual framework of the strategy.

Conclusion

The paper has argued that liminality favors the adoption of fashionable concepts and theories specifically because their vagueness and flexibility seem to offer an adequate labeling of the problems of the liminal position itself. Hybrid warfare and resilience form the latest addition to the Romanian strategic framework. The hybrid label seems to cover all aspects of unconventional threats, risks and vulnerabilities. Resilience, analytically identical to resistance, is the quasi magical antidote to "hybrid" problems, hence the emphasis on increasing or consolidating different forms of sectional or institutional resilience. The assumptions of the strategic framework remain grounded in a form of realism carefully looking at the global distribution of power, while a peculiar understanding of the Copenhagen School seems to be the methodological framework which facilitates the adoption of the very vague fashionable concepts.

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