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PEOPLE'S COUNCILS IN SESSION:
NOTES ON ROMANIAN OBSERVATIONS

Marx notwithstanding, communist parties rule through organs of the state. Although the administrative bureaucracies in communist states are vast and expanding, the structure is invariably centered around the idea of a representative assembly. Whether bicameral or unicameral at the national level, each communist party seeks to employ the image of a popular assembly at the local level, variously called people's councils or soviets. Here, my focus is such local assemblies in Romania (*consiliilor populare*).

We know very little of what takes place in sub-national representative assemblies in communist states. Given their symbolic importance (which allows communist parties to claim that their rule emanates from a democratic base), however, part of my work in Romania has included observations of people's council sessions. This essay is meant to report on these observations and to offer several tentative conclusions from available information.

There are several levels of sub-national political divisions in Romania. The largest, of which there are 39, is the *judet* (county). A 1968-1969 territorial-administrative reorganization returned Romania to *judete* after two decades of Soviet-"inspired" regions and raions. *Judete* are sub-divided into urban areas called, depending on population and importance, *oras* or *municipiu* (town or city). The rural sub-division of a *judete* is called the *comuna* (commune), which is a unit more akin to the idea of a township than what the term "commune" implies in English; a *comuna* is, indeed, a geographic area that may encompass from two to as many as eleven villages (*sate*). Counties, cities, towns, and communes have people's councils which vary in size according to population. Major cities may have 200 or more deputies in their council, whereas the smallest communes have fewer than three dozen members in their people's councils.

Deputies are elected once every four (or more) years, and meet as a "people's council" four times annually in sessions (*sesiune*) that last approximately three hours each. Such gatherings are not without interest to the observer of politics and society in communist party states, despite their brevity. One can infer from the operation of the people's councils, per se, and ancillary organs such as the standing commissions, some causes and effects of widespread change in Romanian society, economics, and politics.

Observations were conducted of local people's councils on a number of

occasions in four județe —Timiș, Cluj, Brașov, and Iași. These counties were selected on the basis of both geographic separation and socio-economic contrasts¹. In some of these instances, I was an official guest of the particular council, and my presence was acknowledged. In other cases, I resorted to “Indirect” observations, receiving detailed reports of debate and discussions by council members. The latter technique was necessary because of the infrequency of people’s council sessions in any one territorial-administrative unit.

Despite my attempts to gain information from a larger number of sessions than I could physically attend alone, no “sample” of sessions could be obtained that would in any way “represent” all people’s council sessions. Moreover, observations that do not involve periodic sampling necessarily run the risk of being a product of chance —i.e., what one sees and hears might be highly unusual for that council or any council.

Control for the error of periodicity is, in this type of research, difficult to obtain. One can obtain “checks” on observed behavior in sessions —from deputies during interviews, from local political leaders, and from the local press. Where relevant, I have incorporated such sources.

People’s council sessions are, in some respects, cross-nationally similar. One should, first, take note of such uniformities.

Deputies do not greet sessions of a people’s council with particular enthusiasm, irrespective of the level of local government. Meetings, which usually begin late in the day (such as 4:00 or 5:00 p.m.) are an additional task for most deputies, directly following a regular day’s work. Several factors might explain such a circumstance.

At the county or municipal levels, and in many towns as well, sessions of the people’s council involve over one hundred people and often above two hundred. These numbers necessitate meeting in auditoriums otherwise reserved for cultural or school events. A lack of comfortable facilities, then, might be an immediate part of the deputies’ reason for a lack of excitement. There are, of course, other more important causes for the apparent disenchantment of deputies when councils meet.

People’s councils, relative to local political institutions in the open political systems of “the West”, make few decisions. When I suggested such an observation to a local party leader in Romania, he responded in what I believe to have been false incredulity to say, “(But) the people’s councils are extremely active bodies, exercising their power through democratic voting proce-

1. I have discussed these socio-economic contrasts in detail elsewhere. See Daniel N. Nelson, *Local Politics in Romania: An Intra-National Comparison*, Doctoral Dissertation, The Johns Hopkins University, 1975 (unpublished).

dures on many occasions”². True, people's councils *do* conduct votes on many occasions, which in no way indicate that they *decide* upon anything. In people's councils which I witnessed (or about which I had direct information), for example, an average of three votes were taken per meeting. A very few of these involved collective decisions, but the vast majority were *ratifications* of decisions made in earlier days or weeks by the permanent bureau in the name of the executive committee, or merely procedural matters³.

As deputies file into people's council meetings, then, there is little heated discussion, no urgent last-minute conferences, or similar characteristics with which one might associate sessions of “legislative” bodies. This paucity one can speculate, is due to the deputies' perception of the limitations in their position.

Planning for sessions of people's councils are not the domain of “normal deputies”. Indeed, a deputy outside of the executive committee rarely knows until 2-3 days previous to a meeting what the major topics of discussion will be. In all cases, deputies outside the executive committee are *informed*, not consulted, about the focus of people's council sessions.

Each deputy receives, by mail, a list of laws and other business to be voted upon. This program or schedule is a *fait accompli* by the time a deputy receives it. Influence or “input” into deciding what *will* be discussed is channeled through the executive committee, its permanent bureau, and the Party. Only deputies who have “elite” status by virtue of their membership in the local party bureau and people's council permanent bureau can be seen to influence the order of business for sessions.

The materials received by each deputy which set forth business for an upcoming session are typewritten and mimeographed, varying in length from session to session. Often, however, the deputy receives two dozen or more pages summarizing laws and decrees effected by the permanent bureau in the name of the executive committee in the weeks or months before.

For example, deputies' material for one municipal people's council included four principal sections:

- 1) an eleven-page “report” to deputies and other people to be invited to the upcoming session, signed by the president and secretary of the people's council, in which a general topic of city provisioning is discussed, and measures taken by the executive committee are related;

2. Oral communication, July, 1973.

3. Each council “elects” an executive committee. Permanent bureaus consist, automatically, of the council president (who is simultaneously the local party chairman), several council vice presidents (most of whom are party secretaries), and a secretary.

- 2) a four-page "decision" of the executive committee of the people's council regarding provisioning for the fall season and conservation through collective action of agricultural foodstuffs as preparation for estimated shortages in the coming winter and spring;
- 3) a four-page report of five other decisions;
- 4) a nine-page report on two other decisions.

The total number of decisions with which these materials dealt, then, was eight, plus a number of lesser measures not to be voted upon formally. Given that such decisions in the name of the executive committee occurred over a three-month period, the rate of "decision-making" must either be very low, or else most decisions are considered to be above the province of the people's council. For individuals of the local political elite, however, decision-making pertaining to the implementation of national policies or regarding local problems is clearly much more frequent than eight in three months. It is apparent, then, that few decisions are made by the council in session, and that even these "formal" decisions are but assents to previously-made policies.

Deputies, as noted above, receive materials regarding upcoming sessions less than one week prior to a meeting. For the most part, deputies give such reports cursory considerations at best. Asked if they read briefings sent to them, many deputies at the county and city level indicated that they (the notes) were not helpful to them. Several deputies were, privately, derisive of the extent to which they were informed about decisions of the permanent bureau; "Little is done by the permanent bureau that we know about until long after"⁴.

This material is not only regarded as uninformative but deputies are, moreover, often required to return these mimeographed sheets prior to entering the hall where the council session is to be held; during the meeting itself, then, deputies (other than the executive committee) rarely have reference material concerning reports or discussions scheduled.

A focus or emphasis is decided by local political leaders for each people's council session (probably months ahead of time at a joint party bureau and people's council permanent bureau meeting). Sometimes their decision is motivated by actions of the Party central organs in Bucharest⁵. It is usually possible, however, for local political leaders at all levels to choose foci for people's council meetings that *appear* to be of public relations value. While no

4. Oral communication, September, 1973.

5. A Central Committee meeting, for example, usually produces an indication to the local political elite of emphases to be pursued; local leaders "read the signals" of happenings in Bucharest, then, *before* receiving official communiqués, and often vie for the attention of central party officers in pursuing goals.

statistics are available over a long period of time, I was able to ascertain that county-level people's councils are now giving attention to what can be subjectively labeled as "consumer-related" problems —provisioning, pollution, housing, public services, and maintenance, etc⁶.

Also generally similar among larger people's councils are procedural matters related to sessions. Once deputies are seated in the hall accommodating people's council meetings, the executive committee strides into the room en masse, accompanied by polite applause and, very often, the deputies' rising to their feet. By being arranged at tables on an elevated platform on stage, the executive committee achieves a dominating physical presence relative to the assembled deputies. Moreover, seated at the forefront of the executive committee is the permanent bureau, with the Party Chairman (simultaneously the president of the executive committee) at "center stage".

The regality of this arrangement is not to be missed. Even where no stage or platform is available, the executive leadership sits at the auditorium's head, facing the deputies, unlike parliamentary systems where the executive members, because they are themselves elected, sit with other members. Communist local politics, however, ironically emphasize hierarchical categories. Each territorial-administrative level is denoted by specific privileges to the point of stressing, symbolically, that people's councils are intended to be organs of state power only insofar as they may be constructively *used* by higher authorities.

Not surprising, then, is the resignation which many (but *not* all) people's council deputies evince when referring to their role; for instance, an opinion occasionally heard was in the genre of this comment:

As a deputy I can listen to reports, hear of national and local leaders' decisions, and raise the concerns of my constituency, but... a deputy's voice is a small one⁷.

Overt manifestations of this mitigated interest are not hard to spot —drowsiness in people's council sessions, attempts to find chairs in the back of the hall, etc. To be sure, actions are difficult to document. One indication of deputies sentiments regarding their roles, however, is that absenteeism from people's council sessions averages 10%. This seems minor enough, until one recognizes that sessions are held only once in three months, last but a few hours, and entail no lengthy preparation on the part of an individual deputy. According to one deputy at the municipal level, members of people's councils

6. Deputies' orientation to such problems has been examined in Nelson, *op. cit.*, Chapter IV.

7. Oral communication, September, 1973.

cannot absent themselves from meetings repeatedly, but that most deputies with whom she was acquainted had not attended *all* council sessions in the last two-year period⁸. If this is true, deputies simply “skip” people’s council sessions upon occasion.

All the foregoing comments seemed to have general relevance, varying to minor degrees only among levels and locations. Session discussions, however, were sufficiently diverse to be noteworthy for this study, for at least one of the factors bringing differences in the operation of people’s council sessions was the rapidity with which problems confront the local government. Other influences on how people’s council sessions proceed were, of course, apparent, such as the personality of the councils’ leadership—i.e., how the president of the council (hency, party first secretary) “manages” the session. Additionally, the level and location are factors that co-vary with session activities.

Principle results produced by these factors seemed to be as follows:

- 1) in areas where socio-economic change was most rapid, councils discussed a wider range of problems even within the context of a basic subject matter established by the leadership’s fiat;
- 2) in councils where the president appeared to be a forceful speaker, authoritatively in “command”, yet with a politician’s care to make a humorous remark or two, debate seemed curtailed by his imposing presence;
- 3) in rural communes, meetings were much less formal, and the relaxed atmosphere apparently contributed to a higher rate of floor-leadership interchange.

These impressions, of course, overlap. That is, a rural commune in a county where change is taking place most quickly could well have a dominant leadership figure. In such a hypothetical case, I suggest, one might expect to find more problems being discussed than in rural communes of other counties with a strong political elite, yet with presidential (and thereby party) dominance modified by the informality of rural communal people’s council sessions. My point, then, is that the above-mentioned factors can, indeed, co-exist in one council at a single point in time.

In order to make comparisons regarding behavior at sessions, I have chosen to relate occurrences at meetings of two people’s councils at the same level, both of which I personally attended—sessions of the municipal people’s councils of Braşov and Iaşi cities (“capitals” of their respective counties as well).

8. Oral communication, September, 1973.

Initially, one is struck by the reversal of roles between Braşov and Iaşi as to the setting for municipal people's council sessions. Braşov City, ostensibly with a much higher socio-economic level than Iaşi, uses a relatively small auditorium for its council chambers. When the Braşov municipal people's council does not use it, this hall normally functions as an assembly room for the "people's university" (adult education), for small plays or cultural events, or it is used by the city library (which is located in another part of the building) for lectures or demonstrations. For a council of over two hundred members there are too few theatre-type chairs, so wooden chairs line the auditorium's sides and rear.

Perhaps ironically, the Iaşi municipal people's council meets in a large hall of the elegant Municipal Building, a relic from Romania's monarchical past. In the council chambers, the high ceiling with chandeliers and huge windows bordered by long blue curtains lend an almost regal appearance. Again, the Iaşi City people's council numbers over two hundred, but has no trouble fitting into such quarters for a session.

Once the local political elite and deputies sufficiently "needed" to have become part of the executive committee are seated on the elevated stage, the president (local Party chairman) rises to speak. From that point on, councils seem to diverge as to how sessions proceed.

The session I observed in Iaşi, for example, included talk on a much larger number of issues —pollution, the consumption and sale of alcoholic beverages, construction (generally) and school construction, and several other topics. Meanwhile, Braşov's council focused on one issue, namely provisioning. Such an observation would be meaningless, of course, without some information from other sources that might tend to confirm first impressions. A single observation, clearly, cannot tell us if these councils always (or, even, usually) differ in such respects. Again, opinions expressed by deputies tend to provide one such support, implying that people's councils in Iaşi County at all levels face and debate more problems than in other researched counties.

Further checks, however, were made concerning the suspicion that people's councils in less-developed/modernized areas debate a higher number of problems. In the course of elite interviews of local political leaders, each subject was asked, "What are the major problems to be faced by your people's council in the next one to three years?", allowing (as was the case with deputies) for open-ended response. By no means a randomly drawn sample, such elite interviews nevertheless supply coincidental information to the extent that local leaders mentioned different *kinds* and different *amounts* of problems facing their people's councils. In Iaşi County, the range of issues was clearly broader, including urbanization, agriculture, health, housing and con-

struction quality, education, soil erosion, and many more⁹. Cluj leaders, by contrast, focused on provisioning problems and urbanization, while Braşov's leadership tended to be more analytical. One Braşov leader carefully said, for instance, that the question regarding local problems is "infinitely complex" and he continued, "We must take an integral view of all the city's problems—they cannot be divided in actuality"¹⁰.

The manner in which topics were discussed also varied considerably between locales. In broad characterizations, Iaşi sessions were much more open than other counties, and rural meetings more so than urban councils. Adjectives such as "contentious" would be less applicable to Braşov and Timiş meetings which I either attended or about which I received detailed information.

The Braşov City people's council session that I observed, to be sure, involved some earnest and forthright complaints about provisioning, but none were heated exchanges. One "report" followed another at the Braşov session, with no exchange of opinions. The reports *were*, I hasten to add, frank. One deputy's report on provisioning revealed that a vendor was engaging in a bit of street-corner capitalism, "hawking" his produce at a higher price than allowed. Another deputy observed wryly that at a grocery in her neighborhood she saw long lines waiting for service as one salesgirl rang up sales and three washed the store's windows!

Still on the subject of provisioning, a doctor spoke with candor (and drew nervous laughter) as he noted that the canteen serving meals to party officials and people's council employees was the *only* restaurant facility in the city with sufficient caloric levels in its dinners, far exceeding what school children and factory workers received. Another report indicated that vandalism and theft by youths made provisioning all that more difficult.

After a large number of these reports, the council as a whole was asked to give its consent to actions taken by the permanent bureau in the name of the executive committee. The council did so unanimously¹¹.

This consenting vote was perfunctory; indeed, when the council president asked for a vote after thirteen reports had been given averaging ten minutes each¹², his phrase was, "Are you in accord with the decisions taken in regard to these problems? Do you have anything against the specific articles (enumerating previous decisions which had been listed in information mailed to each deputy)?" By stating the question in such a way, any deputy who might wish to object, or to even raise a point of information, is put in the position of *oppos-*

9. Oral communication, October, 1973.

10. Oral communication, September 1973.

11. Observation notes, September 17, 1973.

12. Each speaker was timed.

ing what *already* has been decreed. Clearly, it becomes difficult for a deputy to take a stance that would be, in the first place, "negative" and, in the second place, futile given the post facto nature of council votes. Such deterrents to contrary votes, of course, are entirely aside from the most significant deterrent for most deputies —party discipline.

In the Braşov meeting, all deputies who spoke appeared to have a prepared list of comments, such that their "report" was clearly planned in advance. They spoke from a podium beneath the leadership's stage where a microphone had been set up. A few of the reports were given by members of the executive committee. The initial report, for instance, was given by the president of the permanent commission for commerce, and simply recited the accomplishments of the council leadership (and the local party leadership) including the modernization and increased efficacy of food distribution, etc. The second report was also presented by a spokesman for the leadership, he being the director of all provisioning enterprises in the city (all grocery stores and markets).

From that point on, however, speakers were not echoing praise of the local leadership, but offering poignant complaints of provisioning difficulties, not all of which met with the council president's approval. When a young deputy, a teacher by occupation, began his comments with the question, "Why is it that sometimes you get everything in a market, and other times it is barren?", the Party Chairman interrupted angrily, exclaiming that what was really needed was the "education of buyers" so that more people would go downtown to another market, rather than crowding one in the new districts, and exhausting its supplies.

For the most part, however, the Braşov chairman sat quietly, interrupting only twice (including the above-mentioned case). Before adjourning the meeting, however, he made a forty minute speech about provisioning, the problems facing the city, and the leadership's actions. Including introductory statements, interruptions, and concluding speech, the Chairman spoke for approximately 20% of the session's duration.

In a people's council of a similarly-sized city, Iaşi, complaints were as forthright, but had an added element—that of debate or contentious interchange among deputies and between deputies and the council officers. Furthermore, a larger number of topics were considered than in Braşov.

One subject of a local nature brought lively debate and exchange between the Party Chairman (council president) and the floor —namely on the issue of liquor sales. The people of Iaşi, so a doctor contended who reported from a podium below the stage, were disturbed by the drunken behavior of some citizens, particularly in the morning hours. While the doctor's points were essentially medical, he was supported by the next speaker, the president of

the people's council permanent commission on commerce, who suggested that a reduction in public drunkenness could be effected by outlawing liquor in restaurants and confining sales to liquor stores or taverns, and to restrict sales of liquor to after 10:00 a.m., instead of the current 7:00 a.m. opening.

Loudly disagreeing, the council president interrupted at that point. Protesting (with a smile) that "the workers need their beer and wine", the president seemingly tried to defuse the debate. He did not succeed, and for the next three-quarters of an hour, a goodly amount of commotion filled the hall as the nearly two hundred deputies whispered among themselves and indicated their agreement or disapproval, vocally, of whoever had the floor.

During that time, eighteen deputies rose to speak on the proposal, many of whom expressed vehement opinions. Several female deputies spoke in favor of liquor restrictions for the sake of children, since they claimed drunken individuals bothered children in the morning on their way to school. Some males responded contemptuously that the possible substitutes for beer and wine were not acceptable to "working men".

The vote that eventually was taken rejected some of the proposed modifications in current laws. For example, liquor was to remain in restaurants. But hours for the purchase of liquor on weekdays were altered, as a compromise decision allowed the sale of liquor on week-end mornings to continue. An additional provision, passed with some wry humor, would require drunks to pay for their own transportation to the city hospital.

During the entire session, the council's president interjected numerous comments, often in response to deputies, but made no long speeches. As a result, he spoke for approximately one-eighth or 12.5% of the meeting, a significantly smaller proportion than his Braşov counterpart¹³.

These matters, perhaps trivial in the context of Romanian politics, nevertheless offered an opportunity to see votes cast contrary to the apparent wishes of the leadership, both in the final vote and intervening amendments. In fact, the executive committee itself was not unanimous in their voting. That decisions regarding liquor laws are not integral to the continued operation of a government does without saying; no doubt the distance which separates a particular issue from the "life-blood" of a political system such as Romania lessens constraints that otherwise cause a deputy to remain silent on issues more germane to "system-survival".

More important for this study, however, was the manner in which these councils operated differently. In Iaşi, the leadership necessarily played the role of politician, cajoling, rebutting, compromising, presiding over a people's

13. The session was 15 minutes longer in Iaşi than in Braşov.

council that, when the opportunity arose, revealed widely conflicting opinions about public policy.

The Braşov leadership, by contrast, ruled; certainly, complaints were heard, but there seemed little doubt as to when “enough was enough”.

Information available from small town and commune-level councils in Timiș County¹⁴, suggests that sessions there are less formal—even casual at times, yet without intra-council conflict such as I witnessed in Iași. In these instances, so I was told, commune-level people’s councils lack most of the “pomp” which accompanies council sessions in large cities or at the county level. As everyone is a personal acquaintance of each other, members are more relaxed to discuss problems which, at any rate, usually concern communal issues. Knowing that such opportunities exist, leads fewer deputies to harbor underlying tension.

The foregoing observations are, to be sure, impressionistic; one can neither generalize as from a survey, nor formulate a case study. There does exist, however, mutually supporting evidence that people’s councils as institutions operate differently from area to area in Romania.

Moreover, we can have the legitimate suspicion that the nature of observable differences—i.e., a more contentious “atmosphere” in the Iași council—is in some way related to the general “way of life” in that county. Knowing that Iași County is, relative to Braşov, Cluj, and even Timiș, in the early stages of development and modernization but changing most rapidly, it comes as no surprise that such an area faces a long list of problems. Given a long list of problems, it seems quite “human” that people would disagree about priorities and solutions (even to the extent of disagreeing about how to curb public drunkenness). In a formative environment such as Iași County, then, one might expect more conflict and competition—except, that is, for the fact that we are dealing with a communist-party state where considerable roadblocks exist for deputies in the expression of their opinions. Clearly, our next step should be to test these suspicions at another time in Romania, as well as in other communist states.

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14. Information through indirect observation where members of people’s councils, other than those where I attended personally, voluntarily gave me detailed reports of what transpired in sessions of their council during the same period as my other observations.