

Preparations for Bucharest

Written by Dylan Kissane

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DYLAN KISSANE, NOV 5 2013

In a little more than two weeks I am heading off to Bucharest, Romania, to speak at a conference on collective action in international politics. I am really looking forward to the trip for a number of reasons. For one, it will be my first time back in Romania for a few years and I am a great fan of that country and its people. As well, the conference is being organised, in part, by the International Association for Political Science Students (IAPSS), an NGO that I had quite a bit to do with back while I was studying as an undergraduate and a graduate student. Most of all, though, the chance to speak about collective action in international politics is an opportunity to talk about some of the lessons that I have learnt running my Crisis Simulation in the POL 210 class here at CEFAM over the last few semesters. I am convinced that the patterns that emerge in the human behaviour in my classroom parallel wider problems faced by negotiators and diplomats at the international level and, as such, the solutions my students find can perhaps be applied outside of the classroom, too.

I've always commented that it is tough being a theorist of international relations because you have rather limited opportunities to test your theories as a natural scientist might in a lab. For example, if I find that there is a strong correlation between the rate of change in a state's national material capabilities and the recourse to war by that state – and I have found exactly this in the past – I am faced with the problem of testing my theory. I cannot load up a state with new capabilities and see what happens. I cannot rip money and arms out of another state and see if they fall subject to invasion from another actor. I can track data, make some extrapolations and create hypotheses, but in the end I am still waiting for things to happen. Save a Kissinger-like promotion to the State Department, a call from the Quai d'Orsay or a relocation to the Chaoyang District, my theories are likely to rest, like most IR theory, on the sidelines of the practical politics in the world: forever describing, explaining and sometimes predicting, but never 'tested' in the same sense as a theory in the natural sciences might be tested.

The Crisis Simulation, though, and others like it, allow for testing of certain human traits in international politics. The human side, often factored out in grand theories, is important and the role of the negotiator, the critical thinker, the creative analyst and the hard-nosed bureaucrat can all be modelled in the classroom. Watching the interactions between different types of negotiators under the stress brought on by a crisis situation, the clock ticking on the wall, and the need to act collectively instead of unilaterally allows the professor to identify certain elements that help collective action emerge, and others that prevent it from emerging altogether. These conclusions can then be tested against real life successes and failures in collective action

In Bucharest I'll be speaking about three lessons that the Crisis Simulation here at CEFAM can provide for those seeking collective solutions to global problems. I'm looking forward to presenting these lessons and engaging with the audience and the other invited guests – all far more influential and credentialed than me, I should add – on the issue of collective action and in seeking new perspectives about how and why collective action seems to fail (Syria, climate change) as often as it works (Iraq War I).

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