

Democracy Bridge Building
Arabs, Central and Eastern European Democrats

**By Professor Eliot Sorel, M.D., D.L.F.A.P.A.
Senior Advisor
Ion Ratiu Democracy Lecture
Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars
Founder Chairman, Conflict Management Section, WPA**

“Are There Democracy Lessons Arabs Can Learn from Eastern Europe?” the Ion Ratiu Democracy lecture launch given by Professor Saad Eddin Ibrahim at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington, D.C. on 30 November, 2006, was a smashing success. It was in the same universe of success as that of Romania at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival in the summer of 1999—the latter in the cultural domain, the former in the political, intellectual, and, indirectly, cultural. It was truly a historic moment for the Ratiu Family Foundation, the event’s sponsor The Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, and especially for Romania and the late Ion Ratiu, who in the context of this event and this illustrious intellectual Center, where *knowledge and power meet*, were given the dignified respect they deserve.

The extremely well attended program was opened by Ambassador Joseph B. Gildenhorn, the Chairman of the Board of Trustees of WWICS, followed by Mr. Nicolae Ratiu, the Chairman of the Board of the Ratiu Family Foundation who made an excellent, very well informed, and focused presentation regarding the vision and passion that his father, the late Ion Ratiu, had for freedom and democracy.

Ambassador Akbar Ahmed, a distinguished Professor of Islam at American University in Washington, D.C., gave a refined, erudite and intellectually superb, thought provoking introduction of the keynote speaker. Professor Ahmed reminded the audience, among other things, that the Koran states that “...*the ink of the scholar is more sacred than the blood of the martyr,*” sending shudders through the filled to capacity auditorium, a very solemn, inspirational, and unforgettable moment that evening.

Professor Saad Eddin Ibrahim of American University in Cairo, Egypt, who was this year’s honoree, receiving the *2006 Ion Ratiu Democracy Award*, was splendid in his presentation “*Are There Democracy Lessons Arabs Can Learn from Eastern Europe*”!

A scholar of superb intellectual abilities, high ethical standards, and an uncanny sense of humor, Professor Ibrahim delighted the audience with his unique, critical review of democracy’s global spread in the past thirty years, punctuated by accomplishments that were truly unimaginable fifty or so years ago. With great dexterity, intellectual, political and cultural abilities, he elegantly and convincingly demonstrated the sweep of democracy through Europe, Asia, Latin America and the Middle East as well as challenging the audience with what Arabs can learn from the Eastern and Central European democracies- “*Poland’s realized in ten years, the Czech Republic’s in ten days, and that of Romania in ten hours!*”

At the same time he honestly and courageously broached the challenges facing the world's democracies, such as the West's dependence on oil, the unresolved Middle East conflict, as well as the challenge posed by religious fundamentalism. Over the years, the Central and Eastern Europe's prior totalitarian regime's practices of exporting arms, the training of secret police, and of carrying out international murders, created, understandably, a mental block in the Arab mind as to whether there is anything Arabs can learn about democracy from that part of the world. The Soros Open Society Institute's initiatives of bringing Arab democrats to now democratic Central and Eastern Europe have only partially corrected this mental block. Additionally Professor Ibrahim postulated that involving religious fundamentalists in the democratic process is certainly one of the options of our century and possibly one of the solutions to the current crises and conflicts.

Prior to concluding this year's Ion Ratiu Democracy lecture, Professor Ibrahim challenged the Ratiu Family Foundation to not only continue, but also expand the Arab-Central/East Europe democrats' dialogue, launched at WWICS, by initiating and supporting future projects and initiatives in this emerging and promising domain.

At a very meaningful and unanticipated *post scriptum*, as we went that same evening to celebrate Romania's National Day at the Ambassador's residence in Washington, D.C., we had the pleasure to meet with and introduce Professor Ibrahim to Professor Vladimir Tismaneanu and to Mr. Mircea Raceanu. Professor Tismaneanu, who chaired the Romanian Presidential Commission investigating the crimes committed by the communist regime, shared with us the Commission's progress to date and that President Traian Basescu will be presenting the Commission's findings in the Romanian Parliament on 18 December. Mr. Raceanu shared with us his experiences as a political dissident, of his imprisonment and detention as well as being sentenced to death by Romania's "sultan," as Professor Ibrahim referred to the dictator of the country.

The 2006 Ion Ratiu Democracy Lecture at WWICS, a historic event without precedent, of remarkable intellectual, political, and cultural value celebrated deservedly, the memory of the late Ion Ratiu, "*the best President Romania never had*". It also opens new opportunities for collaboration in the following years between the WWICS and RFF to build a solid bridge between Arabs, Central and Eastern European democrats, and other democrats around the world.