

POLITICAL OPPOSITION IN TRANSITIONAL DEMOCRACIES: CATEGORICAL ANALYSIS OF THE PHENOMENON

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Abstract

With the help of etymological and institutional approaches, the article analyzes theoretical aspects of the activity of opposition as a new legitimate participant of the political process in the context of democratic transformations in the post-communist states. In order to distinguish other actors of opposition activity through the concept of “opposition”, the author intentionally narrowed down the concept of “political opposition” to the institution of political parties as they are main potential subjects of power.

Key words: *political opposition, power, transitional period, transitology, post-communist states*

INTRODUCTION

Scientific research of democratic transitions in post-communist countries gives a significant empirical basis for comparison, generalization and modeling of transformational processes. Their modern comprehension in political science mainly takes place within the transitological approach. The classic work in this field is a book of the well-known political scholar S. Huntington “The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century”. The book outlines that “a wave of democratization – is a series of transitions from non-democratic to democratic regimes, which take place within a certain period of time and quantitatively exceed the number of reverse transitions during the same period” [Huntington 2005: 574]. The third wave of democratization began in the mid-1970s in Southern Europe, and

in the late '80s and early '90s it has already covered Eastern European countries and was accompanied by the collapse of the Socialist and Soviet Blocs.

Because of suchlike linear dynamics, many researchers considered political transformations as a certain natural transition from the collapse of various types of authoritarianism to the gradual construction of a consolidated liberal democracy. The argumentation of this approach was strengthened by the comparative research of the results of democratic transitions in Latin America and Southern Europe. As a rule, the transitional period is understood as an interval between the “partial opening” of a non-democratic regime and the formation of new rules of a political game and the establishment of a competitive democracy [Bakirov 2008: 420]. With all the differences in the specific versions of the transition, a country was supposed to pass several typologically identical phases: the liberalization of the democratic regime; institutional democratization; democratic consolidation.

1. POLITICAL OPPOSITION AS A FACTOR OF DEMOCRATIZATION

However, while having relatively equal starting conditions, each of the post-communist countries has demonstrated sustainable differences in transformation results. For example, “hybrid”, semi-democratic, neopatrimonial political regimes, which combine the features of democracy and authoritarianism, were formed in the post-Soviet countries instead of the expected consolidated democracy [Chikhladze 2017; Fisun 2016; Gel'man 2015; Matsiievskyi 2016]. Political opposition may operate under such conditions, but its potential cannot be realized due to significant violations of democratic rights and freedoms. With the strengthening of authoritarian methods in politics and the growth of competition in a party environment, the opposition acquires attributive forms and can be pushed out to the periphery of political life.

According to data provided by Nations in Transit (Freedom House), in 2018 none of the post-Soviet states, except for the three Baltic states, has achieved the condition of a consolidated democracy. Only Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia are classified as semi-consolidated democracies, and Armenia is classified as a semi-consolidated authoritarian regime. All the rest, including Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan, have obtained the features of consolidated authoritarian regimes [Nations in Transit 2018]. The growth of various forms and models of the post-Soviet political regimes (for example, the political regimes of Yeltsin, Putin, Kuchma, Lukashenko, Karimov, Aliyev, Saakashvili) gives relevancy to research aimed to clarify the influence of internal political factors on democratic changes in the post-communist area.

Political opposition is one of the determinants of democratic change. Comprehension of the complex and contradictory specifics of democratization processes reveals the varying influence of opposition on the nature of a transition and its effectiveness. According to M. McFaul, the advantage in favor of opposition has contributed to the origin of “democracies” in nine cases (Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia) and “partial democracies” in three cases (Armenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia). The balance of powers in one case has led to a “dictatorship” (Tajikistan), in six cases it has resulted in “partial democracies” (Moldova, Ukraine, Russia, Albania, Azerbaijan, Macedonia), and in two cases – “democracies” (Bulgaria and Mongolia). Domination of the old regime has given rise to a “dictatorship” in five cases (Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan), and in two cases

“partial” (Serbia) and “complete” (Romania) “democracies” originated [Melvil 2007: 5]. All this proves that the classical theories of transition are unable to explain all the complexity and specificity of democratic transformations. One of the reasons for this is insufficient research of political opposition, in particular, of its categorical characteristics. This issue is rather topical since its covering will reveal the specifics of the formation of political opposition as a subject of democratic transformations in the post-communist countries. Therefore, the purpose of the article is to conceptualize the theoretical aspects of the activity of opposition as a new legitimate participant of the political process in the conditions of post-communist democratic transformations.

Transitology pays significant attention to the studying of the opposition's role in the transformation of society. S. Huntington, A. Przeworski, A. Stepan in their works analyzed different models of interaction between the power and the opposition during a transition to democracy. Political scientists have made a thorough comparative analysis in order to establish how the specifics of the political forces' configuration and situational factors influence the dynamics of political processes. To some extent this allows us to consider the opposition in a complex of sequential factors that affect the nature of the political regime. However, the works primarily summarized the experience of democratic transformations in Europe and Latin America but did not pay enough attention to the countries of East-Central and Eastern Europe.

As for the definition of the place and role of the political opposition during a transitional period in the post-communist space, this issue remains largely unexplored. The theoretical aspects of the formation of the political opposition, in particular, its functional role in democratization processes, are partially analyzed in the works of A. Melvil, A. Tsygankov, L. Shevtsova, A. Glukhova, A. Kolodiy. The institutional conditions of the activity of the opposition in the post-Soviet countries were investigated by Y. Abdulaieva, G. Gavrilov, T. Tkachenko, L. Chervona, A. Friszke.

The transition towards democracy in the countries of East-Central and Eastern Europe largely depended on a new alternative political force – the opposition. It was the opposition political forces that created a political alternative and real political competition by undermining the monopoly of the “party of power” and creating thus preconditions for democratization. The constructive activity of the opposition became a foundation for civil society since its initial pluralism gave rise to different groups of political interests, values, programs, ideologies, and so on.

It should be noted that the understanding of the political opposition as a subject of politics has undergone a certain evolution in Europe. The first half of the twentieth century was marked by the establishment of democratic institutions, including the parliamentary opposition. This period is characterized by the expansion of general social rights and the introduction of the institution of elective offices in many countries. However, the process of democratization was not linear. The strengthening of totalitarian trends in European politics also affected the reassessment of the political opposition's role. Democracy was being perceived not only as a set of political institutions, norms, and practices but has acquired a certain axiological coloring. Within the totalitarianism-democracy dichotomy, the first concept was perceived negatively, and the second – positively. Accordingly, within this approach, political opposition was considered as a mandatory attribute of a democracy, as well as a missing element of a totalitarian regime.

In the 1980s, when the concept of “democratic transition” was introduced into the scientific discourse, the understanding of democracy and, accordingly, opposition, was changed. Political opposition was seen as the main initiator of the democratic transition, which was influencing the dynamics of the authoritarian regime's transformation, its “erosion”. It is generally considered that the beginning of the transition from authoritarianism to democracy is evidenced by active protests by groups, opposing to a government or a ruling party, or changes in the higher echelons of power, which strengthen positions of pro-reformist groups. According to A. Tsygankov, the regime obtains a transitional state when the rights of the political opposition are legitimized in one form or another. [Tsygankov 1995:130].

2. POLITICAL OPPOSITION DURING THE TRANSITIONAL PERIOD: THEORETICAL DIMENSION

However, the application of the term “political opposition” during the transitional period requires conceptual definiteness, since the internal political processes and the evolution of subjects of the opposition activity had their specifics in different countries. The end of the '80s was marked by political activation of various alternative public associations oppositional to the authorities. They gradually acquired organized forms, in some cases united in social and political movements, formed their own alternative programs, and gained legalized forms, directly or indirectly contributed to the erosion of the communist regime in a country. However, the internal opposition was also present inside the ruling party itself in the form of the reformation wing. At this time, the role of opposition political leaders, able to mobilize citizens against the government, is growing substantially. Because of the various forms and methods of opposition activity in difficult transitional conditions, there are concepts of “opposition” and “political opposition” in the scientific discourse. Academic literature often interchanges these concepts or emphasizes their identity.

Let's try to consider this problem in more detail through the etymology of the word “opposition”. The term itself comes from the Latin word “*oppositio*”, which means counteraction, confrontation, resistance. It was used to describe actions characterized by resistance towards certain political processes, political line, political action and criticism of a dominant ideology, opposition to specific institutions or organizations. But the interpretation of the opposition only as an expression of irreconcilable hostility, rivalry, confrontation of power subjects, is somewhat narrowed and does not allow to reveal the diversity of forms and methods of opposition activity and demonstrate its democratic character. S. Riabov thinks that “limitation of the opposition's essence only to deconstructive denial of the existing foundations of social life and extra-systemic intentions is inherent to totalitarian political consciousness and practice” [Riabov 2005: 12].

During the transition from authoritarianism to democracy, a gradual retreat from the confrontation, resistance, denial of the regime to the establishment of rules of the political game and procedures for a competitive political struggle happens. On this basis, the question arises: whether resistance movements, socio-political organizations and other movements, which opposed the authoritarian regime, but did not always aim to obtain political power, can be called political opposition?

Some researchers try to consider resistance with the use of force as a concept separate from political opposition. Thus, the Mexican researcher T. Segovia

distinguished a “resistance movement” and a “political opposition”. In his opinion, “the opposition does not confront the power and its supreme form comes from the opposition party, while the resistance movement cannot be a party by definition: its task is not to rule, but to resist” [Chervona 2004: 28].

The Polish historian A. Friszke has a similar opinion. He understands the political opposition as a conscious, planned activity based on a certain program and aimed to make changes or reforms by limiting the monopoly of party power and restoring the subjectivity of society [Friszke 1994: 5].

Ukrainian scholar L. Chervona agrees that a political party, which does not go beyond the political system, and the resistance movement, which does not recognize the existing political status quo, have different functional tasks. In her opinion, in both cases, they represent the stages of opposition activity, the political opposition of two contrary types - systemic and extra-systemic. At the same time, no political regime can operate without the opposition as a set of nonconformist beliefs and actions of individuals [Chervona 2004: 28].

T. Tkachenko expresses a similar opinion that the opposition can exist in the form of a public protest and as a political institution. Thus, “...the opposition as a form of social protest is the determinant of the opposition as a political institution” [Tkachenko 2007: 41].

However, under the conditions of an authoritarian political regime, when public and political organizations and movements have illegitimate status, it is difficult to call them political opposition in the classical sense of the term. None of these structures falls under the definition formulated by the Polish scholar S. Bożyk. He states that political opposition is a totality of political groups, which do not participate in the functioning of a government but take a critical position towards the government and its policies, and also strive to gain state power, using guaranteed constitutional and legal forms of political rivalry for implementation of constitutional reforms or changes in the actual political socio-economic system [Bożyk 2005: 10]. Thus, a dilemma appears: how to understand the concept of political opposition - in a universal or specific sense? In this case, the problem lies in the terminological and methodological field.

These two concepts, in our opinion, can be distinguished through the application of etymological and institutional approaches developed by the Russian scientist G. Gavrilov. The etymological model represents the concept of opposition in a broad sense, focusing on its activity aspect and considering it as a mere confrontation between one policy and another, an action against opinions of minority or dominant opinions [Gavrilov 2003: 16].

However, this model does not cover the political side of its activities. Instead, the opposition acts as a certain process, operation activity without reference to specific political actors. This approach, on the one hand, gives somewhat blurry understanding of the subjects of oppositional activity, because even pressure and lobby groups can be considered as the opposition. On the other hand, this approach can be partially applied during the liberalization of the authoritarian regime, when the opposition is formed from socio-political movements, public organizations, as there is no legal political parties and free democratic elections, etc. However, with the emergence of a real multi-party system and the stable functioning of democratic institutions, the etymological approach does not allow singling out political parties as an important subject of the opposition, which fights for a dominant power resource along with the ruling parties.

Studying the political opposition during a transitional period, we applied an institutional (or institutional-functional) approach. This allows us to narrow the understanding of the opposition down to specific political institutions which can perform this role. Usually, this approach is more suitable for the analysis of opposition parties in stable democracies, which already have the elements of political pluralism, a competitive inter-party struggle, a stable party structure with clear rules of political competition.

In conditions of a real multi-party system, we can talk about political opposition in a form of a parliamentary and extra-parliamentary opposition, as one of the most advanced and representative forms of political struggle. In a democratic society, the political opposition is the main channel for the expression of social dissatisfaction with the existing political situation, an important determinant of political transformations, a way to achieve fundamental compromises from the authorities and improve the political course.

While agreeing with the opinion of G. Gavrilov, that the opposition is determined through the power, we believe it is important to narrow down the category of “political opposition” to the institution of political parties, as they are main potential subjects of power. Thus, we can “highlight” other actors of oppositional activity through the concept of “opposition”. This opinion is supported by G. Ionescu and I. Madariaga, who offer to distinguish the concepts of “political opposition” and “opposition”. According to their concept, only political opposition *sensu stricto* can exist in a democratic system where it is always institutionalized, acknowledged and legitimized. The scholars believe that “this term should be used in a situation when the opposition is not only allowed to function but when the functioning has become its purpose” [Ionescu 1972: 16].

The opposition *sensu largo* covers different manifestations of dissatisfaction with government policy and is quite a broad concept. Suchlike classification gives a possibility to expand the concept of opposition with various organizations and social-political movements, which act as a certain alternative force and try to democratize society through a competitive struggle with authoritarian power. According to A. Stepan, “the opposition in a non-democratic system, first of all, must undermine the legitimacy of the regime and contrapose it to a democratic alternative, initiate and spread protests, organize strikes, publish and distribute illegal press, establish secret universities, etc.” [Stepan 1990: 44].

But there is a question: at what point the opposition can obtain a different quality and acquire the forms of the political opposition? Is it correct to say that during the liberalization period there was no political opposition, and it has suddenly appeared after democratic elections and the collapse of the authoritarian system? In my opinion, the answer can be found, if we track the formation of political opposition as an institution. The institution of political opposition is a set of game rules and certain codes of conduct, as well as relations and connections that establish and regulate opposition activities within a political system [Vinnychuk 2007: 7]. Thus, we can single out pre-institutional and institutional stages of the activity of the political opposition. The pre-institutional stage of its formation falls for the period of liberalization and is characterized by the organizational formalization of the political forces, which opposed the dominant communist government, the ruling party and directly or indirectly waged the struggle for the state power. The very stage of liberalization can be defined as the period from the Gorbachev's “Perestroika” and

until 1990 when the first declarations of state sovereignty were adopted and the first democratic elections to legislative bodies took place.

It should be noted that the liberalization of the political regime took place in conditions of a certain balance between the power and the opposition. When a decrease in the level of government legitimacy and the growth of the opposition's activity occurred, these caused a rather active political socialization and the emergence of new oppositional organizations. During the liberalization of the authoritarian regime, the opposition itself became internally fragmented and included both a moderate and radical opposition. In this regard A. Przeworski notes, that not all anti-authoritarian movements were pro-democratic, some of them use slogans of democracy only with the aim to overwhelm both their authoritarian opponents and their allies in the fight against the old regime. The search for consensus is often no more than a disguise of a new authoritarian temptation [Przeworski 2005: 645]. In the instability of the political regime, because of the organizational formalization of the opposition, frequent change of its strategy and tactics (from the complete objection to partial cooperation with the authorities), forms and methods of activity – it is quite difficult to perform its typologization. According to the classification of R. Dahl, depending on the nature of its relations with the regime, there is systemic, semi-systemic, and non-systemic opposition. Depending, first of all, on methods which opposition uses to achieve its goals, J. Linz distinguishes three types of opposition: loyal, semi-loyal and disloyal (irreconcilable). Such classifications are more typical for stable democratic regimes, where democratic norms and principles of competition policy are recognized and political opposition has already become a political institution.

The uncertainty of the transitional political regime, when it retains democratic and authoritarian elements at the same time, puts inconsistency in the definition of a moderate part of the democratic opposition. On the one hand, it was determined to dismantle the authoritarian regime and, according to J. Linz classification, was disloyal and irreconcilable. On the other hand, it showed willingness for interaction and constructive dialogue with the authorities in order to overcome the political conflict. Y. Abdulaieva thinks that definitions with the prefix semi- (semi-loyal, semi-systemic, etc.) are also not suitable for these purposes since they rather characterize opposition groups with an unstable political position, which, depending on the behavior of the current regime, are ready to drift towards one or another pole within the opposition spectrum [Abdulaieva 2007: 8].

At the stage of liberalization, we can observe the activity of public-political organizations and socio-political movements, which required systemic changes and were oppositional to the communist regime. At that moment, the opposition manifested its organizational feature. Indeed, it is quite difficult to imagine an unorganized mass of people struggling for a dominant political resource. It is unlikely that an unorganized group could effectively use this resource. With the lack of institutional ways to influence the power, the opposition actively used various forms of mass mobilization: meetings, strikes, demonstrations, pickets, and so on. Direct forms of democracy at that time were a very effective tool for influencing the government. At the same time, the democratic opposition itself, by definition, of A. Stepan performed the following functions:

- 1) resistance to integration within the regime;
- 2) protection of autonomy zones from the regime;
- 3) undermining of the regime's legitimacy;

4) increase of the political price of authoritarian rule;

5) creation of a favorable democratic alternative [Stepan 1990: 45].

In the absence of opposition political parties, these functions were particularly clearly manifested in the activities of socio-political movements which had mass character and included newly created public organizations of different directions, some of which later transformed into opposition political parties. This trend was in Poland (Solidarity) and Ukraine (People's Movement of Ukraine). For example, such national-democratic Ukrainian parties as the Democratic Party of Ukraine, the Ukrainian Republican Party and the Ukrainian Social Democratic Party developed on the basis of People's Movement of Ukraine.

Elections to legislative bodies with the participation of oppositional socio-political movements and parties laid the foundation for the institutionalization of the political opposition. The majoritarian principle of the electoral system and the constitutional abolition of the Communist Party's monopoly for power created the situation in which socio-political movements in the early '90s in Ukraine actually performed the functions of political parties. The People's Movement of Ukraine, for example, aimed to obtain political power through democratic elections. Its representatives in the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine expressed the interests of those social groups, who weren't represented in power but were dissatisfied with it.

Since then, the political opposition has used the legal forms of political rivalry, created its own program and personal alternative. At the same time, the power was perceived by the opposition as an object, to which its common interest was directed [The status. 2006: 4]. It was the struggle for power that essentially corrected the nature, forms, and methods of the opposition parties' activities.

CONCLUSION

Thus, because of the organizational weakness of the newly formed parties during the period of liberalization and at the beginning of the institutional democratization, the scope of the opposition was expanded due to anti-communist socio-political movements that had significant mobilization potential and political weight.

With the subsequent party structurization in parliaments, gradual transition from political confrontation and the denial of the regime to the establishment of rules of the political game and procedures of competitive political struggle, with the introduction of new democratic procedures into society, the collapse or transformation of socio-political organizations and movements into political parties, the political opposition acquires clear institutionalized forms. The narrowing of the category "political opposition" to the institution of political parties as the main potential subjects of power, allowed us to distinguish other subjects of oppositional activity through the concept of "opposition".

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