

## «Iron Law of Oligarchy» by R. Michels and Contemporary Process of Political Institutionalization of Parties

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**Abstract:** The study is devoted to the research of institutional bases of emergence and formation of political parties. This process has been studied in some aspects: legal, socio-cultural and communicative ones. The main attention is paid to the current state of the parliamentary parties and their role in a society. The study focuses on the apparent connection between the party ideology and the method of its internal organization, internal structural relations.

**Key words:** Oligarchy, political party institutionalization, reification, the party system, the political process, evaluation criteria

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### INTRODUCTION

In 2001, for the first time in the history of Russia, the national law «On political parties» was adopted. It became the basis not only for the formation of political parties and the party system in the country but also for the legislative branches of power the State Duma and the Federation Council. The law defined the main direction in the development of Russian parliamentarism. However, the way to this law was too long and there is a need to analyze the previous history and factors in parties development.

### POLITICAL PARTY AS THE OBJECT OF SOCIOLOGICAL RESEARCH

Despite, the fact that the modern political lexicon is widely filled with the term «oligarchy», undeservedly little attention is given to the founder of the so-called «iron law of oligarchy». As we know, the first who drew attention to this phenomenon in the activity of political parties was German sociologist Robert Michels in his «Sociology of a Political Party in a Democracy» (1911) (Michels, 1997). It's been over a century since the publication of the work but it contains a lot of theoretical positions and nowadays it's actual and remains informative value.

Thanks to the sociological analysis of party life which was conducted by R. Michels there are other reasons and factors of oligarchization parties. So, this problem is topical since the first parties appeared in modern societies. Also, it should be noted that even Soviet scientists criticized them unreasonably. In particular, it was pointed out that R. Michels admits

«methodological mistakes» and oligarchization phenomenon was specific only for «bourgeois parties». They found the study of the German sociologist as «abstract», «notional», etc. It seems such «critics» estimates must be clarified. First, R. Michels in his researches and the practice of political life has shown and explained the reasons why the ruling parties of the former socialist countries degraded and left the political scene for a few decades of the second half of the 20th century. At the same time, none of «bourgeois» Western countries' parties collapsed because of «oligarchization». It's only observed (for a long period of time) a «reformation» of the CD in Italy, «regrouping» parties of Germany and in France, when Sh.de Gaulle left politics.

Second, we can't say Michels' research is «abstract» and «notional» but it is mainly based on the analysis of inner life of the socialist party of Germany whose organization model is perhaps the most democratic in Europe.

Third, the conflict of interests between the leaders of the party and people the party lead by is not Michels' fancy but objective factor we can observe in the practice of all parties, regardless of bourgeois or socialist (M. Duverger's terms: «personnel» or «mass») they are.

### THE UNITY OF PARTY IDEOLOGY AND INTERNAL STRUCTURAL RELATIONSHIPS OF POLITICAL PARTIES AS A POLITICAL INSTITUTION

At the same time, we can agree with the opinion of some Russian analysts that some findings of Michels' «Iron law of oligarchy» are not indisputable. It can be

assumed that the causes of “oligarchization” parties are deeper and more complex. We can analyze them. First, any party (Public Organization) needs in organizational and administrative structures, managers and leaders. There are “rulers and the ruled”, “leaders and led”. The Italian researchers V. Pareto and A. Gramsci denoted that he whole “science of policy” is based on this “primary fact”. Besides there are some definite structures of management in any party whether it is large or small, socialist or bourgeois. The management of these structures leads to the “division of labor” in this sphere, “professionalization” and “specialization” of traditional political activities that we can see in the activities of political parties. So neither a “number”, nor “technical conditionality” or “social nature” are causes of oligarchization phenomena in parties.

At the same time, it is important to understand what Michels meant using the term «oligarchization parties». If the researcher means the separation of some members of the party with a rigid subordination to “elite”, it is the result of a lack of democratic principles in party organization. If Michels assumes that socialist parties that proclaime humanistic goals and ideals have the same “earthly” orders which are not humanistic, he is right. The ideals of humanism of a political party and its program installations do not mean that its inner orders are humane and righteous. Obviously, the level of development of the “ideology” of these orders is exactly the same as “average” political culture and consciousness of a society in general. Second, at an early stage of its formation, the communist parties functioned on the principles of trust and responsibility for the common cause and it replaced them a lot of the legal and other aspects of contamporary parties. At the beginning of the institutionalization of the “mass” parties, their rules based only on “a friendly trust” gave serious «failures» in different situations of party life. Third, the opposition of leaders and members of the party isn’t due to the social nature of the political party but to the natural labor division in a society.

#### **THE PROBLEM OF LEGAL INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF RULING PARTY IN THE USSR**

As in the Soviet Union which the researchers sometimes call “party-state”, the ruling party was also a part of the government system, the reasons for the collapse of the “party-state” differ from those reflected in contamporary mass media. And the scientific community rightly point to the lack of studies of “a comprehensive historical picture of the collapse of the Soviet Union”. As for the reasons of the state collapse it’s necessary to pay

attention to the fact that the highest ranks of the party neglected the legal institutionalization of the ruling party. We know that this widespread political and legal process in Europe started “in the third stage of the constitutional process of the world, i.e., after World War II”. The former ruling elite which was struck by the philistinism, careerism, populism and conformism was unable to carry out long-overdue changes.

#### **THE TRANSITION OF POLITICAL PARTIES INTO THE INSTITUTIONAL ENVIRONMENT OF A MODERN POLITICAL SYSTEM: NEW APPROACHES AND “MEASURING INSTRUMENTS”**

The formulation of the problem of political parties institutionalization is connected with the fact that there were new political formations after the Second World War that accepted forms developed in Western policy. Initially, the problem was not given importance to. The first generations of modernization theories (1950-1960s) were based on a rather simplistic view of a new political order formation. One of the first who formulated the problem of the institutionalization of the political order was the American political scientist Samuel Huntington. He presented the process of political modernization in the form of three components: authority rationalization, mass political participation and policy differentiation into autonomous sphere. Huntington offered the definition of political institutionalization: “The process by which organizations and procedures acquire value and stability”. Then, the idea was implied to some levels: the institutionalization of the political order in a separate “polity” and the institutionalization of certain political institutions. As for the institutionalization of individual institutions, the most active studying is connected with political parties.

Analyzing the problem of the political order institutionalization, Samuel Huntington has developed the relevant typology. If the increase in political participation is adequated to the level of institutionalization, there is a civil society. If the development of the institutions is bellow the rise of mass political activity, there is a praetorian society, political activity is expressed in non-conventional forms and destabilizes the political order.

Later, the Israeli political scientist G. Ben-Dor said that the logic of Samuel Huntington needs to find the opposite type to praetorian which is characterized by a combination of a high degree of institutionalization and low level of political participation. He defined it as “over institutionalization” (when party institutes are able to

Table 1: Typology of political order

Political institutionalization	Political participation	
	Low	High
Low	Traditional society	Transitional modernizing society
High	«Over institutionalization»	Developed

“strangle” the political participation in all its manifestations) (Ben-Dor, 1975). Thus, according to Ben-Dor we built four-part matrix (Table 1).

Developing his concept, Ben-Dor is also considering such terms as “semi-institutionalization” and “Quasi-institutionalization”. However, the distinction between these options requires clarification.

For example how to interpret the USSR of 1960-1970s and contemporary China, i.e., the cases when the institution of the ruling party suppresses the autonomous political participation: as “over institutionalization” or on the contrary, “under institutionalization”?

#### **POLITICAL PARTIES IN THE CONTAMPORARY SYSTEM OF SOCIAL AND POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS**

Methodological issues have arisen in connection with the conceptualization of the notion of “institutionalization”. For example, the American scientist from the Institute of Parliamentarism D. Judge was pointed out that institutionalization is was Huntington’s notion of procedure. It involves four types of changes: the formation, development, de-institutionalization and reinstitutionalization and they are closely linked to the “appearance” of the institute and “completion” of its operation. The existence of the institute becomes beyond the analysis. Even if the process of institutionalization is completed, it is only at a particular stage but in fact, it never stops. And it is not always clear is an “institutionalized” institute an “institutional inertia” or an “adaptive and flexible institution” (Judge, 2003)?

Despite the criticism, the idea of Samuel Huntington gave a powerful impetus to the development of the concept of political institutionalization, in particular, for empirical studies of certain political institutions including political parties.

With regard to the political parties Panebianko’s works were important. He understands the institutionalization of political parties as the process by which an organization loses its instrumental role and become self-sufficient. Accordingly A. Panebianko identifies two main criteria of institutionalization: consistency (the relationship of the institute and the environment, other institutions) and autonomy (independence of the institution in decision-making). His

concept had a strong influence on further research, although, it should be noted that Panebianko does not aim to develop a measuring tool.

The research of institutionalization of political parties is clearly intensified in the last decade in order to study the effects of the wave of democratization in Latin America, Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. New starting point in the studying of the institutionalization of political parties was the work of Western political scientists S. Mainwaring and T. Scully. Based on the empirical data of 12 Latin American countries, the researchers identified four criteria for the institutionalization of parties: the regularity of party competition; the extent of the party’s “deep roots in a society”; how citizens and the main political actors perceive parties and elections as a legitimate method of recruitment authority and the level of organization of the party. The first criterion implies free and competitive elections with the participation of political parties. The institutional system of the party has platforms and ideologies that are supported. Accordingly, such system should be characterized by relatively stable number of parties (the second criterion). The third criterion reflects the level of legitimacy of the party and the fourth implies that the party system has routinized procedures, relative unity has independent and sufficient resource base and has local support. Based on these criteria, the researchers have created their own classification scheme with two main categories: institutionalized party system and the system that is still in the process of nucleation. Summing up the values of the four indicators the researchers have the scale:

- 3.0 = High level of institutionalization
- 2.5 = Medium-high level of institutionalization
- 2.0 = Average level of institutionalization
- 1.5 = Medium- low level of institutionalization
- 1.0 = Low level of institutionalization

Subsequently the concept of S. Mainwaring and T. Scully refined repeatedly. For example, M. Kuenzi and G. Lambright attempted to apply it to the comparative analysis of the institutionalization of party systems in 30 African countries (Kuenzi and Lambright, 2001). Developing predecessors’ ideas, they spent the operationalization of these criteria, moving them into quantitative and qualitative indicators.

#### **THE PARTY AS AN INSTITUTE OF POLITICAL SYSTEM OF A SOCIETY: NEW CRITERIA AND EVALUATION**

Randall and Svasand (2002) also research this problem in their work «Party institutionalization in the new

democracies» and propose to distinguish the concept of institutionalization of the party system and institutionalization of political parties. They convincingly show that the institutionalization of individual parties are not always accompanied by the institutionalization of the party system as evidenced by the experience of countries with a dominant party (the Institutional Revolutionary Party in Mexico, the Republic of Poland, Justicialist Party in Argentina, etc.). To what degree are these indicators interdependent? W. Randall and L. Svasand think that previous researchers missed this point of view and propose to analyze the parties and party systems in terms of the internal and external aspects as well as distinguish structural and valuable measuring. Although, comparisons show that in fact it was an attempt to synthesize the criteria for the institutionalization proposed by S. Huntington and the criteria developed in relation to the parties of A. Panebianco and K. Janda (Randall and Svasand, 2002) (Table 2).

W. Randall and L. Svasand associate the valuable measurement with internal and external aspects. Reification criterion has been proposed according to K. Janda's research. He argued that institutionalized party should be "reified by social consciousness", objectified and it must have external symbolic expression. In fact, this criterion reflects the perception of the institute of political party outside a civil society, the media, voters, etc.

The valuable measurement includes the criterion of "self-value" or "intrinsic value". In other words, the organization must have value for its functionaries. "This criterion indicates how members of the party and its supporters identify themselves and what motives prevail among them; to what degree a party is successful in the creation of their particular culture or value system. These can be seen as an aspect of internal cohesion". Applying this matrix to the analysis of political parties W. Randall and L. Svasand developed a system of indicators (Table 3).

This system is a controversial conglomerate and its empirical usage is problematic. There are a lot of the indicators overlap, for example, the resource base and funding independence from external sources. Referring to the criterion of autonomy, the problem is that a transition to the parties of the cartel type which are more closely related to the state and less need in constant mass support. However, the merit of W. Randall and L. Svasand is that they have understood the multilevel institutionalization of political parties and could distinguish the structural and evaluative components.

Another attempt to operationalize the criteria for the institutionalization of parties was made by M. Basedau and A. Stroh who carried out a comparative study using the material of 28 African parties (Basedau and Stroh,

Table 2: Measurement of party institutionalization by W. Randall and L. Svasand

Measurements	The internal dimension	The external dimension
Structural measures	Consistency	Decisional autonomy
Valuable measurement	Value (intrinsic value, value infusion)	Reification

Table 3: Operationalizing of criteria by Randall and Svasand

Criteria	Description
Consistency	The origin of the party (diffusion versus party building) The resource base The role of party leader Factionalism, clientelism
Value (intrinsic value)	The social base Motives for membership
Autonomy in decision-making (decisional autonomy)	Independence from other institutions
Reification	Symbolic expression

Table 4: Analytical matrix by M. Basedau and A. Stroh

Matrix	Measurement	
	The external	The internal
Stability	A level of rooting in a society	A level of organization
Value (value-infusion)	Autonomy	Coherence

2008). The researchers used the same 4-partial matrix by W. Randall and L. Svasand. But they have transformed the original matrix and got the following criteria: the level of organization, the internal coherence, the autonomy and embeddedness in a society (Table 4).

Analyzing the indicators, M. Basedau and A. Stroh have concluded that the discovery of M. Kuenzi and G. Lembright (the election boycott, the adoption of the election results and so on) characterizes the relationship between the parties and not really relevant for the measurement of institutionalizing of a separate party. Instead, they developed an index of institutionalization of the party, consisting of four sub-indices: a level of rooting in a society; autonomy; a level of the organization and coherence. The indications of the quantitative factors such as: the age of the party, electoral support or party identification are converted to a scale ranging from 0-2 while quality indicators a connection with a civil society and representation at the nation scale are originally encoded in the range from 0 and 2. In each case, 0 means a low level of institutionalization and 2 means the highest.

## CONCLUSION

In our opinion, the represented system of indicators is quite operationalized. By combining the results we can make informed judgments about the level of institutionalization of the party in a particular institutional environment.

Since, the studies of R. Michels the research approaches has changed. But one thing remains unchanged: on the one hand, the essence of the research object and on the other the desire to give insight into problems, to understand their content and practical meaning and make productive conclusions which are useful to society.

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