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Phenomenon of “Party of Power” in Political Process of the Slavic Republics of the Former Soviet Union (Russia, Ukraine and Belarus)

Political processes in the former Soviet Union Republics, the creation of new political systems and institutions represent one of the interesting topics for political scientists. Each new political system has its own peculiarities; however, there are common tendencies in the political process of the former Slavic republics of the former Soviet Union.

In this case, Russia, Ukraine and Belarus have common features in their political development. The three countries have common history and culture, as well as political and economic interests. Despite the fact that each political system has its own characteristics, we can observe common tendencies in the political process of each system. The appearance of a concept of “party of power” is one of these tendencies.

The concept of “party of power” has not been recognized in political science as a political term yet, and has several interpretations. Now this concept is widely used in the printing press, while some of the scientists note the negative consequences of the “party

of power” (Riabov, 1996). However, there is no a clear explanation why this type of organization takes place and what are its functions.

The main idea of this research is to explain the phenomenon of the “party of power” in the post-soviet period. The study of the “party of power” is based on the hypothesis that this kind of political party serves as a specific mechanism of stabilization of political processes and is a result of institutional design of new states in the post soviet period.

When we analyze the phenomenon of the party of power, we should take into the consideration the following issues:

- the structural peculiarities of political organization and the division of powers between the institutes of the political systems;
- the lines of formation of the party-system in each of the three political systems;
- inter-elite communication as an important factor on the phase of political modernization;
- the role of party of power as a specific mechanism that provides support to the executive power and stabilization of political system.

1. Political organization

In political aspect Russia, Ukraine and Belarus represent systems with a strong presidential power. The constitutional design of the three systems represents a system of

a mixed government, according to the typology of Shugart and Carey (1992). Such systems have the following basic characteristics:

- there is a president that is elected by the nation;
- the president has the right to appoint and dismiss the members of the government;
- the members of the government need the approval of the parliament;
- the president has the right to dismiss the parliament.

In such a system, the president actually does not need support of a political party. For him it is much easier to work with a particular representative of a political elite or a representative in the parliament. This type of decision-making is especially effective during the process of the formation of the party system, when there is a multiparty system that dominates in the political system.

2. Party system

If we analyze the development of a party-system in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus we can see the common tendency. The system of political parties is still developing and has not received a particular form. Each period of elections new parties appears and many of them cannot survive election competition in four years. The fact that there is no stable configuration of political forces yet, the system of elections is still transforming and the party legislation is ineffective (Dryzek, 2002).

From the time of the Soviet Union collapse in there is a pursuit of the mechanism that could provide stability for the political systems of the new states. The inconsistency of political line depends on the argument between the president and opposition¹. Though the opposition is divided by different ideological views, the main argument is about the access to the power and support of the president. It seems to be important for the president to have a support of the majority in the parliament to make a decision-making process more efficient. Hence, any political system with a strong presidential power includes the possibility to create a major political party that can support the line of the president (Fourman, 1996; Guzenkova, 2001; Gelman, 1998).

3. Communication between the elites

It is important to notice the tendency that is common for the three political systems as a state control over the reforms of economic sphere, where economic and political elites are considerably close. In Russian micro-elitists theories the analysis of the communication between the elites in the post-soviet period of transition was given by M. Afanasiev (2002). This theory serves as the basis of the study of the “party of power”. Afanasiev explains the communication between the elites from the mutual interdependence and the need of someone to coordinate recourses and their redistribution.

¹ For example in his article G. Golosov (2001) presents an interesting evaluation of the political system of the post-soviet state and the design of political institutions in it. According to his study in many cases this political design depends on the constitution and power that political elites share.

4. The concept of the “party of power”

The study of the “party of power” phenomena is many-sided and has its peculiarities. For the first time, the term - “party of power” - appears in Russian publicist literature in the 1993-1994². In many cases the concept is used in studies that are devoted to the party systems or communications within political elites in the post-soviet era. It is also important to stress that there are no comparative studies of such a phenomenon in political science, while the concept of the “party of power” is used in the case-studies of Russia, Ukraine or Belarus.

In the post-soviet systems we can notice the tendency, when in the political system the two dominant political centers tend to be formed: the ruling elite and the opposition. In this case, the ruling elite in the recent post-soviet political studies is known as the “party of power” (Peshkov, 2000). This phenomenon is a special organization of political elite that acts as a structural element in political system.

The “party of power” is a complicated phenomena and it is a new concept that has several interpretations and has not received a particular definition in political science yet. This concept needs a serious exploration and determination. Moreover, in different publications the term “party of power” is always in the quotation marks and this is the way it will be used in this essay.

² Among the first analysts who started to study this phenomenon in Russia are Shatilov A (1996), G. Golosov (2001) and A. Riabov (1996). Despite the early studies of the “party of power” the publications in scientific journals and review appear only by the middle of the 1990s.

If look at this phenomenon in the three political systems, we should understand that the “party of power” is the project of the president administration that aims to create this kind of party as a leading force in the process of political modernization. It is also important to take into account other characteristics of the “party of power”. This organization is created in order to support the political leader, in our case - the president, in the coming national elections. Because the “party of power” is in the alliance with the executive power, its ideology, political values and platform should correspond with the line of the government and the president. According to the studies of A. Riabov, a president needs the “party of power” in order to have a guaranteed support in the parliament so that political opposition would be limited in its policies (1996). Business elites also need such an organization in order to receive an opportunity to lobby own interests and have influence on the decision-making process.

In the period when the new political institutions are being established, there is instability in the political system. The new institutions should be legitimized and respond to the desires and demands of the population. Moreover, when the shift happens, especially such a radical, as it had happened in the former republics of the Soviet Union, there is a need in such a tool to coordinate the political process (Shugart, 1992; 1996). The first need of the new political system, here, is the mechanism to coordinate the interaction between government and parliament, especially in the mixed political systems. The majority party in such a system is the mechanism of coordination and stabilization of political processes. It is clear that the participation in the elections is the only way to

fulfill this strategy. Further we will see that in the context that we study, the majority party is created to order to win elections and or at least to affect the results of these elections. In this case, the “party of power” presents such a coalition that supports the line of the president and aims to get the maximum of the sits in the parliament (Riabov, 1996; Guzenkova, 2001). The “party of power” here seems to be rational to achieve political goals. Because there are other political parties it makes political system be competitive and look democratic, though the “party of power” has advantage to use so called administrative resources as state channels and patronage of political official in the state and local levels. Henkin focuses his research on this aspect of “party of power” and its functioning in Russian political system (1996; 1997).

The successful creation of such a party leads to the maximization of the presidential influence on the process of decision-making. That can be clearly seen from the particular case studies of Russia, Ukraine of Belarus. The effectiveness of legislature can be higher because the majority party provides the easier way to accept proposals of the president and realize reforms of the government. Moreover, since the majority of the parliament is a presidential party, it provides discipline in the decision-making process.

It is important to notice that the “party of power” is the phenomenon that is a characteristic of political systems of the former Soviet Union Republics (Guzenkova, 2001; Henkin, 1996). This can be explained, first of all, by the argument, that the process of the transformation of political system was not as successful, as it was expected. The “party of power” is the outcome of the process of post soviet modernization that is

responsible for the stability, while the fact that this process can be called democratization is unclear and needs another exploration.

The perspective of the existence of the particular party of power as a mechanism of the line of ruling elite depends on the level the elite can be identified as ruling (Gelman, 1998). According to studies of V. Fesenko (1995), the life of this party in the parliament is directly proportional to the seats in the parliament that were received after the elections. If the party lacks at least one of the criteria of the ruling elite, and in particular, the president, would not support this party.

This model simplifies the reality, because in reality the mechanism of the creation of the party of power depends on the political system and the current politics. That is why it is important to pay attention to the actual ways that party of power is organized.

Russian variant of the party of power

One of the first parties that we can classify as a party of power is the organization that appears in 1993-1994, which is DVR (the abbreviation can be translated as Democratic Choice of Russia). This party actually acted as an independent from the presidential line. Interesting side of this organization is that it unites the representatives of political and financial elites and is successful as will see it further only when it includes the famous governmental officials. It is necessary in order to provide the image for the electorate of the great effectiveness of such a party. In the new political system in Russia, it was difficult to create the interaction between the citizens and new political institutions,

including political parties. In this case the idea of the DVR project was to make this party a leading party that defines the lines of the political development of Russia. However there was a problem of the ideological basis of the party. The communist past and the influence of the communist ideology made DVR to refuse any positive role of the ideology in the party organization. However, in the party platform we can see the clear complex of liberal values and focus on further democratic modernization. It is important for such a party to be a support for the president and receive important resources to maintain the existence of the party. However, the controversy with the Kremlin on the question about the war in Chechnya resulted in the lost of the presidential support and as a result the fail at the parliament elections (the party received only 3.86 % of votes).

The building of such an organization, according to the view of Russian scientists, allows the executive power compensate the lack of the parliament support: “this party of power represents the substitute of the party in power” (Lichtenshtein, 2002, 136). The “party of power” in Russia at the 1990s looks more like a corporation of bureaucrats, banks and industry groups, as well as pro-government media. The stabilization of the political system, or in the other words the concentration of the main political forces around the common leader (the president) is the realization of the stability principle in the political process.

The new party of power was organized in 1995. From the very beginning this party, NDR (that can be literary translated as “Our home is Russia”) was created to participate in the elections. The Prime Minister V. Chernomyrdin became the leader of this party.

The function of the liberal party that was proposing social politics and a popular leader were the powerful sides of this party. The project of the president Administration was to create the bipartisan system, where NDR would compete with a soft communist opposition. NDR was not associated with the president but vice president, thus it acted as a part of the executive power. The party could get enough support because the communist got the voices of the electorate. Besides, the crisis of the power and economic disability in the 1998-1999 negatively affected the position on NDR. As a result a new party of power was created in the September of 1999. "Edinstvo" (that can be translated as "Union") and its leader the minister S. Shoygu created a new image for the party of power and created a metaphor: "From party of power to the party of will". It was the first time when the new leader of the Country the acting President V. Putin supported officially the party. This project was very successful and the party gained the majority in the parliament and received 23.32%. The temporary economic stabilization, the positive image of the new leader also affected the results of the elections. Here we can see the line of the close relations between the executive power and the party that plays an important role in the political design of the system. Moreover, it is important to stress that this kind of support in the parliament allows the president to accomplish his program and follow his own line.

Despite the difference in the ideological basis, all of the named parties of power maintain common features:

the principle of the organization from the top, when the rule in power creates the party; high role of personalities of politicians in the party, while other members remain invisible for the electorate; disability of such a party to maintain the status of the ruling party and even existence at the political realm; the consistent need of president loyalty.

Ukrainian variant of party of power

The organization of NDP (The Popular Democratic Party) in Ukraine became the important event in the political process because the goal of this party was to unify all the parties that belonged to the center. It is important to stress that this party as well as the variant of party of power in Russia was a union of elite both political and financial. This party was organized in 1996 and from the very foundation received the label of the party of power. This term has already appeared in the discourse of Russian political science. In this case, the party in Ukraine was organized the similar way it was in Russia. Among the top leaders of the party were the Prime Minister V. Pustovoitenko, V. Ushenko the councilor of the National Bank of the Ukraine and some other ministers. Some analytics argue that because of the high concentration of the representatives of the elite the party was classified as a party of power (Guzenkova, 2001). There were two main functions that NDP was to realize. First of all this party was created as the center of consolidation of the political system. Second, the president needed to be sure about the efficient interaction between the parliament and the government, in order to provide support for his own political line.

Here if we use the interpretation of the post communist interaction between the political elites we can assume that the party of power benefits from the presidential support in change to its loyalty towards the policy of the president and his proposals.

NDP was able to become a powerful fraction in the Ukrainian parliament in 1996 and tried to concentrate its powers on financial and energy directions as well as reformation in the area of education and science. Such a position and the chosen platform were basically created in order to become a strong force to compete with the communist opposition that was considerably strong in the parliament at that time (Guzenkova, 2001).

When we study the structure of the party and its resources, it becomes clear that NDP was organized as a strong and powerful organization, because five of its members were ministers in the government, while others were famous bureaucrats and businessmen. Such a position allowed the party of power not only to take a strong position, but also be effective and able to support the policies of the president.

However, party failed to gain enough of the electoral support. It was formed from several fractions and the most important challenge for this party were the elections in 2000. Although NDP assisted the legislature and provided interests of the lobbies, its contribution in the social reforms and reaction to the social demands was inefficient. As a result the party was not able to gain enough support in the parliament elections in 2000. The other mistakes of the party leaders were for example the lack of even absence of a strong leader, who would be able to represent the party in a political arena. The group lead by Matvietnko proposed to overcome the structural crisis in the Ukrainian

government and presented the plan of new reforms. Those proposals undermined the position of Kuchma and that also lead to the collapse of the party.

Here we can see that that in the frame where the power of party depends on the loyalty of the president and mutual support and cooperation. If one of the rules cannot be fulfilled then the party loses its role and even quits from the politics as we have also seen from the examples in Russia. NDP was not able to give an appropriate support to the president and lost its position as a party of power. In the end, NDP transformed from the party of power into the political opposition and by 2002 clashes into several political minor organizations.

Belarus and of the party of power

In Belarus the party of power obtained its own characteristic. From the world practice we know that any party especially if it is in power has its own platform and ideology. So far we have seen those in Russia and Ukraine parties tend to take central position in order to gain more electoral support. The basic formula for ideology can be presented as “democracy for the people” or “liberal reforms and social support”. The example of party of power is significantly different from the experience of Russia and Ukraine. The party of power in Belarus did not have any structure, nor platform or definite strategies (Dragilo, 1996; Drakohrust, 1997)

Weak activity of the people, disintegration of the democratic parties and organizations lead to the problem, when the party of power had to create its own support.

Moreover, in the discourse of political scientists of Belarus, the term of party of power was brought from Russian in the late 1990. However, there is a considerable number of Belarus studies in Russia that use this term in as applied to the Belarus political process in 1997 (Furman, 1997).

In the Belarus parliament the fraction “Belarus” under the leadership of the proem-minister V. Kebich became the tool of political transformation. The interesting fact is that the democratic opposition was very weak, while the communist party was organized only in 1996 (Feldman, 2001). Again, this party included high level of bureaucracy, ministers and influential businessmen. The interesting fact here is that in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus there are different authors and sources that point out the structure of this kind of party. In the three examples the party of power includes noticeable politicians that are very close to the power. In this case the party receives its support from the political administration rather than from electorate. The leader of the party in the parliament S. Shushkevich supported it’s the alliance with the democratic forces. That is why for his position party appointed M. Grib, who was under the control of the party (Fourman, 1996). It is important, however, to mention that there was no a position of the president in the political system of Belarus till 1996. The process of political transformation in this former republic of the Soviet Union was really slow. At this point, the main task of the party of power “Belarus” was to create the new position and precede further the process of political modernization.

The Belarus variant of the party of power had an interesting strategy because being neutral in its ideological points it realized political reforms, while democratic opposition did not have any tools to oppose it (Koktysh, 1999). They were not represented in the parliament, they were disintegrated and their protest against any political decision looked as if it were a protest against the entire political system.

The new constitution was announced in 1994 and defined the authorities of the president as wide and almost unlimited. Kebich was seen as the only possible candidate for this position. Here we see that the party of power basically provided the major political decision in the political transformation in Belarus (Koktysh, 1999; Kurtov, 1996).

However, at the elections 1994 the winner was A. Lukashenko. One of the reasons was the ideological weakness of the party of power that was not able to support its candidate at the elections. Both candidates, Lukashenko and Kebich, appealed to the values that were close to the communist and responded to the majority of the population. According to Fourman and his study of Belarus political system, the results of the elections were shocking for Kebich and the party of power (Frouman, 1998).

When Lukashenko comes into power it is clear that there should be a new party that supports the line of the president and this line. "The party of the people's agreement" could be compared with the Ukrainian NDP not only by the similar structure but also by the way it was organized. Some scientists describe PNS in Belarus as a party of political contract between the president and economic elite. PNS was the new party for the new

president. At this very period Belarus starts to move back towards authoritarian rule. The 60% in Belarus parliament were representatives of the party of power that allowed changing the electoral system, the media legislature as well as the law of the party. All the new changes were undemocratic, however, the people stay silent because Lukashenko is responsive to their demands and provides social and economic stability. Some of the Belarus scientists that publish their works in Russia tend to note that the current structure of the Belarus parliament is not a legislative organ any more it is a new party of power.

The study of this problem shows that the “party of power” in the contexts of the three political systems becomes a bureaucratic mechanism that depends on the relations with the executive branch, and in particular with the president. This kind of party substitutes real democratic mechanisms of the decision-making. Moreover, the “party of power” is not a party in its direct meaning, because it does not represent interests of the people.

It should be noticed that within the framework of the political system in transition the “party of power” becomes the institute that is created to provide stability and consolidation of political forces around the course of the president. The “party of power” creates quasi-democratic process when the presidential line is supported by the majority party, regardless the legality and resources of such a party. Such an organization creates a limited competition, where other political parties can exist, but do not have resources to

access the real process of the decision making. The “party of power” is also a mechanism to coordinate interests of different political groups.

The study of the three cases shows that there is always a connection between the executive and legislative powers. They do not check and balance each other, but rather executive power creates the mechanism to manipulate the legislature. In this case the party of power is not a natural process but a political project that receives the label of “party of power” from analytics that find common features in the process of the Slavic political systems in the post-soviet period.

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