

# Przemysław Maj, Waldemar Paruch

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## The concept of „political system” in political science research in Poland – aspects and controversies related to the concept’s definition

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Polityka i Społeczeństwo nr 5, 75-84

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2008

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej [bazhum.muzhp.pl](http://bazhum.muzhp.pl), gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

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**Przemysław Maj, Waldemar Paruch**

**THE CONCEPT OF „POLITICAL SYSTEM”  
IN POLITICAL SCIENCE RESEARCH IN POLAND  
– ASPECTS AND CONTROVERSIES RELATED TO  
THE CONCEPT’S DEFINITION**

**1. Theoretical controversies**

There is no consensus in political science research in Poland regarding a definition of the concept of political system, which stands in contrast to the universal use of the notion in academic papers falling into the sub-disciplines and domains of contemporary political sciences. The category in question is deployed in two manners – methodological and substantial. As a methodological category it is applied in scientific system analyses. It functions then as an analytical category, a theoretical abstraction, introduced into the scientific discourse by David Easton in 1953 and used ever since to analyze selected aspects of political reality which is conceived of in a holistic and systematic manner (Nocoń, Laska 2005: 112). As a substantial category, the notion of „political system” is applied in analyses of issues related to political regimes and institutional arrangements of contemporary states. In the latter case, it ceases to be a purely theoretical construction of a deductive nature. It refers to states existing in a historical time and geographical space which are studied through the lenses of principles, rules and constitutional features, on the one hand, and through the lenses of relationships between various elements typical of the states (institutional, axiological, social, economic), on the other.

In political science research, the differences between the two manners of usage of the category are only weakly emphasized. In the present paper we are interested in the second of the types of usage of the discussed notion. The choice is motivated by several factors. Firstly – the fact that many political scientists promulgate a false metho-

dological assumption according to which the meaning of the notion is clear-cut and uncontested, which is not at all the case in Polish political science. Secondly – because of the prominence of political processes occurring in a global scale at the turn of the twentieth and twenty-first century, captured by the term of systemic reconstruction (transformation), which have become a subject matter of both political debates and scientific discourse. Thirdly – because of the fact that researchers (political scientists, historians, lawyers) generally have acknowledged the existence of systemic pluralism established in the twentieth century by means of co-existence (most frequently conflictual) and transformation (resulting from *coup d'etats*, revolutions, controlled processes of change) of the three basic political systems – democracy, authoritarianism, totalitarianism. Starting from these assumptions, we have come to the conclusion that the lack of precise theoretical underpinnings referring to the definition of the concept of „political system” hinders or prevents creating typologies of political systems, classifying concrete cases (states) and making comparative analyses (Stachowiak 1997; Friszke 1996).

In the relevant academic literature as well as in the public opinion there function several concepts which are related to the notion of political system (Antoszewski, Herbut 1999: 507, 635–636; Wojtaszczyk 2002a: 284–316; 2002b: 359–378; Żebrowski, n.d.: 258–259; Fiala, Schubert 2000: 101–107; Dahl n. d.: 35–58). These concepts include: „political organization” (*ustrój polityczny*), „institutional organization of the state” (*ustrój państwa*), „political regime” (*reżim polityczny*), „system of government” (*system rządów*), „system of institutional organization” (*system ustrojowy*), and „constitutional organization” (*ustrój konstytucyjny*) (Gulczyński, Zaradny 2000; Czajowski *et al.* 1999; Sarnecki 2003). Any attempts at equaling the meaning inherent in the above listed concepts with that of the political system have to be seen as unjustified (Jakubowski, Załęski 2001: 233), because the alternative notions have a reductionist character. We tend to agree with Mariusz Gulczyński according to whom the introduction of the concept of political system into the scientific language is justified by developments in political activities. These are currently manifest in „variegated organizational forms, not only state-related, not only legitimized by law but also forms which are not included in regulations”, which makes the traditional concepts not fully adequate to explain mechanisms involved in the functioning of public life (Gulczyński 2004: 37). Even though we share this

methodological stance, we still believe that it is necessary to review some of the related concepts.

The concept of „political organization” (*ustrój polityczny*) is granted the broadest scope of meaning. It is used to define a „systemic whole” composed of three elements, including: 1) principles underlying the organization and functioning of the state; 2) structures of the organization of the state; 3) mechanisms of the state’s functioning. According to Wojciech Kotowicz, the organization of the state comprises two basic sub-systems – political and socio-economic, which logically means that the elements making up the organization of the state can be of different nature (Kuciński 2003: 14; Kotowicz n.d.: 219). Wiesław Skrzydło rejects in turn the second of the sub-systems as a research object deploying the notion of „political organization” (*ustrój polityczny*). According to him, the notion encompasses all principles referring to organization and functioning of political power in the state, excluding social and economic contexts. He lists the following principles: the status of an individual in the state, the indication of the sovereign, the manners in which the sovereign exercises its political authority in the state, the organizational structure of the state authorities and mechanisms of their functioning, relations between the organs of the public authorities (Skrzydło 1998: 11; Banaszak 2001: 14).

The concept of „system of government” (*system rządów*) has the narrowest scope of meaning. It is used to describe reciprocal relations between central institutions of the state, mainly between the organs of the legislative and executive branch of government (Skrzydło 1998: 12). Invoking the principle of tri-partite division of powers simultaneously means that the notion of a system of government may be applied only to democratic states. Only in such states, the application of the criteria inherent in the notion of a system of government, allows for distinguishing varieties of democratic systems – parliamentarian-cabinet, parliamentarian-committee, presidential and semi-presidential; the states may then also be divided into two groups – monarchies and republics.

The category of „political regime” (*reżim polityczny*) provokes most controversies because of the co-existence of two interpretative stances: institutional-functional and normative. Supporters of the first stance assume that the notion of political regime denotes institutional, functional and axiological frames of action by participants of political life as well as relations between the participants. In Waldemar

Żebrowski's view those are the rules defining relationships between state and non-state political actors (Żebrowski 2005: 25). We believe that in this case the meanings inherent in the notions of „organization” (*ustrój*) and „regime” (*reżim*) are identical, which is why we may differentiate on their basis between democratic, authoritarian and totalitarian states (Bäcker 1992; Paruch 2005). Marian Grzybowski and Andrzej Antoszewski understand the notion of political regime in a different manner. According to them, this concept (*reżim polityczny*) should refer, both in its general and specific application, only to democracies as political systems. They maintain that, interpreted in general terms, the notion of political regime means an „arrangement of relations between legislative and executive authorities”, described in a normative manner (Grzybowski 1999: 11; Antoszewski, Herbut 2006: 168–169; Antoszewski 1998: 15), while when interpreted in specific terms, it means a concrete model of division of powers in a state. By the same token, in the case of a democratic state we may speak of various political regimes: presidential and parliamentarian as well as hybrid solutions (semi-presidentialism, convent rule etc.).

## 2. Towards a definition

Proceeding to a discussion of various ways to define the notion of political system (Goduń *et al.* 1999: 7; Konieczny 1996; Wojtaszczyk 2004; Sulowski, Wojtaszczyk 2005: 8), it needs to be mentioned that there are five different approaches: institutional, institutional-functional, normative, communicative and functional (Deszczyński, Gołata 2000: 9–11). Within each of them different elements are claimed to be fundamental to a political system: either institutions, principles determining the functioning of institutions, norms delimiting relationships between institutions or circulation of information. An analysis of those approaches carried out by Przemysław Deszczyński and Krzysztof Gołata has produced a conclusion that there exist in political science literature three basic definitions of the concept of political system: structural, functional and functional-structural. Jarosław Nocoń and Artur Laska have contended, in turn, that instead one should rather speak of „ways to interpret the political system”, distinguishing between cybernetic, functional and institutional interpretative approaches (Deszczyński, Gołata 2000: 10; Nocoń, Laska 2005: 113). We believe that on the basis of research practice

(application of the notion in political science research), one could distinguish three definitional orientations/conceptions to define political systems: 1) structural-new institutional; 2) functional; 3) cybernetic.

Within the structural-new institutional orientation two methodological approaches to the concept of political system are merged: classical structuralism and new institutionalism. A political system is first of all perceived as a set composed of elements, such as political institutions (structures), relations between them, principles and norms regulating their functioning (Wojtaszczyk 2002b: 359; Nocoń, Laska 2005: 120). We might add that the main feature of the approach is, on the one hand, a tendency to point to particular elements of a political system, such as political parties or state organs, while, on the other hand, putting an emphasis on legal principles regulating relationships between the particular elements of the political system. Formal-legal foundations determining the character of the elements of the system and relations between them are the most important in this conception.

The functional orientation is based on an assumption that a key role is played by functions of the political system analyzed in two dimensions: functions of a whole vis-à-vis its environment and functions of some elements of the political system vis-à-vis its other elements. Within this orientation we may differentiate between various scientific approaches. Some researchers assume a behavioural perspective and stress that a political system is a dynamic social process taking place in the framework of particular communities of which the state is just one embodiment. The core function of the system involves transforming social stimuli into political decisions and actions. Other authors of definitions attach the most importance to mechanisms of the functioning of elements of a political system, irrespective of their characteristics and qualities. According to Żebrowski, a political system constitutes a „space within which whole political life of the state takes place” (Żebrowski 2005: 9). This space could be qualified by: a specific type of legitimate state authorities, a manner in which society is integrated, patterns of behaviour and a model of political leadership. Yet other experts on the issue stress the importance of relations occurring inside a political system as well as those between the given system and its environment. In this case, the concept of political system is understood as denoting a certain whole, made up of parts (sub-systems) which are mutually connected. The smallest, simple parts are called elements of the system, while relations between these elements

constitute its structure. The system is characterized by temporal changeability; it is also circumscribed by its internal dynamics and boundaries which separate the system from its external environment. The system is oriented toward adaptation, goal-attainment, integration and conflict resolution (Szostak 1999: 26; Nocoń, Laska 2005: 118).

The cybernetic theoretical approach takes into account not only the structure of the system as a whole but also sub-structures of which it is composed and particular elements as well as changes occurring inside the given structures and between the structures and their environment. In accordance with fundamental tenets of cybernetics, the system is both complex and ordered, it is both self-regulated and evolving. The most important sub-structures of thus defined political system include: political community, political regime and political institutions. A political system can exist and evolve only when the enumerated sub-structures and the elements of which they are composed are mutually integrated to an extent which enables decision-making.

Not delving deeper into the controversies, we now assume that a political system is a structure which (1) is composed of qualitatively different elements which are mutually related; (2) delimits the shape and features of public and private space and (3) delineates a border between them.

### **3. Two aspects – structural and functional**

Generally, the cybernetic approach to defining a political system is taken to be most typical of political science research. It seems neither overburdened with legal considerations (as the structural-new institutional orientation is) nor with theoretical interests dominated by psychological or social issues (as the functional orientation is). Nevertheless, the cybernetics-based definition should be complemented by pointing out particular building blocks of the political system.

According to the experts on the issue, a political system is constituted by all those objects which are politicized, irrespective of their ontologies. Taking types of the ontologies into account, we could list five groups of elements constitutive of a political system:

1. All institutions (organs) of public authorities (March, Olsen 2005: 9 and ff) which constitute the structure of the state. The structure includes: legislative authorities instanced by a two- or one-chamber parliament, with a reservation that we are also interested in the internal structure of the types of parliament; organs of executive power

instanced by the office of head of the state (monarch or president), government (federal or national in unitary states) and administration, including all kinds of state units and agencies as well as local representatives of the state; the institutions of justice, including – apart from courts – the police and organs of prosecution.

2. Non-state components of the political system, such as: political parties; territorial self-government and its institutions; pressure and interest groups including trade unions, lobbying groups; non-governmental organizations in as much as they are active in the field of politics; churches and religious associations; informal groups participating in political actions within the framework of the given state.

3. Values, principles and norms which have a legal and non-legal character, endowing the given political system with an axiological dimension.

4. Patterns of behaviour (activities) enacted by political actors.

5. Mechanisms of functioning, i.e. mutual linkages and dependencies existing between elements of the system as well as between the system and its environment, including the circulation of information.

In the political science literature, four sub-systems (dimensions) are distinguished within a political system: institutional, functional, regulatory and communicative (Ryszka 1978: 33; Antoszewski 1996: 73 and ff; Wojtaszczyk 1992: 8; 2002b: 360–363; Żebrowski 2005: 9–10). Political scientists believe that it is the structures constituting the institutional sub-system that endow the whole political system with substance and shape basic direction of its actions as well as determining norms acknowledged within the system. As Mariusz Gulczyński and Ryszard Zaradny state: „Permanently organized structures are the spinal part of a political system: institutions of the state, parties and organizations which perform the role of interest groups” (Gulczyński, Zaradny 2000: 11; Żebrowski 2005: 11–24). Moreover, as noted by James G. March and Johan P. Olsen, institutional structures in which politics is performed exercise a direct and indirect influence on it by having impact on competition rules and by affecting the state of the environment of politics (March, Olsen 2005: 27). The functional sub-system determines behaviour of the political system which is directed either at its survival or development by means of modernization or a radical change. This may include: the steering of political processes (regulative function), the resolution of conflicts inside the system (mediating function), an improvement in the functioning of institutions

(adaptive function), the transformation of the system environment (innovative function). The regulative sub-system determines, in turn, the character of norms obtaining in the political system, which decides about prevalent types of social behaviour and social relationships. The communicative sub-system is defined by Wojtaszczyk as all connections and relations existing between structures of the political system which determine the degree of the system's stability.

Functions performed by a political system constitute a major research issue. Żebrowski enumerates four functions: regulation, mediation, adaptation and innovation (Żebrowski 2005: 10). The execution of the functions by a political system emphasizes a reciprocal relation of the two concepts – the state and the political system. However, there are many ambiguities as far as the exact scopes of content of the two notions. According to Władysław Szostak, the state and organization of the state are forms of a political system (Szostak 1999: 28). Such an approach results in frequent identification of the state with the political system. In our opinion, however, the state and its apparatus can be seen as an important sub-structure of a political system, which does not mean that the state equals the political system.

A political system changes, i.e. evolves despite the fact that its typical tendency is to maintain its stability (Szostak 1999: 9–10). In any political system the governing elite fears undermining the system stability which, according to the rulers, decreases effectiveness of the system and may even lead to its delegitimization. The process of change is, nevertheless, inescapable – objectively speaking. It is related to the nature of political reality and occurs within the given system without affecting its identity as a result of reforms as well as by introducing new elements to the system structure. On the contrary, a revolution or a *coup d'état* involves a thorough reconstruction of the political system since such events are followed by liquidation of old constitutive elements of the system and abolition of principles which animated its functioning so far.

The system change is interpreted in a slightly different manner by Ziemowit Jacek Pietraś, who introduced a notion of political adaptation (Pietraś 1990; 1998: 58–59). In accordance with theoretical assumptions of this political scientist, political adaptation involves adapting the given political system to changing conditions, which is forced by the system's external environment, i.e. its international milieu. The process of adaptation is dynamic, which means that the political system is subject to permanent change. Hindered or

unsuccessful adaptation may result, in extreme cases, in the system's collapse and its dissolution. We could add that the process of adaptation is enforced and monitored by the political system's homeostatic element, i.e. its decision-making centre. An absence of the decision-making centre or its chaotic functioning is directly translated into the level of adaptive capabilities of the system as a whole.

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