
Functions of Power Elites in the Situation of Crisis

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Abstract:

Purpose: The aim of the article is to highlight analytically the nodal functions of the power elite, which are implemented in the situation of crisis situation. The separation of these functions is a consequence of relating the actions of the authorities in relation to social needs and expectations in emergency. The characteristics of these functions have been illustrated with references to the practice of political actions undertaken in selected countries.

Design/Methodology/Approach: The methodological basis for the analysis of these functions are the assumptions that contribute to the functional perspective of explanation, referring to the achievements of Talcott Parsons, Jeffrey C. Alexander and Niclas Luhmann. What is particularly important here is the interpretation of the function as a specific relationship between a group of elites and its social environment, which generates the imperative of specific directions of the power's action.

Findings: The strategic positioning of the elite in the power structure implies the implementation of key functions in the sphere of counteracting threats related to the crisis situation.

Practical Implications: The characteristics of the separate functions of the power elite may be the basis for empirical research aimed at analyzing and comparing activities undertaken in different countries.

Originality/Value: The original model for analyzing the activities of the power elite.

Keywords: Power elites, political functions, decision-making centre.

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1. Introduction

The crisis situation caused by the pandemic threat undoubtedly poses great challenges for governments all over the world. Thus, it prompts us to reflect on the functions that are performed in a crisis by state institutions and decision-making bodies as well as the power elites, who form their personnel and direct support. In this situation, the consequences of undertaken political actions are particularly significant and directly felt in the sphere of health and even lives of citizens. Epidemic threats and the related limitations in the functioning of society and state institutions are also serious challenges in the sphere of economic security, both in the production and services market, as well as in trade.

At the same time, state institutions of power operate in an emergency, under great pressure from public opinion and under the influence of unpredictable factors. Time issues and restrictions on access to information fundamentally affect decision-making procedures, including the potential effects of wrong choices, and the effectiveness and efficiency of actions taken. These factors contribute to the emergence of a crisis situation in which the actions of state structures under the influence of new problems verify their functionality in relation to the social environment. In political practice, it is expressed primarily by attempts to control the threats of the spread of the disease as well as the prevention and monitoring of the situation and the development of epidemic trends.

The effectiveness of these actions is a derivative of the quality of the power elite, which directly participate in decision-making procedures and are responsible for their effects (Boin, Hart, *et al.*, 2005). In this perspective, it is worth asking the following questions: What functions are performed by the power elites in the state? What is the implementation of these functions in a crisis situation and what impacts do they involve? The characterization of the role of the ruling elite in a crisis situation made in this way may become a useful analytically model for assessing the actions taken by the elites, the factors determining their effectiveness, as well as comparing actions in different countries.

2. Methodological Assumptions

The functional theories of the elite constitute a natural methodological perspective for the subject matter. They refer to the basic assumptions of functionalism, which, among various theoretical and methodological paradigms applied in the field of political science, created one of the well-established visions of the political world. In general, the aim of analytical work in this trend is primarily to study individual segments of the social system in terms of their impact on meeting the needs of the entire system, as well as determining the functions of individual elements of the social structure.

The key factor explaining the shape and duration of the social structure in the perspective of this orientation are the needs of the structure and its homeostasis. The main assumption of functionally oriented research analysis is based on the thesis that social phenomena are implied by needs both in the individual and group dimensions (Nocoń, 2010).

Social needs are, on the one hand, satisfied as a result of the occurrence of these phenomena, and on the other hand, phenomena taking place in the social space have the power to generate new, previously unseen social needs. This dependence is to a large extent the driving force behind the development of civilization, economic and political, and social systems. This position leads to the recognition of society as a functional unity, integrated on the basis of a catalog of universal needs of individuals and groups that make up it. A structure is formed in society, the elements of which are functionally oriented towards satisfying the needs and maintaining the stability of a given structure. Consequently, the functions performed by individual elements of the social structure are positive components of the system, and as such are essential for its existence.

The social system formed in this way is perceived as an ordered whole, the structural elements of which are interdependent with each other. The roles and status of individual elements of the social structure are functionally determined. From this perspective, functional approaches assume that the elite and social masses are complementary and coherent elements of the political system, which, mutually conditioning each other, co-define the nature of the implemented state tasks. The existence of the power elite is justified by the sphere of its influence, defined as functions. Their implementation is an essential element of the stabilization and development of the state, not only in its political dimension. Such a perspective makes it possible to formulate the basic assumption of functional elitism, according to which the power elite is perceived as a separate social layer, which, due to the functions performed in the political system, is a necessary and therefore inalienable element of its structure.

3. Elites in the Structure of State Authorities

The structure of influence in each country reveals the correctness of the concentration of power in elite groups. It is the people, not the institutions, that are responsible for the consequences of the decisions made. Thus, the effectiveness of actions taken in a crisis situation depends on the quality of the elite and the competences of those who contribute to it. However, the very structure of the elite may encompass different groups with varying influence on decision-making processes. In this context, it is worth analyzing the structure of political influence and characterizing individual groups of the elite.

The broadest concept of an influential group is the political elite. It includes politically active people who directly or indirectly shape the content of power

decisions. The elite consists not only of individuals and groups participating in the management and indoctrination of society, but also parts of their social base that exert political influence. Such a definition of the group of political elites is very fluid. This creates a risk of extrapolating the concept of the elite and identifying its scope with the concept of the political class. In order to define the scope more precisely, it can be assumed that the element delimiting the political elite is the moment of organizational institutionalization of political structures in the process of creating an accepted and legitimized social order. This stage of organizing a political movement determines the process of professionalization and, therefore, the elitization of political roles.

Thus, the scope of the political elite includes the leadership bodies that stand out in the organizational structures of political movements, and in certain situations the political influence of aristocratic or monarchical families, whose members exert behind-the-scenes, informal influence on ruling decisions. In this perspective, the political elite, apart from the most influential families, circles of state administration and other political organizations, can also be created by representatives of economic spheres and circles managing the mass information system.

A narrower term, falling within the political elite, is that of the power elite. It is made up of people who, due to their strategic location in the institutional structure of the political system, control political resources of decisive importance and thus gain the possibility of exerting the greatest influence on the shape and content of ruling decisions. The possibility of political influence of units forming the power elite is therefore closely related to the position held in the main political institutions and the competences assigned to these positions. The scope of the political elite interpreted in this way is determined by senior positions in the administration, including primarily members of the government, military commanders, heads of powerful economic enterprises and influential socio-cultural organizations. This corresponds roughly to the positional definition of the elite, which is the group of people occupying leading positions determined by the structure of state organizations and institutions.

When trying to define the concept of a ruling elite on the basis of the criterion of political influence, one must take the political decision as a reference point. The shape and content of the ruling decision, as long as it corresponds to the intentions of the decision-makers, will be verified by the ruling elite. The scope of the ruling elite thus determines the degree of dependency between the intention or will of the decision maker and the content of the decisions made. In this perspective, the ruling elite is made up of individuals who have an actual and real influence on the ruling decisions they make. The scope of the ruling elite does not have to coincide with that of the power elite in this context.

From the point of view of the public administration system, another type of elite can be distinguished, associated with the development of state bureaucracy, which

appeared with the spread of parliamentary democracy. It is about the bureaucratic elite, so it is not identical with the political elite or the power elite, although it strives to participate and exert influence over the government. It derives from a group of people formed from various professional categories, dealing with the organization of work and collective coexistence within the existing social institutions. The bureaucratic elite consists of people who, through their professional development or their career within the intelligentsia, have achieved high positions in the hierarchy of structures governing the economy, state administration, science, culture, etc. spheres of social life.

On the basis of the criterion of the function performed in the decision-making process, the following types are distinguished among the elites themselves: articulating elites - defining social needs and establishing goals and corresponding political values; influence elites - people who are not formally part of the power structure, but have a real impact on the course of the decision-making process and the content of decisions made, and decision-making elites - units occupying strategic positions in the state administration apparatus.

Taking these types into account, it can be assumed that both the location of the power elite, its personal composition, the form of organization, and the political role are implied by the nature of the functions for which there is a demand in a given country. Social needs and group interests determine the priorities of communities, shaping specific preferences in the choice or legitimation of individuals controlling the resources of power on their behalf. These preferences determine such criteria for the selection of political elites that predestine individuals with certain features, qualifications or talents, increasing the probability of political action, adequate to social needs (Verzichelli, 2018).

This regularity relates mainly to the performance of specific functions corresponding to specific conditions of the state. Each political elite, within the framework of system-wide, universal and continuous functions, also performs specific functions, differentiated due to the diversity of cultural, demographic and geopolitical conditions. This diversity is expressed in the different nature of projects for implementing social, religious, economic or financial policy.

The differentiation of functions performed by the political elite is a consequence of not only the differentiation of the subject of reference and the scope of these functions, but also of their importance for a particular state. In the political reality, shaped by the functioning of democratic political institutions, the interests of a specific social group are the main factor determining autotelic values and the selection of strategic goals by political elites. The nature of the links between the political elite and the rest of society is shaped by the forms of the political representation process. Taking into account the essential role that political organizations play in this process, the functionality of the elites towards the rest of society can be determined by the degree of performance of the functions of political

parties: elections, articulation of needs, political recruitment and the function of governing.

4. The Leading Role of Elites

A crisis is a situation that creates a particular social need for the phenomenon of leadership. In accordance with the previously adopted perspective of the reception of the political system through the prism of its functions, it is the separation of the leadership institution as the central state institution. The status of leadership is understood as the resultant of the system functions performed by this institution. Treating politics as a sphere of resource mobilization, serving the achievement of collective goals and adaptation to changes in the environment, is closely related to the organization and coordination of social activities by an institution specialized in this sphere, i.e., the public authority.

The systemic demand for these mechanisms is satisfied by the leadership layer separated within it, which, thanks to the available resources, creates conditions for effective collective actions based on integration, normative and coordinating factors. From this point of view, the institution of leadership turns out to be indispensable for the proper functioning of the political and social system in terms of the production of resources, the creation of support and compliance with collective goals.

In this perspective, leadership grows into an essential function and one of the main attributes of a political system. It is also an initial category, primary in relation to power. On the other hand, power becomes one of the aspects of leadership. The essence of a functional approach to political leadership is to perceive it as a system of mutual interactions in the process of achieving set goals and achieving preferred states. The key feature of leadership in this approach are its causative properties, expressed in the dispositions of behavior that create reality.

Three basic types of influence of political leaders can be distinguished here, characterizing their causative possibilities. They are related to the interpretation of reality, the possibility of its creation and conciliation, as necessary for effective action in the field of dispute resolution against the background of conflicting group interests.

Leadership is realized in the sphere of influencing other people, including the forms of their organization and administration. At the same time, however, it grows beyond the technological scope of organization management. In this context, leadership does not so much organize as creates a vision and strategies for the development of the organization, and also defines its social mission. In times of crisis, this prophetic role of the elite is particularly exposed. The ruling elite perform this function both at the level of state and party organization. It consists in creating group goals, motivating and inspiring collective actions and activating social resources. The creative function of the elites is particularly emphasized by J. Schumpeter, who wrote: *"in reality*

people never raise problems or make decisions in their affairs, but problems are raised for them and decisions are made for them that affect their fate" (Schumpeter, 2008).

As part of the leadership, each power elite, regardless of the nature of the society it represents, participates in the implementation of the main functions of this system and conditions the implementation of the functions of power, state and political organizations. This is due to the fact that the direct subject of any political action is always a person, and not an institution or organization. An organization can become a centre of imperative decisions if it obtains approval for its purposes both among its members and in the external environment. Thus, political organizations in practice perform the ruling functions of the elite.

In this context, the functions of political elites can be defined with reference to the functions of politics, state, power or political parties. The implementation of collective goals is inextricably linked to the axiological and integrating function, within which ideological, educational and socialization interactions are realized. The function of political socialization is expressed in the forms of influencing the political awareness of society, whether in an institutionalized form, e.g., through political education, propaganda, agitation, or in non-institutionalized forms, e.g. politicians' speeches, appeals, political disputes in the media, etc.

According to Lasswell, this is the most important function of the elite, which enables the effective organization and management of society (Laswell, 1938). Political education of the society is a consequence of deliberate educational activities carried out by the elite, and aimed at spreading and consolidating knowledge about politics, the political system and the conditions of undertaken and conducted political activities.

The aim of these undertakings is to create positive emotional attitudes as well as models of attitudes and functional behaviors towards authority. The process of political education, being a part of socializing interactions, is usually based on a set of ideas and values that make up the *virtus integrativa* of the political community. In this context, political elites are instrumental in establishing interpersonal and intergroup ties, bonding and uniting collectives into axiologically integrated social groups, guided by common needs, interests and corresponding political goals (Andre, 2012). As a consequence, these activities also contribute to the implementation of the function of political identification, developing a sense of identity and social role that is internalized by individuals and social groups.

As part of the axiological function, political elites perform such ideological functions, which include, among others, prophetic, visionary, platform-forming, conceptual, model-creating and symbolic interactions. These interactions shape new ideas, visions of social order, values and political goals, as well as development strategies and programs. In this perspective, the political elite, along with the

religious and economic elites, are one of the main factors shaping the social axiological system, social culture, and the nature and directions of development of the social system. The elites awaken the need for social acceptance for the aspirations, values and goals they express. Thanks to the disposal of information resources, they can disseminate it, thus shaping the public opinion. Thus, they significantly contribute to the uniformization of attitudes and the acquisition of identity and social identification within the political system.

These influences are related to the functions of the elites in the process of legitimizing power and the political system. Legitimization is one of the central processes in which the political system gains or loses stability. Naturally, the basic task of the ruling elite is to convince the public about its legitimate status. The role of the opposition elites is to question, question or diminish the foundations of the ruling camp in whole or at least partially. The clash of these influences consequently creates a greater need for the effectiveness of acquiring, consolidating and increasing the degree of legitimacy of political entities.

From this point of view, for example, the democratic consensus adopted by the elite as to the basic values, rules and principles of the political game also helps to legitimize democratic institutions and stabilize the system. It is also important that the legitimation process is based on attempts to rationalize the sources of power of a given political entity. The rationalization of power and a given form of political system is included in the arguments that justify the aspirations and strivings of elites who aspire to control the resources of power on behalf of specific political entities.

The process of shaping the political awareness of the society and the mechanisms of creating values in the field of political axiology make up the phenomena of shaping patterns of political culture. The mechanisms and channels used in the process of shaping political awareness, socialization and social education often take the form of institutions which, along with political ideas and values, form the core of political culture. By developing new ideas, values, norms, institutions, rules of coexistence and relations between social entities, the elites enrich political culture by giving it specific identity features, character and level. The forms, efficiency and functionality of these institutions can serve as a criterion for the separation, classification and evaluation of the political culture of a given social system.

Developing and strengthening the ideological identity of the society favours the regulatory and stabilizing functions of the political elite. The elites influence the pace, direction, scope and depth of social change. Thus, they modulate the relations between individual social entities, at the same time shaping the nature of the relations between them. It is expressed, *inter alia*, in the mediating function of the elite. By creating a platform for clash of group interests, they act as the main actors responsible for developing mechanisms of interaction between the parties to the conflict, projects for resolving it, negotiating strategies and the scope of concessions in the compromise negotiation process (Mourão, 2018).

Political elites in an arbitrary way decide both on the composition of persons responsible for resolving individual conflicts, and on the use of appropriate means for this purpose. In this perspective, political elites, as an element of the system regulating the sphere of contradictions of interests and social conflicts, prevent the destabilization and disintegration of the political community and to a large extent constitute both the framework of this community and its internal cohesion and homeostasis. This stabilizing influence of the elites is of fundamental importance and is even necessary for the proper functioning and development of the social system.

5. Organisational Functions of Elites

The managing function performed by the elite is expressed both in the process of coordinating political undertakings, organizing activities, planning them and controlling the degree of implementation. The development of long-term assumptions concerning the political strategy includes both the definition of tasks, political goals, summaries of social benefits and costs, as well as the main instruments and mechanisms of their implementation. It is related to initiating changes and inspiring group activities, stimulating the activation of human resources, as well as motivating social groups to implement political undertakings.

The controlling function of the elite is reflected, *inter alia*, in the powers of the parliament over the government executive. Regardless of the ruling elite, it is necessary to take into account the fact that the group of the political elite is the main reservoir of leadership staff and the center of recruitment and selection of its members. Political elites, having a decisive influence on the electoral regulations and shaping their form and content, define the rules and criteria for the selection of candidates, as well as the dates and methods of organizing elections. Thus, they largely control both the selection of ruling camps and their activity.

Coordinating function refers to the harmonization of activities of various forms and levels of representation of specific social groups. This allows for direct and indirect management of the entirety of political practice, implemented in the interest of individual social groups. Coordination of political activities is related to the development of communication mechanisms, both within the political elite, between individual elites, and between the elites and the rest of society.

The construction of appropriate information transmission channels and the control of their flow are a necessary element of organizing and coordinating political undertakings aimed at achieving socially important political goals. This is the result of the requirements of the political game. It is also the need to inform the public about the rationale behind the actions taken and the rationalization of decision-makers' actions in the political arena. The forms of information flow between individual entities have a significant impact on the definition and implementation of goals, which are made on the basis of the assessment of the degree of satisfaction of

social needs and interests that requires social consultation and then their aggregation and conversion into specific political proposals.

6. Decision-Making Function of the Elites

The regulatory function of the political elites is expressed, *inter alia*, in their decision-making and distribution powers. Political decision-making is one of the most important functions performed in the social system by the political elite. This is due to the essence of politics, which covers the planes of contradictory, often antagonistic aspirations and spheres of influence, striving to work out optimal systemic mechanisms of realizing group interests in given system conditions. All activities aimed at this goal are a consequence of the political decision-making process, understood as an act of non-random selection of one of the variants of political action. This choice, being conscious and deliberately directed, is always made by specific people from the group of political elites who are the main animators, creators and directors of decision-making processes.

The importance of the role of the decision-maker results from the consequences of the decisions made, which are manifested in shaping the principles of the political system, ideological and doctrinal assumptions of the implemented policy, and exerting influence on the form of the political system, defining goals, values and social aspirations. The aspirations and social values are defined in the form of legal norms, the establishment of which belongs to the part of the political elite forming the legislative bodies of the state. It is also up to the political elite to develop institutional forms that ensure compliance with the established legal norms as well as respect for ethical norms. Therefore, the political elite establish public utility institutions and define their competences, structures and functions.

A separate, fundamental function is performed by political elites in the area of distribution of social goods and values. Situation in the functional structure of the political system predestines the elite to the role of the main factor determining the methods, rules and spheres of material and non-material allocation of social goods. The priorities set by the socially accepted system of values are set by the political elite. They also determine the spheres of special privilege in accessing resources that enable satisfying the needs and pursuing group interests. Thanks to these competences, the political elites act as the main stimulator of development trends in individual sectors of the economy, animator of cultural life, guardian of social rights, civil liberties, or national and moral values, traditions, etc. By performing this function, the elites determine the specificity of the economic system, the type of economic relations, the type of ownership of the means of production and the nature of managing state resources (Firestone, 1996).

The functions and tasks of the political elites listed here, performed in the social system, can be operationalized into specific, detailed influences, adjusted to the specific conditions of a given social system and the adopted and conducted foreign

or internal policy. As part of internal policy, one can talk about economic, economic, financial and social functions. This polyfunctional character of the overall influence of the political elites contributes to their strategic location in the structure of the social system, assigning them one of the essential roles determining the existence of the system, its character, structure and quality.

7. Conclusion

The crisis situation exposes a special need for effective actions of the authorities. It is often associated with an elementary sense of threat and destabilization in socially sensitive spheres. In this perspective, the power elites, which are a functionally separate group of influence, play a strategic role in the decision-making processes and actions counteracting crisis situations. The characteristics of the functions performed show that the effectiveness of the way out of the crisis and dealing with its consequences depends on the efficiency of action and competences of the elite.

The functions of the power elites distinguished above make up a model for analyzing political activities that can be used in the description and characteristics of activities undertaken in the political practice of various countries. The description of the role of the elite in crisis situations outlined here exposes activities that can be the basis for the evaluation and comparison of politicians, regardless of the type of social organization and cultural conditions.

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