

POLITICAL SCIENCES

THE POLITICAL OPPOSITION: THEORETICAL PROBLEMS

Blaga Blagoeva

University of National and World Economy, Sofia, Bulgaria

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7621389>

Abstract

In the present article, the fundamental theoretical analyses of the political opposition are subject to interpretation at the level of its definitions and its place and role in the political process. The author systematizes the main classifications and models of the political opposition. An author's definition of the oppositions is offered and some fundamental conclusions and generalizations are made, connected with the need for future theoretical analyses and empirical research.

Keywords: *political opposition, opposition models, types of opposition, parliamentary opposition, secession*

1. INTRODUCTION

The analyses of the political opposition are a significant aspect of the problematic field of the political science. At the same time, the political opposition and its existence are part of the political practice. In this sense the research work on the theory and practical manifestations of the opposition are topical in a theoretical and practical aspect.

It is known that the political opposition is examined primarily in the English and American scientific literature (and more specifically in political sociology) in connection with the theory of elections and the theory of the political system. The reason for this fact is connected with a very important institutional characteristic of the political opposition: it is not a "tier" of power, nor is it a structure of power in an institutional sense. The political opposition is traditionally analyzed in three problematic situations: (1) during parliamentary elections; (2) during its activity in parliament (in the course of parliamentary sessions) and (3) in its activity in mass media.

The socio-political and economic changes in the East European countries after the end of the 90's of the 20th century have brought about an increase of interest in the topic of the political opposition and the need for topical analyses, generalizing the political practice in Eastern Europe. This is also the reason for the growth of interest in the political opposition during the last two or three decades, as well as its role in society and the Russian scientific literature, which leads to interesting analyses. In the Bulgarian scientific literature, the theoretical problems of the political opposition have not been examined independently.

The **chief aim** of the present article is to systematize and analyze the main theoretical contributions to the topic of "political opposition" at the level of the definitions of it, its place and role in the political process and the fundamental classifications and models.

The etymology of the concept of "opposition" leads back to the Latin word "oppositio" – confrontation. It is claimed that its wide use in a political context can be attributed to highly placed civil servants from the middle of the 18th century and was put to scientific use by Edmund Burke and Henry Bolingbrook (See: Рыжикова, 2021; Татаркова, 2013). The use of the

term "opposition" in the political parlance is associated with England and the well-known deferential expression "the opposition of His Royal Majesty, the King", despite the term having a strongly negative connotation for quite a while (Пономарева, 2002).

The problems of the political opposition can be found in the works of a number of well-established researchers, such as: Francois Guizot ("On the Means of Government and of Opposition in Modern France", 1821), Moisey Ostrogorsky ("Democracy and the Organization of Political Parties", 1902), Maurice Duverger ("The Political Parties", 1951), Charles Mills ("The Ruling elite", 1956), Jean-Paul Sartre ("Critique of Dialectical Reason", 1960), Robert Dahl ("Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition", 1971), Peter Bromhead ("Evolution of the British Constitution", 1978) and others. However, classical theoretical examinations of the opposition are considered "Political Opposition in Western Democracies" (collection under the editorship and with the participation of R. Dahl, 1966); "Opposition: Past and Present of the Political Institution", 1968 by Gita Ionesco and Isabel de Madariaga; "Political Opposition in One-Party States", 1972 by Leonard Shapiro; "The Opposition in Eastern Europe", 1979 by Rudolf Tökes (comp.).

2. EXPOSITION

In the present article, a theoretical interpretation is given to the following problems: the approaches to analysis of the political opposition; the boundaries of defining the opposition on the part of various researchers; the models and classifications of the political opposition ensuing from the definitions in question and the explicit generalization of the role of the opposition in the political process.

2.1. Approaches to analysis of the political opposition

The problem of the approaches to the analysis of the opposition is important because the ways in which the analysis is carried out determine the definition fields of each phenomenon, including the opposition. Various approaches can be identified in the analyses of the political opposition. The variety of approaches to the phenomenon of political opposition is actually a reflection of its complexity and multi-aspectual character.

According to E. Rijkova there are two approaches to the political opposition:

- The first approach treats political opposition as an element of the political structure of society and its political institution (this is the so-called institutional approach). The opposition is analyzed from the viewpoint of its institutionalization and the degree of its organizational structure. According to this approach, the focus is on the means and ways with which the opposition influences the political power and its degree of impact on the power structures. The approach, herein mentioned, defines the forms of opposition as systematic and non-systematic, while the opposition defines itself as parliamentary/non-parliamentary or as legal/illegal.

- The second approach analyzes the opposition as a behavioral predisposition of a person, group or organization towards manifestation of dissent concerning the existing political regime or the official state policy. This approach lays the accent on the social base of the opposition, the values, shared by the opposing groups, the behavioral activities and the conditions for transformation of the latent forms of opposition into active ones (Рыжикова, 2021). This approach is provisionally defined as behavioristic.

Another researcher – P. Vasilevski – extends the number of the approaches to analysis of the opposition and refers to them as:

- Institutional – it interprets the political opposition as an organized group, united on the basis of the common character of interests and values, which struggles for domination in the system of the state power with the ruling elite;
- Etymological – it lays the accent chiefly on the confrontation as a key characteristic of the opposition;
- Communicative – it regards the opposition as an alternative of the political power, in possession of specific meaningful, political and socio-cultural codes, determined by the minority, which are not shared and accepted by the majority;
- Structural and functional – it regards the opposition as a specific mechanism, ensuring feedback between society and the ruling elite (based on T. Parson's theory).

The author concludes that the rationalization of the opposition must be based on its role and status in the political system of society. Historically speaking, there are two types of approaches, connected with the evaluation of the role of the opposition: (1) the opposition as a pathology in the political world and a response to an imperfect state and political model, and (2) the opposition as a natural and legitimate structure in the system of the relations between “political power and society” (Василевский, 2018).

In our modern times, the political opposition is regarded as a crucial element, characteristic of both democratic and non-democratic political systems.

2.2. Analyses and Definitions of the Opposition

The analyses of the political opposition, which are best known in the scientific literature, are connected with the research work, done by Robert Dahl, Leonard

Shapiro, Rudolf Tökes, Gita Ionesco and Isabelle de Madariaga, Otto Kirchheimer, G. Sartori, Natalie Brack and Sharon Weinblum.

2.2.1. Robert Dahl

Dahl analyzes the political opposition within the framework of his polyarchy theory by analyzing the political opposition only in bi-party and multiparty systems. An important characteristic of polyarchy is the attitude towards conflicts in the political system, which are regarded as unavoidable, but constructive elements of the system. The possible sources of conflict in the system of democracy are: (1) the development of technologies; (2) the development of the social and economic institutions of society and (3) the development of citizens' ideas and beliefs. For the researcher, the political conflict is not only unavoidable, but also desired, because it helps in the development of the system. Dahl, however, points out that the system does not need “drastic conflicts” which could threaten it. In this context, the conflict is defined as sharp and drastic, if “most people from each of the two sides regard the other one as an enemy and want to do way with it regardless of the means involved (Dahl, 1967). Proceeding from these assumptions in his book “Political Oppositions in Western Democracies”, Dahl put forward the question: “How to handle and manage the political conflict?” and answers it by stating that this is a **task of the political opposition** (Dahl, 1966).

Dahl's definition of the political opposition is relational and hypothetical: “1) Let us assume that **A** determines in some aspect the behavior of the government of a given political system during some period of time; 2) Let us also assume that during this period **B** is unable to determine the behavior of the government and that **B** opposes the behavior of the government through **A**; then **B** is what is called an opposition” (Ibid., p. 71). By all means, in another time period **B** can determine the behavior of the government and then **A** will be in opposition, Dahl points out.

It is evident that Dahl does not regard the opposition as a structure in an institutional sense of understanding, but rather analyzes it judging by its role concerning the possibilities of exerting influence over the policy of the government.

Proceeding from the role of the political opposition, R. Dahl distinguishes between two types of opposition.

(1) *Active* – it functions in the cases when **B** undertakes a carefully planned course of action aiming to modify the activity of the government;

(2) *Passive* – it functions when **B** recognizes the conflict between itself and the government, but deliberately does not undertake any action aiming to change the government's behavior (Ibid., p. 73-74).

In “Political Oppositions in Western Democracies”, the scientist subjects to analysis only the active opposition. Analyzing the active opposition, Dahl offers certain *criteria*, based on which, he distinguishes and defines *models* of political opposition. The following table presents systematically the criteria, suggested by the author, and their corresponding models of opposition. See Table 1.

Table 1.

Models of political opposition, according to R. Dahl

Criteria	Models
1. Coherence (concentration) of the opposition	<u>4 models of opposition</u> 1) In a bi-party system with a high degree of unity inside the party (Great Britain); 2) In a bi-party system with a relatively low degree of unity inside the party (North America); 3) In a multiparty system with a relatively high degree of unity inside the party (Sweden, Norway, The Netherlands); 4) In a multiparty system with a relatively low degree of unity inside the party (Italy, France)
2. Competitiveness of the opposition	<u>3 types of strategies, determining the models of behavior:</u> 1) Confrontation during elections and in parliament between the opposition and those in power; 2) Collaborationism during elections and in parliament; 3) Mixed – confrontation during elections and collaborationism in parliament
3. Possibility for conflict between the opposition and the groups who control the government	<u>3 types of possibilities for conflict, determining the models of behavior (only in parliament)</u> 1) The opposition persuades the government to take a certain decision; 2) Initiative on the part of the opposition to impose a decision on the government; 3) Coercion on the part of the opposition concerning the taking of a certain decision by the government
4) Self-knowledge of the opposition	<u>4 problem zones, connected with the dichotomy of liberalism-conservatism, determining models of behavior and connected with the political culture;</u> 1) Concrete v/s abstract (or empiricism and pragmatism v/s abstractness and rationality); 2) Economic problems v/s political and civic freedoms; 3) Internationalism v/s isolationism; 4) Innovation v/s tradition
5) Goals of the opposition	<u>2 types of goals of the opposition, determining models of behavior:</u> 1) Long-term (dominant) goals – referring to the gaining of the power; 2) Short-term (controlling) goals-referring to the composition of the government, the policy of the government, the structure of the political system, the socio-economic structure.
6) Strategies of the opposition (perceived as means which the opposition uses to accomplish its goals)	<u>6 types of strategies of the opposition, determining models of behavior:</u> 1) Focusing on the competition for gaining enough support in parliamentary elections, for majority in parliament and for forming a government; 2) Focusing on the neutral electorate and joining a ruling coalition; 3) Focusing on representation and participation in quasi formal negotiations and influencing lobby groups (USA); 4) Focusing on exerting influence at the level of relations between legislative and executive power, small parties, central and local institutions of power (USA) 5) Focusing on the preservation of the political system when it is threatened by internal crises or coup d'états; 6) Focusing on the destruction of the existing political and constitutional system (revolutionary opposition)

Source: Author's table

Another interesting idea of R. Dahl, concerning the opposition, is the idea of typifying it, based on the type of political system and its accompanying political culture. Thus, the researcher, defining two hypothetical types of political systems – Anglo-American (he incu-

des also the Scandinavian countries in it) and Mediterranean (mainly represented by Italy and France), typifies the political opposition and defines its main characteristics. The following table presents the general characteristics of the opposition in the two types of political system, according to Dahl. See Table 2.

Table 2. Characteristics of the political opposition in the Anglo- American and the Mediterranean types of political system

Type of political system	Characteristics of the opposition
Anglo-American	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Support for a stable government; 2. Staunch support of the political institutions and the constitutional rules; 3. Advocates of evolutionary social changes 4. Advocates of a factual analysis, i.e. there is no ideological system analysis
Mediterranean	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The opposition achieves its goals even if this leads to instability of the government; 2. “the rules of the game” (constitutional rules) may be changed, if this is what the goals of the opposition require; 3. Achievement of the structural power and social changes even if this requires revolutionary means and ways 4. Advocates of ideological analysis (strong ideological colouring)

Source: Author’s table

R. Dahl’s analysis of the political opposition is the first system analysis and contributes to the theory of the political opposition with the following: (1) it defines the political opposition; (2) it analyses the opposition on the basis of its role and functions in the political system; it defines different models of opposition, based on a system of developed criteria, and (4) it typifies the opposition on the basis of the type of political system and political culture.

2.2.2. Leonard Schapiro and Rudolph Tokes

What the two authors have in common is that they analyze the political opposition in the Eastern European country during the period of the totalitarian communist regime.

L. Schapiro analyzes the political opposition in the one-party systems, proceeding from M. Duverger’s classification of political systems into one-party, bi-party and multiparty ones. According to Schapiro, it is necessary to analyze the process of government “not only in the light of what people in power try to do and actually achieve, but also concerning those who oppose these goals or whose interests and resistance must be reconciled, before those in power can act” (Schapiro, 1966, p. 2), i.e. the role of the opposition must also be analyzed.

In his book “Political Opposition in One-Party States”, Schapiro defines three main reasons for the emergence of a political opposition in the states with one-party political systems. They are (1) the economic insecurity in the countries; (2) the existing obstructions on the way to social mobility and (3) delay of the fulfillment of the promises for improving the quality of life on the part of the ruling party.

The author provides the following definition of political opposition: “an organized political group (groups), whose goal is to oust the existing government from power and substitute it for a new one, elected by it” (Schapiro, 1972, p. 345). Thus, Schapiro regards the political opposition from the perspective of a specific field of action – the parliament, a concrete participant – the party of the minority, a concrete opponent – the

government, and a concrete goal – taking the political power. The above-mentioned approach is not much different from Dahl’s approach. However, Schapiro distinguishes the political opposition from another critic of the official political power – the dissidents. The author refers to the dissidents as “... unorganized political group for political action, who does not aim to substitute the existing political regime, nor does it aim to gain the right of exercising the political power. Its aim boils down to criticizing, giving advice, convincing and desiring to be heard by those in power” (Ibid., p. 346). Therefore, the main differences between the opposition and dissidents are determined by the degree of organizations and the attitude towards the exercising the political power (or not exercising it).

R. Tokes and the authors of the collection “The Opposition in Eastern Europe” analyze the historical emergence, goals and strategies of the political opposition after the imposition of the communist regimes in Hungary, Poland, Czechoslovakia, the USSR, and East Germany (DDR). In the collective work are identified *four main forms of opposition in Eastern Europe*, which are made concrete for the separately analyzed states. They are:

(1) *Integral opposition* (from the mid 40’s to the mid 50’s of the 20th century)- it is represented by the bourgeois political parties, subjected to ostracism and persecution, which are forced to retreat from political participation;

(2) *Factionary opposition* (from the mid 50’s to the mid 60’s of the 20th century) - it is connected with the faction stratification in the ruling communist parties and the fight for political influence among them;

(3) *Fundamental opposition* (from the mid 60’s to the mid 70’s of the 20th century) – it presents a particular unification of the oppositional attitudes of the working class with the dissidents of the intelligentsia.

(4) *Specific opposition* (from the 70’s of the 20th century) – it is connected with a development of the above-mentioned forms of opposition and their attempts for organizational unification (an example of

such an opposition is the “Solidarity” trade union in Poland) - (Tokes, 1979).

The concept and understanding of political opposition, presented in the cited book is maximally wide and includes all forms of dissent with the official political power.

2.2.3. *Other analyses*

As we have already mentioned, there are also other analyses of the political opposition, although small in number. Without any claims for comprehensiveness, we present some more popular studies.

- Gita Ionescu and Isabel de Madiaraga, in their book “Opposition: Past and Present of the Political Institution”, succinctly define the opposition as “logically and morphologically ... a dialectical double of the political power” (Ionescu and de Madiaraga, 1968, p. 2). The authors analyze the parliamentary opposition, because, in their opinion, it is “the most advanced and institutionalized form of political conflict” (Ibid., p. 9). Consequently, the analysis is in the common paradigm of the institutional understanding of the political opposition. According to Ionescu and Madiaraga, “the term ... must be used in situations, in which the opposition is not only allowed to function, but (certain) functions are entrusted to it. Thus, it turns into an institution... higher institution of a completely institutionalized political society and (becomes) a criterion for these societies, which are referred to with different names: democratic, liberal, parliamentary, constitutional, pluralistic, and even open and free” (Ibid., p. 12). It can be inferred that in the authors’ opinion, the political opposition is a part (characteristic) of democracy.

- Otto Kirchheimer and Giovanni Sartori analyze the types of opposition. Thus, for example, Kirchheimer distinguishes among three different types (kinds) of opposition: (1) “*classical* “or “*loyal*” *opposition* – it offers an alternative to the exercised policies while at the same time it recognizes the right of the government to rule and support the existing constitutional system; (2) *opposition of principles* – this is an opposition, opposing both the government’s policy, and the constitutional requirements of the political system; and (3) “*political competition*” – here, the oppositional group competes with the current team holding the political power, but it does not offer alternative goals and objectives, different from those of the government (Brack and Weinblum, 2009). G. Sartori also distinguishes between the “normal” opposition from its deviant form. According to him, the “real” opposition involves agreement on a fundamental level, which is an agreement on the level of community and political regime. It opposes the “government but not the political system as such and acts quietly and constructively by opposing but not obstructing. Along with this “constitutional opposition”, he identifies another type of opposition: the anti-system opposition which contests the legitimacy of the regime, such as it is. The latter opposition acts “irresponsibly”, since it does not have the chance of gaining the political power and taking responsibility for the policy (Sartori, 1966, p. 151).

- Nathalie Brack and Sharon Weinblum, proceeding from the classical analyses of the opposition and taking into account the modern tendencies towards

a wider view of this political phenomenon, offer an expanded definition of the political opposition. The authors understand the political opposition to mean:

- ✓ “Any organized and active subject – parliament, political party, unrepresented political formations, trade unions, social movements;

- ✓ Expressing a position, different from the official one in the public sphere – government, parliament, media, and others;

- ✓ Anyone who constantly or timely checks out, informs, and criticizes the current state of things by using various non-forcible modalities – legislative processes, parliamentary questions, press releases, mobilization of media, social protests, demonstrations etc.;

- ✓ Any activity, whose critical targets are the government and/or its policy, and/or the political elite, and/or the political regime as a whole” (Brack and Weinblum, 2009).

The above-cited definition is maximally comprehensive and includes a wide range of subjects, their roles and various forms of activity in politics. In it the oppositional activity is targeted not only at certain political subjects, but also at the political system and its corresponding regime.

3. GENERALIZATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Based on the above-mentioned analyses of the political oppositions, some generalizations and conclusions on the topic can be made.

First. The political opposition is an element of the political system and a subject of the political process. It exists – either overtly, or in latent forms – in every political system – both democratic and undemocratic. Its main role is to criticize or correct the political power and the official policy, regulate the conflicts in society and/or offer alternative policies and solutions. The forms of activity, sphere of action and means, used by the opposition, are different and depend on both its organizational state, and the type of political culture and existing traditions.

Second. The functions of the political opposition are numerous and are mainly connected with the following:

- ✓ Offering various political alternatives in parliament and in public;

- ✓ Expressing the interests of its adherents;

- ✓ Offering alternatives to officially passed bills in parliament and governmental decisions;

- ✓ Participating in parliamentary and social debates by searching for constructive approaches;

- ✓ Evaluating and critically commenting on the suggested legislative initiatives from the standpoint of its goals;

- ✓ Commenting critically the governmental policy and the activities of the state administration;

- ✓ Contributing to guaranteeing transparency and control over all stages of the political process;

- ✓ Contributing to analyzing and guaranteeing the legitimacy of conflicts.

Third. The classification of the political opposition is carried out on various criteria and is connected with the type of political system and goals of the oppo-

sition. The following table presents a possible classification of the opposition according to certain criteria. See Table 3.

Table 3.

Classification of the political opposition	
Criteria	Types of opposition
1. Spheres of activity	Parliamentary Non-parliamentary
2. Degree of participation	Active Passive
3. Attitude to the political system	System Anti-system
4. Positions, connected with its constitutional regulation	Legitimate Illegitimate

Source: Author's table

Fourth. The additively political opposition can be defined in the following way: an organized group of subjects (actors on the political stage), united by common interests, values and goals, opposing the official subjects of the political power and expressing by various means criticism and dissent with the government and its policy, the political system, or political regime. The political opposition is a carrier of various alternatives for social development and public policies. Its long-term goal is to take over the power resources in the political system (See: Татаркова, 2013, p. 115).

The problems of the political opposition will play important part in future political analyses, both at the level of theory, and the level of the empirical analysis of the activity of the various manifestations of the opposition. Particularly productive would be the analyses of the political opposition in concrete and specific national frameworks – the classical and new democracies and the non-democratic political systems.

References:

1. Василевский, П. Теоретико-методологические аспекты изучения феномена политической оппозиции (2018) - <https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/teoretiko-metodologicheskie-aspekty-izucheniya-fenomena-politicheskoy-oppozitsii>. (Accessed: 03 June 2022)
2. Пономарева, В.В. Ins and Outs: Институт парламентской оппозиции в Великобритании
3. XVIII в., в: Правоведение, 2002, № 3.
4. Рыжикова, Е. Политическая оппозиция: определение, сущность, подходы к изучению

(2021) - <https://zaochnik.com/spravochnik/sotsiologija/politicheskaja-sotsiologija/politicheskaja-oppozitsija/>. (Accessed: 03 July 2022)

5. Татаркова, Д.Ю. Оппозиция: суть политического феномена, в: Вестник РУДН, серия Политология, 2013, № 3.

6. Brack, N., Weinblum, Sh. What do we mean by “political opposition”: a theoretical perspective (2009) <https://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:ODYYYetPq6owJ:https://di-pot.ulb.ac.be/dspace/bit-stream/2013/44841/1/what%2520do%2520we%2520m> (Accessed: 01 July 2022)

7. Dahl, R. Pluralistic democracy in the United States: conflict and consent, Publisher: Chicago, Rand McNally, 1967.

8. Dahl, R. Political Oppositions in Western Democracies, Published by New Haven / London, Yale University Press., 1966.

9. Ionescu, G. and de Madariaga I. Opposition - Past and Present of a Political Institution, London, The New Thinker Library, 1968.

10. Sartori, G. Opposition and Control Problems and Prospects, Government and Opposition, vol.1, n°1, 1966.

11. Schapiro, L. (dir.), Political Opposition in one-party States, London, Macmillan, 1972

12. Schapiro, L. “Foreword” in Government and Opposition, vol.1, n°1, 1966.

13. Tokes, R. (Editor), Opposition in Eastern Europe, Johns Hopkins Univ. Pr., 1979.