

UNDERSTANDING INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS THROUGH: SYSTEM APPROACH

System approach as a methodological tool of analyzing International Relations has gained great importance in the lexicology of political science. The meaning of this term is said to be quite imprecise and vague, but it become used wider. To better understand the main feature of the system approach in International Relations often is used the “international system”. The researches in the field developed basic framework to establish the basis on which the international arena can be regarded as a system. They regard not only nation-states, but also individuals as international actors, always standing in interaction with each other making the whole world as an organized complexity. Therefore, system approach contributes to understand and analyze International Relations as a system of interactions which are interdependent and interrelated.

The system approach is one of the methods of contemporary scientific knowledge. System approach can be used for an overall view of the relations among nations and for achieving the objective of theory-building in international politics. The emergence of system approach to the study of International Relations can be described as one of the most significant developments of the 20th century. Immediately after its birth, the system approach captured the interest of a large number of modern political scientists. They began using it as a convenient tool for a large scale of analysis of the political phenomena in the world.

Through system research methodology can be determined the level of organization and functioning mechanisms of complex objects and their interactivity. The experience of modern science shows that the most compelling and complex description of the object is obtained when it appears as a system. Ever since its introduction in the late 1950's, the system approach has been regularly used by a large number of political scientists for analyzing relations among nations. Using the scientific method is associated „with studying the processes that conditioned the formation of a system” [11]. E.Markarian called system approach as „one of the fundamental strategies of the research, from historically point of view caused by the need to explore systems through cognitive resources” [10]. In the opinion of Russian scientist Iu.Urmančev any object can be studied through systemic methodology. Every system operates, develops and is transformed into other systems based on certain laws of composition. Those laws ensure the unity and stability of the function and development of the system and represent the conditions faced by elements and the relationships between them [13]. All elements

that are in mutual connection and relationship and which form a whole constitute a particular system.

Before discussing system approach, it is important to have a clear understanding of the concept of “system”. Also, as defining system approach, there is no unanimity on the exact meaning and implications of this term. However, it refers to a structure of its own, having different parts which are interconnected and interdependent, which undergoes various processes to maintain its existence. Therefore, system implies not only the inter-dependence of parts but also the influence from environment and bidirectional flow. Inter-dependence means that when the properties of a component in a system change, other components and the system as a whole are affected.

In order to make our meaning clear, we will give an example of European Union system model. We will refer to key categories, such as structure and system. Any system has a structure which establishes the organization of interactions and relationships between all elements of the system that determines its functionality. Regarding the relation between structure and system, there is no structure in general, as there was no such EU system previously, but only the elements that make up the system. In other words, the elements of the system determine its structure. The founding states of EU had determined initially the structure of the system: an EU member can become only European countries in terms of geography.

Obviously the structure may have some transformations of the elements without affecting the structure of the system. Although Norway is not an EU member because of a national referendum in which Norwegians were against joining the EU, it implements all common European policies at national level incorporating European legislation, being a signatory to the Schengen agreement for cooperation in terms of border control [3].

However, even structure does not react immediately to any variation of the elements. An example is the adoption of any rule in the EU, which suffers changes from proposal moment till coming into force. Obviously the system structure influences the behavior of the elements and determines their qualitative changes. EU Member behaviors are influenced by a number of common European standards preset in interaction with other EU countries, or from outside. Qualitative changes that had occurred in the elements have been named “European standards”, which means set of norms, rules, behaviors and qualitative results.

A system approach views the system as a “holon” – an entity that is itself a part of a whole. It interacts with other holons in its wider environment [7], while also being made up of interacting parts. We can use this model recursively – each part of the system may be a system in its own right, and can itself be viewed both as an entity as seen from outside, and as a set of interacting parts. This model also

applies in understanding the interests of the system elements and their interaction in order to fulfill and promote their interests.

To be more explicitly, we could mention that the existence of many states portends a permanent struggle for the maintenance of political independence, territorial integrity and economic interest. States appear naturally selfish because their inherent desire to pursue their interest in competition with other states. The efforts towards the achievement of national interest over the years have made the international system an arena of survival struggles. This call for concerted efforts by the leadership of various nation-states manifests in making decisions that would enhance their interests in the system. National interest, therefore, becomes a conflicting issue because some interests are not actually for the nation but are self-centered. Especially, where wide consultations or due considerations are not made to determine meaningful outcome or prospects for enhanced development and improved living standard. However, in spite of the embedded conflict surrounding the concept of interest, the fact still remains that all states, no matter their geographical locations, size or population, economic status have interests, and these interests are expressed mostly in their behavior in International Relations.

Another consequence of the holistic nature of a system approach is that it considers not only a problem situation and a solution but also the system is created and deployed to apply one to the other. A systems approach must consider both the boundary of the system of concern as well as the boundary of the system inquiry.

International Relations system is always open, due to the fact that it interacts with the environment. Contrary, regional systems are mostly closed due to resource constraints and boundary limit. So there is an ongoing negotiation to relate elements in system structure and to succeed there is a need to understand the difference between them. Thus, a system approach can be characterized when it considers problems and holistically, sets problem boundaries, understanding the elements relationships and trying to avoid unwanted consequences. The setting of solutions based on system principles, should reduce organized complexity and unwanted emergent properties.

By the other hand the reducing of organized complexity won't be a perfect solution, because according to System theory the world is a system which involves an organized complexity [4]. This system is regulative and adoptive. It is known that each system exists for certain purposes, and, it is for the attainment of these purposes that it adopts and regulates itself to the environment. The system approach conceives nations which come in contact to form a complicated relationship resulting from the phenomenon of interaction. The activities of a nation are always directed towards the preservation of its national interest. But at the same time nations live with one another. They live in an international environment and participate in that environment. The behavior of a nation is thus

a “two way activity of taking from and giving to the international environment” [8].

The features of implementing the system approach in understanding International Relations are derived primarily from the analyzed object. One main characteristics of the IR is that by nature they are social relations, which shows that the international system is a type of social system. This means that the system could not be compared by analogy with the analysis of mechanical system. The structure of a social system is open and badly organized due to the fact that decision making process is based mostly on leader or a small group of people. The system based on social relations conditions the occurrence of international society [2], one that not only forms a system, but established through dialogue and consent common rules and institutions for relationships and recognize their common interest in maintaining these commitments. Any international society, just as the international system, is defined by the great powers and their interaction. It seems to us that none could exist without other, as seen in some historical events that changed the nature of relations between the great powers and held reconfiguration of power relations and in developments of international society.

Another feature of international relations that can be researched through system approach is that they are made by social groups and individuals. It follows that the international system is a system of interaction between people who are guided in their actions by desires, conscience, values, etc. This means that, as pointed out by Robert S. Cohen [12], the determinants of the international system are associated with phenomena such as selection, motivation, perception, etc. International Relations theory, in general, had ignored the role of individuals in shaping the international system. Instead, scholars have tended to favor system theories that explain the behavior of actors, generally viewed as states, as a product of anarchy in the international system. But we do not deny the role of Hitler on configuration the international system. Sometimes, we witness major transformation on international arena due to the influence of one major individual, or because of his/her interaction.

Another common feature of international relations, which must necessarily be considered in a system approach, is that they are primarily political relations, which remain the main point of interaction between countries. Therefore, for example, the core of the international system is a global system of international relations. Regarding the specific characteristics of international relations, the most important of them is that they are characterized by a lack of sovereignty and “pluralism of sovereignty”. A characteristic related to international systems at low levels of external and internal centralization. In other words, the international system is a special type of social system characterized by low degree of integration of the elements and considerable autonomy to these elements.

The degree of autonomy is not absolute; International Relations are characterized by conflicts of interest, but also by existence of interdependent actors. And integrated society in turn is not exempt from conflict, which under certain conditions, can make it look as anarchy in International Relations, including possible disintegration as we have seen in the example of disintegration of the USSR. Since the end of the Cold War, we have been witnessing the emergence of new types of conflicts. These are progressively more complex, but are, still too often, conceptualized and approached simplistically, using a linear type of reasoning. Complexity is disregarded, and the need for systemic thinking is underestimated, rarely leading to disastrous results. Feedbacks are most often ignored, and the complex dynamics which make a conflict to change over time, following often unpredictable paths, are rarely taken into account. Without a system and holistic framework, decisions may worsen the conflict, resulting in increased and prolonged suffering for the involved populations, and the analysis may lead to poor and mislead understanding of the conflict's dynamics and perspectives [6].

In the same time we have to pay attention to some shortcomings and limitations of applying a system approach in the study of International Relations. A system approach makes concept cause essentially meaningless. In other words, it provides an opportunity to get rid of mechanical determinism. This is particularly important for understanding International Relations that constantly interact with diverse phenomena, events, situations and processes. Relying on multiple levels of causality, it became hard to understand International Relations only under the system theory, due to both quantitative and qualitative constituent elements.

However, system approach has little success in analyzing International Relations. It could be named only two areas in which positive results were undeniable: in policymaking and decision-making process of international politics [12]. The other achievements have been modest. From epistemological point of view, this happened because any system that has reached a certain level of complexity cannot be known entirely. Therefore a system approach is considered as a method of determining the state of system to identify different ways to combination of its elements, but as soon as the researcher goes beyond relatively simple systems, the results are significantly reduced. So, even there is a classification in 5 types of international systems, determined by the history events, as usually a conflict or war, there is no certainty that there won't more other determinant elements of the international system. In accordance to that, the classification made by R.Rosecrance [5] could be a better one, because he took into account more determinant feature than other researcher. The historicity of a system is manifested by the appearance of the development, its evolution or involution. The duration of this system depends on the strength, quality and

quantity of information transmitted through the processes and interaction between elements.

On the strength of the using of the system approach in international relations there were identified some common characteristics of international systems. First of all, an international system is a social one. Therefore, it should be considered as complex adaptable, open and poorly organized system. It is not always possible to draw clear and precise boundary between the international system and its environment. Most spatial boundaries of international systems are conditional. So many history systems were autonomous; the relations between its elements play a more important role than the relationship with the environment. A specific feature of international systems is that they are characterized by the absence of sovereignty, low external and internal centralization. In other words, the international system is a special type of social system characterized by a degree of integration of elements. In order to be clearer, we will bring the example of European Union creation.

According to the explanatory dictionary European integration means a process by which EU member states understand to transfer progressively, from national to supranational level, a range of skills related to national sovereignty, accepting to perform sharing and cooperating in those areas of activity in order to achieve political, economic, social and cultural progress and development of EU [1]. Proceeding from the above, we might say that the EU is a unique body founded by spreading sovereign powers. As a result members formed a supranational organization from European community authorities, respecting the identity and national peculiarities of the countries grouped in that organization.

Despite the existence of supranational institutions, the project of political unification of Europe continues to be done by some nations and leaders. As elements of the EU, national governments influence the development of the integration process. Continues to play a key role Franco-German axis, that represents an engine of integration – they propose mostly initiatives and tend to support other countries for the efficient functioning of the EU in particular areas of policy. Several authors, including N. Kaveshnikov remarks the establishment of stable groups of countries within the EU, in addition to some enduring such as Benelux, Baltic States, the Nordic countries (Denmark, Sweden, Finland) and the Visegrad Group (Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary) [9]. These groups have regular consultations, sign memoranda and action plans, formulating common positions that they support further at meetings of the European Council and the Council of Ministers. Member States were not willing to renounce to their national state structure in favor of a European federal union and transmit their powers to a Community authority. It was initially transferred “only part of sovereignty” in a particular fields (ECSC, EEC and EAEC). In this context, from a real example of the

actual European Union, we can emphasize that all elements in a system interact bi- and multi-directional, unconcerned of the degree of integration, but their relations contribute to the formation and structuring the system.

In addition, there is no unanimity between researchers of International Relations about the structure of the international system. Even there is a reasonable agree, as we have seen, the similarity is too narrow. We are speaking about the behaviorist and neo-realism concepts [4]. Not only the competing approaches that conceptualized the international system remained unsolved, but the large theorizing scale has not been fully configured. One consequence is that the difference between rival system approaches of International Relations was not adequately appreciated. Another consequence is that system thinking for understanding International Relations is less sophisticated than it should be. A part of the problem is that the most conscientious system theorists in terms of methodology tended to be methodological monistic and see the system from one-dimensional perspective. The novelty of the current position in the International Relations clearly shows the limits of methodology based on political neo-realism, such as "balance of power", "bipolarity" or "multipolarity". After the collapse of the Soviet Union and bipolar global system, there appear such issues that cannot be solved by conventional terms of "poly", "balance of power".

The world has entered a period of uncertainty and increased risk, exacerbated by the continuing proliferation of nuclear, chemical, bacteriological weapons. Values widespread in the West (such as the market economy, pluralist democracy, human rights, individual freedoms, quality of life) in the former socialist countries and in post-colonial contribute not only to the stability of the international system by increasing homogeneity, conversely it has the effect of increasing mass migration of people from less economically developed countries, generates conflicts associated with culture conflicts, loss of ideals, undermine the tradition, erosion of self-identity. International system is experiencing profound shocks associated with the transformation of its structure, changing the interactions with its environment.

The system approach creates prerequisites for determining the identities of both private and the whole phenomena and processes in the system. System approach includes the analysis of every International Relations event, phenomena and processes using the system characteristic, as completeness, relativity, historicity and self-regulation. We cannot give up on research methodology of International Relations through a system approach, due to the lack of results. Even if there is no majority acceptance of the classification of the international system, we cannot deny its existence. Currently, prevailing conceptualizations in International Relations about international systems remain inconsistent and one-dimensional, being able to contribute to the endeavoring of discuss about the whole

history of mankind. The same state of affairs is in accepting system approach as pragmatic and common method of research of International Relations. The system approach creates prerequisites for determining the identities of both the private and the whole phenomena and processes in international systems. Being a complex organism in which prospects of decision making process may be subjected to testing and development, the contemporary international system acts as an integrated system in which the processes of integration and globalization keeps not only the particular relations between the great powers but continues multispectral transformations in overall process of homogenization through diversity.

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