DISCOURSE OF POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS AND PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

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INTERACTION BETWEEN THE PARLIAMENTARY OPPOSITION AND THE GOVERNMENT IN SLOVAKIA IN THE 90S OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY: THE POTENTIAL AND EFFICIENCY

This article has analyzed the reasons and consequences of the formation of political conflict model in relations between the government and the parliamentary opposition in Slovakia in the 90s of the twentieth century. Internal and external factors that influenced this formation were highlighted. The forms of political opposition's institutionalization, the potential and efficiency of coalition politics were substantiated. The contradictory nature of the interaction between the government and the opposition were considered in the context of increasing authoritarian tendencies, destabilization of democracy and weakening of inter-party competition.

The weakening of inter-party competition in the early 90s and V. Meciar's power strengthened the authoritarian tendencies and, thus, minimized the influence of the parliamentary opposition and reduced its control functions.

Keywords: parliamentary opposition, government, power, political conflict, democracy, political competition, authoritarianism.

Introduction

In countries with a well-established democratic system, political opposition acts as an institutionalized instrument which reconciles contradictions between the state and society and ensures political stability based on the balance of political forces. In democratic societies, the political opposition, which has constitutional guarantees of activity, is primarily the government opposition. A. Ferraro claimed that for democracy the opposition is no less important entity of people's sovereignty than the government. Suppression of the opposition means suppression of the people's sovereignty[1].

We can agree with S. Bożyk, who states that "the political opposition is a totality of political groups that do not participate in the work of government but take a critical stand towards it and its policies and aim to obtain state power, using guaranteed constitutional and legal forms of political rivalry to implement constitutional reforms or change actual political and socio-economic system"[2]. Parliamentary opposition is one of the forms of political opposition. Its subjects are deputative associations (factions, parliamentary groups, parties) that have a legitimate right to exercise power.

One of the most important tasks for the parliamentary opposition is to define the optimal course of action while interacting with the government. At the same time, the opposition aims to exert a dominant influence on the executive branch. Its important strategic task is to become a parliamentary majority with the prospect of forming a government. The rise of a crisis in society, when the political course of the government begins to lose the support of the population, usually gives an obvious strategic advantage to the opposition parties. Using the chance to obtain power, parliamentary opposition tries to distance itself from the government course as far as possible. This manifests itself in the aggravation of contradictions with the ruling parties, an increase in the ideological and political distance between them. The distancing from the

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[1] Сарторі, Д. (2005). Основи теорії демократії: народ і врядування. *Демократія. Антологія.* Київ: Смолоскип, 37.
[2] Bożyk, S. (2005). *Opozycja parlamentarna w Sejmie RP*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Sejmowe, 10.

government is primarily explained by the struggle for votes of voters.

Of course, the suchlike policy of the opposition may escalate the confrontation with the government and, as a consequence, destabilize the political situation in the country. The model of relations when the opposition does not cooperate with the government in any way whatsoever is called *confrontational*. The reasons for the conflicting style of relations can also be seen in the narrowing of the political and legal field of the opposition activity, its relegation to the periphery of political life by minimization of the opposition's impact on government activities. In such circumstances, the opposition often resorts to non-constructive criticism of the executive power and does not offer its own alternatives.

The deconstructive impact of the opposition's activity on the government was noted by J. Schumpeter. In his time he made a forewarning that politicians in the parliament should not be tempted to use every opportunity to defeat the government or create additional difficulties for it[1]. Democratic institutions and procedures help to minimize the conflict potential of the government and the opposition and ultimately lead to consensus and cooperation. In contemporary Western democracies, there is a *cooperative* model of relations between the government and the opposition. This model is characterized by the formation of various unions and mutual understanding in identified political issues and based on cooperation, consideration of common interests, and orientation for conflict resolution.

Democracy requires inter-party competition, during which two of its main actors, pro-government parties and opposition parties, clearly manifest themselves. Their status is volatile, that's why they are in equal starting conditions during elections, and the electorate, by voting, has a chance to influence the formation of representative and legislative authorities. M. Vachudova comparing the successes of different governments in Eastern Europe after 1989, defined the adversarial political system as one of the indicators of the democracy's success. In her opinion, "it is important to know whether during the first decade of democratic governance the transition of power from one liberal-democratic party to another took place, or, on the contrary, the monopoly of power was seized by non-liberal parties which limited the space for political competition and polarized the political system"[2]. Therefore, from a theoretical and practical standpoint, it is important to study the specifics and forms of interaction in the "power-opposition" vector during the formation of the parliamentary majority and government coalitions and operation of the parliamentary opposition in post-communist countries, in particular, in Slovakia. The choice of the country is stipulated by the fact that in the early 90s, in comparison with other countries of the Visegrad Group, Slovakia had a controversial interaction between the government and the opposition, which was accompanied by a decline in the pace of democratization and an increase in authoritarian trends in politics.

1. Current state of the problem's research

The interrelation between the parliamentary opposition and the government in Slovakia has not yet been comprehensively covered by scholars. In the overwhelming majority, we have works devoted to democratic transition and the consolidation of post-communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe, which dominated because of the importance of institutional changes in the early 90s, and were aimed to analyze the effectiveness of the government and coalition party policies. One of the explanations for the lack of academic attention to the role of the parliamentary opposition is the exceptional variability of the subject of study. There was a quite common opinion that in conditions of unstable functioning of parties and governments it was difficult even to determine, who at that time was in opposition and what was the government's policy for its opponents. The change of the institutional base prevented a clear assessment of the opposition structures. At that time, the contradictory nature of the political process of the transitional period made any assessment of the opposition's role a rather difficult task.

M. Vachudova analyzed the formation of the model of interaction between the government and parliamentary opposition through the mechanism of EU influence on Slovakia[3]. She showed that the lack of political competition in the country had created opportunities for the concentration of political power and benefited the ruling elites. Theoretical aspects of the formation of the model of interaction

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[1] Шумпетер, Й. (2005). *Елітарна демократія і теорія конкурентного лідерства. Демократія: Антологія.* Київ: Смолоскип, 483.

[2] Вахудова, М. (2009). *Нерозділена Європа. Демократія, важелі впливу та інтеграція після комунізму.* Київ: ВД Києво-Могилянська академія, 27.

[3] Ibid.

between the government and the parliamentary opposition were developed by Y. Shumpeter[1], M. Kubat[2], T. Haughton[3], A. Cigankov[4], S. Bożyk[5].

The essential achievement in the study of this problem was made by scientific studies of the Slovak scholar J. Marušiak[6]. Studying the role of political parties in the organization of political life in Slovakia, he has paid great attention to the formation of the parliamentary opposition and identification of the reasons, which defined conflict style of its interaction with the government. Various aspects of relations between the government and the opposition in Slovakia were analyzed by M. Bútora, Z. Bútorová, B. Strečanský[7], P. Lewis[8], S. Wolchik[9], G. Zelenko[10], M. Lendel[11].

2. Specific character of the interaction between the government and the parliamentary opposition in Slovakia in the 90s of the twentieth century

The operation of the parliamentary opposition in the countries of Western Europe demonstrates that its organizational unity, concentration, and potential substantially depend on the type of party system. In particular, M. Duverger stated that bipartisan system, as a rule, makes the opposition a real institution. But in a multiparty system, on the contrary, "one can speak about its institutional forms with a certain reservation, as the distinction between an opposition and a government is not so clear and transparent"[12]. The multiparty system is based on the inclusion of large parties in the parliament, their competition and changes in the balance of power between them. As a result, coalition governments of the majority or minority are formed. All opposition parties have the opportunity to become the ruling parties under conditions determined by the outcome of the negotiations held after elections. This makes the political opposition less cohesive and consistent[13].

Volatile nature of the parliamentary opposition's status is strengthened by the fact that it may include several party groups politically (ideologically) different from one another. They may have different party interests and goals. At the same time, each opposition force tries to preserve its ideological niche, adhering to the proclaimed principles but, simultaneously, trying to increase its electoral base. However, after the collapse of communist regimes in 1989, the practice to form government coalitions and parliamentary opposition in the new democracies of Central and Eastern Europe was a little bit different from similar processes in established democracies. A suchlike situation was observed in the Slovak Republic. Unlike Poland and Hungary, where more liberal ruling regimes created a real possibility to form oppositional socio-political movements at the national level, in Czechoslovakia "…a get-tough policy of the authoritarian regime restrained the nation-wide forms of social self-organization, provoking thus the formation of socio-political movements and political parties largely on a geographical criterion"[14]. In November 1989, in order to negotiate with the communist government of Czechoslovakia, a pro-democracy opposition organization "Public against Violence" (VPN) was created in Slovakia, similarly to the Czech Civic Forum (OF). However, as far as the dissident and human rights movement in the country was poorly organized, VPN failed

[1] Шумпетер, Й. (2005). Елітарна демократія і теорія конкурентного лідерства. *Демократія: Антологія.* Київ: Смолоскип, 467-485.

[2] Kubat, M. (2010). *Political Opposition in Theory and Central European Practice.* Frankfurt-am-Main: Peter Lang.

[3] Haughton, T. (2004). Explaining the limited success of the communist-successor left in Slovakia. The Case of the Democratic Left (SDĽ). *Party Politics, 10, 02*, 177-191.

[4] Циганков, А. (1995). Современные политические режимы: структура, типология, динамика. *Библиотека Гумер* <http://www.gumer.info/bibliotek_Buks/Polit/Cigank/> (2020, February, 12).

[5] Bożyk, S. (2005). *Opozycja parlamentarna w Sejmie RP*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Sejmowe.

[6] Marušiak, J. (2011). Роль политических партий в организации политической жизни и в процессе реформирования Словакии. *Революции и реформы в странах Центральной и Юго-Восточной Европы: 20 лет спустя*. Москва: РОССПЭН, 570-588.

[7] Bútora, M., Bútorová, Z., Strečanský, B. (2012). *Active Citizenship And the Nongovernmental Sector in Slovakia. Trends and Perspectives.* Bratislava: MY3.

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[10] Зеленько, Г. (2007). *Політична "матриця" громадянського суспільства (досвід країн Вишеградської групи та України)*. Київ: Знання України.

[11] Лендьел, М. (2011). *Місцева демократія у країнах Центральної і Східної Європи*: Ужгород: Мистецька лінія.

[12] Duverger, M. (1965). *Political Parties. Their Organization and Activity in the Modern State.* New York-London-Sydney: John Wiley & Sons, 34.

[13] Kubat, M. (2010). *Political Opposition in Theory and Central European Practice.* Frankfurt-am-Main: Peter Lang, 59.

[14] Зеленько, Г. (2007). *Політична "матриця" громадянського суспільства (досвід країн Вишеградської групи та України)*. Київ: Знання України, 114.

to unite and rally counter-elite around itself. Because of the spontaneous creation, only a part of dissidents joined it. Obviously, for a long period of time all this complicated opposition's efforts to perform a mobilizing role in the process of regime transformation. Because of the low level of self-organization, VPN did not show particular interest in direct participation in the process of the power formation, positioning itself as a force that only controls government activity.

In December 1989, the communist government of Czechoslovakia resigned, thus losing control over the federal Czechoslovak government and the governments of the Czech and Slovak republics. Instead, a Transitional Non-Communist Government of Czechoslovakia was created. The further process of democratization involved the declaration of freedom of speech and assembly and calling of elections on a multi-party basis. In June 1990, VPN received 29.3% of the votes (48 mandates) in the free Slovak parliamentary elections. Unlike the Czech opposition, its main rival in the election was not the Communist party, but the Christian Democratic Movement (KDH), which received 19.2% of the votes (31 mandates). After the elections, the two largest formations VPN and KDH formed a government coalition. Later, the formal membership in the government coalition was received by the liberal Hungarian independent initiative which participated in the elections together with VPN. V. Meciar was elected as a head of government.

The formed government coalition had a situational nature and was not long-lasting. During this period, the opposition was not particularly active in the walls of the parliament. Instead, in early March 1991, an internal opposition was formed within the leadership of the VPN, which opposed the policy of V. Meciar's government. As a result of the conflict, in April 1991, V. Meciar was removed from the position of a prime minister. With nearly a half of the deputies from VPN, he has left the parliamentary majority, establishing Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (hereinafter – HZDS). So, in comparison with Poland and Hungary, in Slovakia we see a deviation in the development trajectories of anti-communist opposition. Unlike those countries, where the opposition came to power, Slovakia experienced marginalization and the virtual disappearance of the former anti-communist opposition. According to P. Lewis "almost total absence of any significant anti-communist opposition in Slovakia in 1989 definitely impacted this, and, at that point, the events in the country more resembled the situation in the Balkans and part of the former Soviet Union, than the situation in Hungary and Poland, where the outlines of the organized opposition were visible long before 1989"[1].

The reason for the opposition's weakness can be found in its inability to transform from disjointed groups into a single political force with a clearly developed program. The rapid loss of positions of the former opposition can be easily explained if we take into account the balance of political forces and their potential. As political practice shows, there usually is a pronounced political conflict between the supporters of the communist regime and the opposition parties during the transitional period. It is marked by a clear division into two ideologically opposing camps. This, in turn, narrows the prospect of forming a joint coalition on the basis of similar political goals or ideology.

It is worth noting that the formation of the opposition took place in the late 80s in conditions when a significant part of the Slovak population adapted to the communist regime and considered this period to be progressive for their country. As a consequence, in comparison with the Czech lands, "the polarization of Slovak society was not so deep, and the separation between official and alternative structures was not so cardinal"[2]. As for the communists, after 1989 they experienced an ideological and organizational crisis and could not quickly adapt to the competing conditions.

As you can see, the reformed Communist Party was weakened, and the post-communist forces, which had been in opposition until 1989, actually lost power. Instead, they were replaced by certain hybrid entities, which nature was ambiguous and contradictory. Since 1991, the HZDS joined the parliament as a political center-right oppositional force that has largely imitated VPN. However, in practice, the HZDS was manipulating the ideas of democracy and the protection of Slovak national interests, and thus managed to take advantage of the low political competition and low political competence of voters. When the problem of the constitutional structure and relations between the Czech Republic and Slovakia had exacerbated, V. Meciar took a nationalist position, showing a certain similarity to the style and methods of the previous communist rule. Since its establishment in 1991, the HZDS was the most successful party due to the ideology and support of a social base, focused on economic reforms, rhetoric and care for those, who lost from market transformations, charisma and personality of its leader and founder, V. Meciar[3].

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[1] Lewis, P. (1997). The Repositioning of Opposition in East-Central Europe. *Government and opposition, 32, 04*, 616.

[2] Вахудова, М. (2009). *Нерозділена Європа. Демократія, важелі впливу та інтеграція після комунізму.* Київ: ВД Києво-Могилянська академія, 60.

[3] Haughton, T. (2004). Explaining the limited success of the communist-successor left in Slovakia. The Case of the Democratic Left (SDĽ). *Party Politics, 10, 02*, 182.

After elections in June 1992, populist HZDS and nationalist Slovak National Party (SNS) formed a coalition and a new government. Its activity was associated with the suspension of privatization and its subsequent transformation into an intransparent, corrupted system of rewarding V. Meciar's loyal supporters. The conflicting nature of the relations has been prevailing between the government and the parliamentary opposition since the HZDS emergence. According to Slovak scholar J. Marušiak, "at that point, nationalist opposition considered that their true main opponent was ruling liberal post-dissident elite but not communists"[1].

The interrelation between the government and the parliamentary opposition was complicated by the significant polarization of the party system. The existence of different and unstable coalitions was typical at that moment. The withdrawal of the deputies from the HZDS in 1992 and 1994 resulted in a no-confidence vote to the government in March 1994. The new government headed by J. Moravcik was formed from five different right, centrist, and left parties. SDĽ entered on behalf of the left-wing forces. The new government was also supported by the ethnic Hungarian party. This government has strengthened democratic institutions, encouraged ethnic tolerance and took measures to deepen economic reform.

The parliamentary elections in October 1994 reaffirmed the success of V. Meciar. The HZDS gained 34.96% of votes[2] and formed a coalition government with the extreme right SNS and the neo-communist (ZRS). When V. Meciar had concentrated the process of the party's political decision-making in his hands, he tried to restrict democratic rights and freedoms of citizens and, through political and legal mechanisms, weaken inter-party competition. Open confrontation with President Kovac, obstruction to holding a referendum on direct presidential elections in Slovakia in May 1997, depriving the parliamentary opposition of control over government decisions and actions[3], restriction of the opposition's access to state media, and attempts to introduce a so-called imperative mandate for parliamentarians – have become manifestations of his policy. All this substantially undermined democratic mechanisms of checks and balances and led to a significant politicization of the state administration. Thus, the space of inter-party competition was significantly narrowed, and the ruling elite was focused not on the economic reforms and democracy-building, but on the use of a political resource to maintain its dominant position. This is evidenced by the fact that after the death of President Kovac, the head of government for a long time illegally combined both posts. This deepened the confrontation between the Prime Minister V. Meciar and the parliamentary opposition.

When the nationalist elite came to power, despite its democratic rhetoric, the process of establishment of democratic institutions somewhat slowed down. In 1994, the government had a rather weak and fragmented opposition, which had no internal consensus to effectively compete for the influence with non-liberal parties. However, gradually, opposition parties began to coordinate their strategies, considering the political course of V. Meciar's government as a potential threat to democracy. The Communist successor – SDĽ, became one of the few stable and consistent defenders of the rights and freedoms of citizens. The party was ready to participate in any coalition that would replace V. Meciar. In March 1994, after lengthy negotiations with the HZDS regarding mitigation of its policy, the SDĽ joined other democratic parties in order to overthrow the government.

In 1996-1997 authoritarian tendencies in governmental policy remained an integrating factor for the disjointed opposition. During this period, five different opposition parties united into Slovak Democratic Coalition (SDK). In early 1998, the parliamentary opposition was represented by SDK, Party of the Hungarian Coalition (SMK), and SDĽ. With the increasing of the parliamentary opposition's political weight in the party system of the country, competitiveness has acquired its original institutional significance. Opposition parties challenged the legitimacy of the bills adopted by the parliamentary majority in the Constitutional Court, used the institutional factor of the EU influence in their political strategies, intensified contacts with reputable politicians and international organizations.

On the eve of the 1998 elections, in response to such tactical actions of the parliamentary opposition, the ruling coalition, formed around the HZDS, tried to reduce opposition's influence applying political and legal mechanisms. Under conditions of coordinated action of the opponents, the parties of power had more

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[1] Marušiak, J. (2011). Роль политических партий в организации политической жизни и в процессе реформирования Словакии. *Революции и реформы в странах Центральной и Юго-Восточной Европы: 20 лет спустя*. Москва: РОССПЭН, 575.

[2] Haughton, T. (2004). Explaining the limited success of the communist-successor left in Slovakia. The Case of the Democratic Left (SDĽ). *Party Politics, 10, 02*, 181.

[3] Bútora, M., Bútorová, Z., Strečanský, B. (2012). *Active Citizenship And the Nongovernmental Sector in Slovakia. Trends and Perspectives*. Bratislava: MY3, 19.

and more difficulties to build electoral support on a competitive basis. Acting within a competitive system, the HZDS decided to consolidate its dominant position, and remain a source and a regulator of political processes. On the eve of the 1998 parliamentary elections, the government introduced changes into the electoral legislation, which made it difficult to enter parliament for political coalitions. Under the new law, each party in the coalition had to overcome a 5% entry barrier. Of course, this has substantially strengthened the position of the pro-government HZDS and artificially displaced the opposition from the political field. We can even talk about attempts to form a non-democratic type of relations between the government and the opposition, where inter-party competition remained only a decorative construction to give the regime a semblance of democracy and transparency.

In 1998, the HZDS also "attempted, through an electoral law, to establish a system for control over local processes"[1]. It was planned to introduce a proportional system of elections in a one-member constituency. This would allow small-scale communities to implement a personalized approach to the selection of candidates. From the opposition standpoint, this raised fears that party structure, most powerful and administratively organized, could use it. Intentions of the ruling coalition to influence the results of local elections with the help of legal changes were disputed by opposition parties, self-governing associations, and non-governmental organizations in the Constitutional Court, which declared them illegal.

The non-liberal course of V. Meciar complicated Slovakia's association with the EU. Therefore, the opposition parties were interested in changing the country's foreign policy and had a common position on the European integration processes. The opposition's activity intensified when the EU used influence to remove V. Meciar from power. This contributed to the cooperation of both parliamentary and extra-parliamentary opposition parties.

The formation of the extra-parliamentary opposition also took place with the active participation of the third sector. NGOs ensured the basis for the development and promotion of critical attitudes towards the government and support for democracy among the inhabitants of Slovakia. They also"... allowed the citizens to organize independent forms of protest of government policy independent of existing political parties, attempting to mobilize public opinion and discuss new political problems"[2].

On the eve of the parliamentary elections in 1998, we were witnessing attempts to coordinate positions between civil society organizations and opposition parties. An umbrella organization the "Third Sector" became an integral center and a discussion platform for the Slovak civic groups and opposition parties to clarify their positions and differences. Its emergence is connected with the need to prevent government attempts to decrease the role of civic organizations. One of the results of the Third Sector's activity was the agreement reached between the four opposition parties in cooperation. Despite some differences over the priority strategies of economic reform, gaining membership in the EU and removing V. Meciar from power has become a common goal for them.

Since 1998 Slovakia has restored the democratic practice of altering parties in power. This created objective conditions for the elimination of consequences of the non-liberal government and gave dynamics to the implementation of the European integration policy and economic reforms. As a result of the parliamentary elections, the Slovak Democratic Coalition (SDK), SDĽ, SMK, and the Civic Understanding Party (SOP) won. The ideological spectrum of the government coalition formed by M. Dzurinda was extremely broad. There were social democrats, conservatives, liberal political forces. It is commonly known, that in democratic countries there is the interdependence between the number of parties in the government coalition and the effectiveness of solving political tasks by the cabinet. The more ideologically heterogeneous parties are represented in the government, the greater the possibility of conflict scenarios in the process of political decision-making exists. In this case, the coalition government of M. Dzurinda had the support of the parliamentarian majority, which created favorable conditions for the implementation of the necessary reforms. Among other positive results, we should note the restoration of integration processes to the EU and NATO, the reform of the legislative branch of power, the judicial and banking system, and the protection of the rights of national minorities. In the short term, the new government has overcome certain democratic deficits and deformations of the previous period. However, the ideological heterogeneity of the government has become a serious obstacle for agreed solutions, contributed to the emergence of internal opposition and constantly caused conflict situations within the cabinet.

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[2] Wolchik, S. (1997). Democratization and political participation in Slovakia. In: Dawish, K., Parrot, B. (eds.) *The consolidation of democracy in East-Central Europe*. Cambridge: University Press, 235.

Conclusions

The lack of a powerful, organized opposition to communist rule in Slovakia created a political vacuum at the time of a regime's transformation that allowed neo-opposition governments to keep power in their hands. The weakening of inter-party competition in the early 90s, the strengthening of authoritarian tendencies because of the Meciar's government, minimized the influence of the disjointed parliamentary opposition, reducing its control functions. There was a confrontation between the government and the opposition parties with a low level of consensus. All this gives us a possibility to talk about the construction of a conflict model of interaction between the government and the opposition.

Relations between the government and the political opposition largely depend on a personal factor. The personification of politics in Slovakia can be clearly observed in the person of V. Meciar. It should be noted that he played a dominant role and the conflicts that had arisen between him and his main rivals, between him and the opposition, led to the polarization of the political life in Slovakia.

The parliamentary opposition was formed from political parties, which ideologically differed from each other and included both center-right and center-left parties. This complicated the formation of joint coalitions. However, deceleration of democratic processes and European integration in the country led to the united efforts of parliamentary and extra-parliamentary forms of political opposition and the creation of a new institutional environment. Political opposition was significantly strengthened at the expense of non-governmental organizations. Non-party actors of oppositional activity became an integrative center for the opposition to the government. Active influence from the EU side significantly increased political subjectivity of the opposition. Since 1998 Slovakia has restored the democratic practice of the alteration parties in power, which eliminated the consequences of Meciar's non-liberal rule, implemented the policy of European integration and economic reforms.

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