

# POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS AND PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

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## AMBIDEXTERITY STRATEGY IN THE TRANSFORMATION OF POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS UNDER CONDITIONS OF UNCERTAINTY

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### Abstract

The article examines the theoretical and methodological foundations of adapting political institutions to conditions of permanent turbulence and aggressive uncertainty. The relevance of the work is determined by the inability of traditional hierarchical models of political system management to respond effectively to the 'uncontrollably complex' and unpredictable challenges of modernity.

The article applies a polyparadigmatic approach that synthesises the achievements of neo-institutionalism, adaptive governance theory, and «organisational ambidexterity». The work analyses the phenomenon of path dependence and the emergence of «institutional traps» that block the democratic development of the political system. Using the example of Central and Eastern European countries and Ukraine, the risks of democratic backsliding and imitative institutionalisation are demonstrated, where formal norms are not filled with real content due to weak political culture, external shocks, corruption, and other factors.

Particular attention is paid to the Ukrainian context in the context of war, which is characterised by «double institutionalisation» and the threat of further personalisation of power. As a mechanism for overcoming crises and «democratic backsliding», the concept of institutional ambidexterity is proposed as the ability of the political system to simultaneously combine the processes of «exploitation» (using traditional existing procedures) and «exploration» (introducing flexible innovations into management processes).

It is concluded that institutional flexibility and the ability to adapt to a changing and unpredictable environment, based on shared democratic values and partnership with civil society, are the key to preserving the state's subjectivity in the face of existential and utilitarian external threats and internal crises. The article hypothesises that a system built on the principles of ambidexterity is capable of effectively reforming (and even fighting) simultaneously, ensuring the transition from imitation to real quality in public policy.

**Keywords:** political institutions, adaptive governance, institutional traps, path dependence, ambidexterity, public policy, political system, transformation.

### **Introduction.** *Epistemological crisis in science and the challenges of interpreting political reality.*

The contemporary world is changing faster than political science can respond to these changes. The dynamics of global processes, the emergence of "black swans," and the permanent turbulence of political systems create a situation in which the traditional methodological toolkit proves insufficient for explaining atypical changes.

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The explanatory capacity of contemporary scholarship depends on many components: the level of ontological knowledge at a particular point in time, the epistemological position of scholars and the degree of their ideological bias, theoretical and methodological trends in the scholarly space, as well as the degree to which a problem is actualized in scholarly discourse.

Therefore, political science's response to the invariability of systems and to the capacity of institutions to adapt to new conditions must go beyond linear forecasts and form a new polyvariant methodology capable of explaining dynamic changes and processual features.

**The purpose of the article** is to identify the main directions for the theoretical substantiation of the problem of institutional quality and its significance for political development under conditions of uncertainty, on the basis of an analysis of the practical experience of the adaptation of political institutions amid the transformation of political systems.

The transformation of states can occur simultaneously with the process of democratization, which in methodological terms complicates the task of developing a research strategy. The adaptation of political institutions under conditions of transformation should include the renewal of governance models in the state, the development of instruments of public participation and oversight under crisis conditions, the formation of a culture of accountability, and ensuring the openness of decisions. As global indices (Freedom House, V-Dem) and the experience of stable democracies show, the key factor in this process remains not only the strength of formal norms, but also the depth of political culture, namely the rootedness of democratic practices and the effectiveness of institutions as such.

During a transition period, the quality of political institutions is of particular importance, since they are a basic instrument of public policy. The success of reforms, the introduction of new rules of coexistence among actors, and the effectiveness of conflict regulation practices depend on them. The question that is now at the center of attention of scholars and practitioners is which institutionalized subjects are capable of guaranteeing the success of the transformation of politico-administrative systems and ensuring equal access to policymaking and policy implementation. As of today, there is no universal and unambiguous answer. Accordingly, political science continues to expand and update its theoretical and conceptual approaches, clarifying the role of institutions, mechanisms, and actors in the processes of adaptation and the emergence of public authority systems under dynamic challenges.

### **Theoretical Polylogue: The Search for A Methodological Optic to Explain New Trends in The Political Environment**

The logic of scholarly inquiry regarding the problem of institutional adaptation in transformational systems, which in our study we present as an uncertain environment, rests in contemporary scholarly discourse on a multi-paradigmatic approach. Contemporary theoretical explanations in political science proceed from the assumption of the simultaneous variability of two components, the environment and institutional practices, which underscores the need to analyze the environment in light of time-relevant internal and external determinative factors, and to consider institutions not as abstract universals, but as dynamic structures embedded in specific political, historical, and social contexts.

The change in the environment of political systems' functioning today appears not as a situational anomaly, but as an objective ontological circumstance that unavoidably determines the logic of institutional behaviour. In this context, the adaptiveness of political institutions should be viewed not as an optional characteristic but as a fundamental condition of their survival and the preservation of legitimacy. External and internal factors, from geopolitical shifts and global economic crises to the transformation of societal demands and value orientations, create strong pressure on the politico-administrative system. This pressure forces institutions to go beyond established bureaucratic routines and seek new formats of interaction with reality, transforming static procedures into flexible mechanisms of response.

A direct response to the inability of traditional managerial approaches to explain contemporary governance practice has been the new paradigm of "adaptive governance." Non-hierarchical and flexible models of management have emerged as an alternative to the classic "command-and-control" model, the effectiveness of which is substantially reduced under conditions of contemporary societal challenges:

1. The complexity lies in the fact that contemporary problems (conflicts, wars, climate change, pandemics) are "unmanageably complex," where a change in one element unpredictably affects others.
2. "Uncertainty" is interpreted by the authors as confronting deep and irreducible uncertainty: "we do not know what exactly we do not know."
3. Conflictuality presupposes that society contains contradictory values and interests, which makes the existence of a single "correct" solution impossible.

Thus, under such conditions, traditional management that seeks one “optimal” solution to problems is doomed to fail. Adaptive governance, which recognizes the uncertainty of the environment, instead proposes an iterative (repeated) process of “learning through action.” Policy is treated as an experiment that involves implementing the best possible solution at a given concrete moment in time, subject to monitoring real consequences and to built-in mechanisms for flexibly changing the adopted decision on the basis of the data obtained.

Accordingly, contemporary theoretical explanations in political science have undergone a significant epistemological recalibration, moving away from the search for ideal models and traditional explanatory constructs. They rest on the assumption of the fundamental variability of institutional practices, which entails rejecting the view of institutions as abstract universals that can be mechanically transplanted from one context to another with guaranteed results. Instead, scholarly discourse focuses on institutions as dynamic structures that are deeply embedded in specific political, historical, and social contexts. This embeddedness includes historical memory, informal norms, levels of trust, and the structure of social ties, all of which shape how formal rules are interpreted and implemented in practice. Only this approach makes it possible to explain why institutional designs that are similar in form can perform very differently in stable democracies and in systems undergoing transit and uncertainty.

The synthesis of different methodological approaches makes it possible to comprehensively clarify the relationship between institutional design and a turbulent environment: neo-institutionalism (historical, social, normative, international, and others), rational choice theory, network theory, the systems approach, contingency theory, phenomenology, and others.

*Political neo-institutionalism* provides a foundational framework by offering a macro-level view of institutions within the state–society system. As Skocpol, Peters, Hecl, and Krasner argue, institutions possess relative autonomy and play a dominant role in structuring political space. They are not merely passive arenas of interest-group conflict, but independent variables that shape the trajectories of political system development. Historical neo-institutionalism (Getham, Steinmo, Thelen, Tilly) deepens attention to context by foregrounding time. It explains the inertia of change through “path dependence,” whereby choices made at critical junctures constrain contemporary alternatives. Rational choice theory (Scharpf, Olson, Ostrom) analyzes public policy (PP) at the micro-level through the search for optimal decisions, interpreting institutional adaptation as the product of individual and collective action aimed at reducing transaction costs and uncertainty. Social neo-institutionalism (DiMaggio, Powell) is central to this analysis because it directs attention to legitimacy and to the social ties among public policy actors. In conditions of structural uncertainty, institutions often engage in mimetic adaptation, aligning with environmental expectations by copying successful models not primarily for efficiency, but for survival and social approval. This strategy is frequently characterized as imitative (Chaltseva, 2017).

Network theory (Börzel, Rhodes, Marsh) and the managerial approach (Sabatier, Mazmanian) explain dynamics in contemporary polycentric systems, where institutional adaptation does not occur hierarchically but through complex bargaining and interaction among multiple actors (Chaltseva, 2017).

Systems and spatial approaches (Luhmann, Giddens, Bourdieu, Fligstein) introduced the concepts of emergence and autopoiesis, making it possible to analyze not only the survival of political systems but also their capacity for dynamic self-reproduction and the acquisition of new qualities in response to critical destabilizing factors. A key property of an integrated system is its capacity for self-reproduction and for the adaptation of subsystems and elements in response to “external shocks” (Kaufman). The concept of “liminal fields” (Turner) helps conceptualize transitional conditions in which old rules no longer operate while new ones have not yet been formed, or are still forming. Consistent with contingency theory (Burns, Stalker), high levels of external entropy require institutions to abandon rigid hierarchies and traditional managerial practices in favour of more organic, adaptive structures and flexible governance models.

### **Phenomenology of Institutional Traps and “path dependence”**

Institutional development, like technological development, includes two key components: an *innovative component* (natural selection or design) and a *transplantational component* (borrowing from advanced systems). An organic combination of tradition and innovation enables actors to expand the field of opportunities. However, in transitional systems, this process often encounters serious obstacles (Chaltseva, 2024).

Accordingly, the system confronts two key problems: the first is the unpreparedness to install new institutions due to the absence of necessary conditions (for example, e-democracy without an appropriate

IT infrastructure and the digital literacy of society). The second is the emergence of so-called institutional “traps,” which are interpreted as stable, inefficient norms that block the development of the political system. Such a “trap” often becomes the preservation of a routine system of governance (administrative-command) under the mask of new democratic façades (Chaltseva, 2024).

A separate and extremely complex type of “trap” is the phenomenon of similarity, which in the scholarly literature is qualified as “path dependence.” In the transitional systems of the 1990s and 2000s, new institutions created according to Western templates proved instrumentally and formally present, but functionally incapable of creating stable democratic traditions and of building a national model of public policy.

This problem acquired particular specificity in transitional countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), which, despite differences in chosen trajectories and the final outcomes of transformation, encountered a shared challenge. The key determinant triggering the institutional “trap” was that new democratic institutions were installed on the “old ground” of informal social ties and a statist culture.

In this context, a cognitive and functional gap emerged: formal institutional designs borrowed from the experience of stable democracies proved to be only “facade” constructions. Beneath their shell, inertial mechanisms of patron–client networks, nomenklatura ties, and legal nihilism inherited from the Soviet and post-socialist system continued to function.

It was precisely this mismatch between progressive formal instruments and the conservative content of social capital that led to the fact that in CIS countries, transformation often ended in the personalization of power, while in a number of CEE countries, it resulted in a “deferred crisis” and democratic reversal. Thus, “path dependence” manifested itself not so much in a deficit of laws and processes of formalizing new democratic institutions as in the resilience of informal practices that adapted new institutions to old elite interests.

For example, in Poland and Hungary in the 1980s, there were attempts by political elites to reform political systems “from above.” Yet the tradition of treating law as an instrument of the party as a political subject, rather than as an independent arbiter, persisted and acquired new features, including proximity to governing elites and the reproduction of hierarchical nomenklatura practices. Even after Constitutional Courts were established (Poland in 1982, Hungary in 1989), elites through the mid-1990s often treated courts as bodies meant to “confirm” political expediency rather than constrain power. This pattern of “socialist legalism” and legal nihilism laid a foundation for later attacks on judicial independence in the 2010s in these countries.

Further manifestations of this “trap” include the imitation of multiparty competition and the creation of “pocket parties” in transformational systems in the 1990s. By 2000, many CIS and Balkan countries (for example, Yugoslavia under Milošević) had formally installed electoral democratic procedures into their systems, taking their first steps in electoral politics. However, given a statist political culture, parties were often created not as representatives of social groups’ interests but as administrative superstructures organized around leaders. This contributed to the emergence of “illiberal democracies” already in the 1990s (Zakaria, 2003), where elections occurred, but rights and freedoms were not protected.

Another indicator of the “trap” can be called the deficit of trust as a consequence of the authorities’ “total control” over society. Sociological research in the 1990s (for example, Putnam’s work on social capital in post-communist countries) confirmed that, after decades of forced (mobilizational) participation in Soviet organizations, citizens in the 1990s felt distrust toward any civic activity. For example, the weakness of the trade union movement and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Ukraine until 2000 was a direct consequence of “path dependence” on the Soviet model of “state public organizations.” Thus, the institutional memory of statism proved stronger than the rational design of Western consultants.

By 2000, a paradox had formed in the CEE region: democracy in form, but clientelism in content. Despite energetic rates of European integration and positive dynamics of formal democratization, the deep transformation of the public sphere in a number of states slowed down or underwent reversal. The effect of the so-called “deferred crisis” operated. Among the key determinants that activated the “path dependence” trap in CEE are the following:

- weak institutional culture and a deficit of trust in political systems. The alienation of society from power inherited from socialism turned democratic procedures into rituals that imitated the public process;
- historical centralization of power (a statist political culture). The tradition of executive dominance proved stronger than the system of checks and balances;

- imitative inclusion of civil society in governance processes. Co-governance mechanisms often remained declarative, which created prerequisites for the formation of pseudo-democracies (hybrid, incomplete, imitative);

- populist tendencies that became the mainstream of contemporary political systems. The use of democratic instruments (elections) by anti-system forces to dismantle democracy from within.

In Poland (2015–2023), institutions, including the judiciary and public media, proved vulnerable to political capture despite formal adherence to procedures. In Hungary, under V. Orbán, this process took the form of a proclaimed “illiberal democracy,” with systematic media control and pressure on NGOs, enabling the regime to be characterized as “competitive authoritarianism” or an “electoral autocracy.” In Slovakia, the return of R. Fico’s government signaled troubling tendencies of following the Hungarian scenario, including attacks on anti-corruption bodies and the media. In Serbia, a “hybrid regime” formed under A. Vučić, where boundaries between the state and the ruling party were blurred, and administrative resources undermined the substance of political competition.

Thus, the experience of CEE has shown that the simple borrowing of forms without changing political culture and the value paradigm of both society and the elite does not guarantee stability, and under crisis conditions can lead to the regeneration of authoritarianism.

### **The Ukrainian Dimension: Dual Institutionalization and The Challenges of War**

Ukraine, despite significant efforts to reform public administration after 2014 (decentralization, anti-corruption infrastructure), continues to face problems of political fragmentation and “dual” institutionalization. This phenomenon is characterized by the simultaneous functioning of post-Soviet in content (patron–client, hierarchical) and new (transparent, democratic) institutions. This collision reduces the effectiveness of the implementation of procedures and contributes to the personalization of power (Chaltseva, 2017).

Under conditions of full-scale war, the situation takes on an existential character. A particular threat arises when citizens, under extraordinary circumstances, are prepared to exchange some freedoms for security. This creates space for emergency executive powers that are extremely difficult to revoke after the crisis ends. What is temporary tends to become permanent and may produce irreversible consequences for the future of democracy in Ukraine.

Institutional “traps” under such conditions not only impede development potential but can also trigger mechanisms of irreversible degradation of social structures. The public sphere may contract, giving way to narrow group interests, the slowing of reforms, and corruption.

One of the main means of preventing this scenario is the development of a real rather than a façade democracy, which ensures consideration of different actors’ views and provides institutionalized representation and self-organization. Ukrainian civil society, which has demonstrated unprecedented resilience and capacity for self-organization during the war, is a resource that can compensate for weak state institutions and constrain arbitrary exercises of power. However, this non-state actor also requires institutionalization through new forms of partnership.

### **Ways of Resolution: The Concept of Institutional Ambidexterity**

The analysis shows that there may be many scenarios for the development of public policy in transitional systems; however, it should be treated as axiomatic that only expanding the boundaries of high-quality socio-political representation, developing social partnership, and strengthening institutional adaptiveness can help absorb problems that destabilize, and at times even destroy, the system. To achieve this goal, it is necessary to create conditions for the formation of public capital and a national model of PP that would correspond to the principles of democratic and effective governance. In this context, the task of the academic community is to provide analytical support for the processes of political system adaptation: risk modeling, forecasting the consequences of temporary decisions, and advancing dialogue.

In connection with the above, the response of scholars in different fields, primarily managerial disciplines, was the proposed concept of ambidexterity (from Latin *ambo*, meaning both, and *dexter*, meaning right, literally “two-handedness”), namely a dynamic capability that enables organizations to succeed in the long term while simultaneously engaging in two seemingly contradictory types of activity: “exploitation” and “exploration.” Duncan (1976) was the first to introduce the term “organizational ambidexterity,” describing the capacity of structures to change in order to implement innovations while maintaining stability. A founder of the contemporary discussion of this phenomenon, March (1991),

who advanced the idea of dividing activity into two types, “exploitation” and “exploration,” argued that a system’s survival depends on the balance between them. “Exploitation” is an activity oriented toward efficiency, cost reduction, and incremental innovations in the system. It involves concentrating on improving existing, traditional products, processes, and technologies that have already operated within the political system. “Exploration” is an activity oriented toward institutional flexibility, radical innovation, and the introduction of new opportunities, with a focus on searching for new knowledge and developing new products and services, mechanisms, and so forth.

The article by Charles O’Reilly and Michael Tushman (2011) provides empirical confirmation and theoretical deepening of the concept of ambidexterity. Earlier work confirmed the importance of ambidexterity but did not provide a clear understanding of the specific mechanisms that allow managers to actually reallocate resources and reconfigure assets in order to balance exploitation and exploration. Their work moved ambidexterity from the theoretical to the practical level by offering managers a concrete set of interrelated decisions, concerning structure, culture, rewards, and processes, that must be made in order to use current assets successfully while simultaneously exploring new opportunities for future growth. The authors argued that the capacity of senior leaders to moderate and integrate existing assets for simultaneous exploration and exploitation is critically important for overcoming inertia and ensuring organizational adaptation to a changing technological and market environment. The research methodology is based on qualitative case studies and in-depth interviews with executives from thirteen different organizations, which enabled the authors to obtain a detailed understanding of the actions managers took to implement ambidextrous designs and to identify what facilitated success or impeded it. O’Reilly and Tushman (O’Reilly, & Tushman, 2011) found that, in linking and managing separated units, the successful implementation of ambidexterity depends on an interconnected set of decisions about organizational design and the way the senior leadership team operates. It should have the following characteristic features:

1. Shared vision and values: clear articulation of a shared vision and values that create a unified identity for all units (exploitation and exploration) and serve as an ideological “umbrella” for different cultures.
2. Strategy accountability: the senior team must explicitly take responsibility for the ambidexterity strategy. This includes creating a reward system based on shared fate that motivates cooperation.
3. Relentless communication: continuous communication about strategy, decisions, and priorities in order to manage inevitable conflict and tension between units.
4. Ambidextrous leadership: the need for senior leaders who themselves possess ambidextrous thinking, the capacity to champion both exploitation and exploration initiatives simultaneously (to be “consistently inconsistent”).

Thus, O’Reilly and Tushman (O’Reilly, & Tushman, 2011) translated theory into practice and demonstrated that ambidexterity requires a specific design: separate units for innovation and stability that are integrated through shared strategy and leadership.

Gibson and Birkinshaw (Gibson, & Birkinshaw, 2004) examined “contextual ambidexterity,” in which the capacity to be “two-handed” depends not on structure, but on employees’ individual choices and a culture of trust within the system.

In contemporary political science theory, the concept of “institutional ambidexterity” is gaining prominence. The transfer of ambidexterity from business to the public sector entails a shift from “bureaucratic inertia” to “adaptive resilience.” Institutions must differentiate between processes that maintain order and processes that advance reform. “Exploitation” is classical public administration operating under rigid regulation, such as paying pensions, providing basic services, and maintaining public order. Vertical authority and accountability dominate here. “Exploration” consists of project offices and digital laboratories (for example, the Ministry of Digital Transformation in Ukraine) and crisis centers. They operate through flexible methodologies and experiment with new forms of interaction with citizens. To ensure that the “two hands” do not work against one another, for example, so that digital reforms are not sabotaged by the old bureaucracy, an ideological umbrella is required, which in the context of transformational systems represents shared democratic values and the idea of publicity that can justify temporary inconveniences associated with change.

For institutions, this is the most difficult level. It requires political leadership to be “consistently inconsistent”: on the one hand, to ensure stability and security, especially during war, and on the other hand, simultaneously to sanction the dismantling of old, ineffective ties in the name of innovation. Ambidexterity is an antidote to institutional “traps.” If a system only “exploits” old experience, it becomes locked into a path

of inefficiency. The exploration strategy makes it possible to create alternative pathways of development in parallel with core activities, which facilitates the gradual transformation of an entire system without its collapse.

### Conclusions

In summary, it should be noted that the adaptiveness of political institutions under conditions of uncertainty is not an automatic process. It requires the deliberate construction of a design that takes into account the “traps” of path dependence and the risks of “democratic backsliding.” The experience of CEE countries and Ukraine demonstrates that the formal presence of democratic institutions, without filling them with the substantive content of co-governance between state and society and public oversight, is insufficient.

The future of transformational political systems will depend on the capacity of elites and civil society to form a governance model that combines institutional resilience with flexibility, ensuring a transition from imitation to genuine subjectivity in public policy.

Contemporary political reality should be approached through the concept of “institutional ambidexterity” as a key strategy for survival and development. The problem of ambidexterity has evolved from a narrow concept in organizational management into a fundamental strategy for the survival of complex socio-political systems. This term, borrowed from organizational theory, describes the capacity of a system of public governance to be “two-handed,” that is, to sustain a binary reality simultaneously: exploitation and exploration. “Exploitation” entails the effective use of existing, stable procedures to ensure order in the system, security, and predictability, which is critically important under conditions of war. “Exploration” entails the simultaneous active search for and implementation of new innovations and flexible approaches in response to future challenges and rapid environmental change.

It is precisely institutional flexibility, grounded in shared democratic values rather than exclusively in the rigid letter of bureaucratic procedures, that can serve as a guarantee of preserving democracy under conditions of systemic threats. An ambidextrous system is capable of waging war and reforming simultaneously, while maintaining governability and openness to innovation.

Under conditions of war, Ukraine has become a “laboratory of ambidexterity.” The state is compelled to be as rigid as possible on issues of mobilization and defense (“exploitation”) while simultaneously being highly flexible on issues of digital transformation, the mobilization of volunteer networks, and decentralization (“exploration”).

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