THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS ON RAISON D’ÉTAT

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ABSTRACT

The concept of raison d’état (reason of state) is very popular in Poland, and it will apparently remain relevant as long as the Polish state exists. The idea is commonly used in official statements by politicians, political journalism, and in various government documents. Raison d’état is an ambiguous concept, which results from simplified and often popular opinions on what is and what is not the raison d’état. Conceptual chaos, intuitive judgments and notions appear to be the reason why political scientists are discouraged from systematized and in-depth studies on this political category. The paper is divided into three parts. The first part discusses definitions of raison d’état and the accompanying problems. The second one deals with the theoretical aspect covering the subjective, objective, temporal and spatial scopes of the concept. Two new definitions of raison d’état were mentioned which diminish the importance of the nation-state at the expense of international organizations. The third part presents methodological approaches in studies on raison d’état understood in two ways: as a system of vital interests of the state and as a category of political thought.

KEYWORDS

reason of state, political theory and methodology, political thought

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INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

Raison d'état is an ambiguous concept, which results from simplified and often popular opinions on what is and what is not the raison d'état. Conceptual chaos, intuitive judgments and notions appear to be the reason why political scientists are discouraged from systematized and in-depth studies on this political category. The concept of raison d'état (reason of state) is widely used in official statements by politicians, political journalism, and in various government documents.

Characteristic constituents of raison d'état are sovereignty, independence, territorial integrity, protection of security, national identity, and the country’s development capacities. What serves raison d'état is foreign policy, the choice of allies, coordination of operations of state authorities, and acceptance by citizens. Furthermore, raison d'état is a very important norm because it applies to the central agencies of state authority as “a postulate for specific conceptualization i.e. molding of activity consisting in governing the state’s policy; it functions as a theoretical element of social practice” (Stemplowski 2013: 15). It specifies the hierarchy of political objectives and means of achieving them, including those that cannot be negotiated with foreign entities.

In the Third Republic [of Poland] the idea of raison d'état is still alive and it will apparently remain relevant as long as the Polish state exists. The global economic crisis, the Russo-Georgian war in 2008, and the Russian-Ukrainian conflict of 2014 considerably reinforced thinking in terms of state interests. Both in Western Europe and in Poland questions began to be asked again about the fundamental responsibilities of the state as a political organization. The Polish discussion on the international aspects of raison d'état in 2015 was full of acute political disputes concerning particularly Polish-Russian relations in the context of Poland’s membership of NATO and the European Union.

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RAISON D’ÉTAT IN THE CONCEPTUAL NETWORK OF POLITICAL SCIENCE

Conceptualization of political science terminology is an important element of political theory. Its goal is to define and interpret terms that constitute the conceptual network of political science. Many political science concepts have a multifaceted character, therefore it is necessary to explain their meanings and research perspectives that they imply. While studying raison d’état, we encounter etymological and definitional problems. They are connected with defining the meaning of raison d’état, while the main problems in this research area stem from the failure to understand the constituents: “reason” (raison) and “state” (état), which may appear archaic at present. Raison d’état is indisputably a whole with a complicated structure (Jabłoński 2010; Stemplowski 2007: 237).

The category of raison d’état belongs to the group of so-called essentially contested concepts. The “contested concept” is a term first used by Walter B. Gallie and indicates the contents of something that is so abstract, ambiguous and indeterminate that its full meaning can be grasped only through a concept that admits of different ways of understanding, i.e. different conceptions of a concept (Gallie 1956: 167–172).

The idea of raison d’état evolved as the state and political thought developed. It underwent various stages: early absolutism (until the mid-17th century), its mature form (until the French Revolution), and entered the stage of the developing nation-state. At present, raison d’état is understood first of all in connection with the problems of governing the state, based on its interests (Stemplowski 1997: 102).

Raison d’état is usually defined as “regard for state interest” or “state interest” or, as Machiavelli put it, “the precedence of state interests over other norms”. Some scholars define the concept of raison d’état in terms of “permanent and overriding interests of society and nation, which constitutes a state, without which it would be impossible to achieve other goals”, which a community seeks to attain. According to Z.J. Pietraś, “raison d’état is a historically variable system...
of fundamental internal and external interests of the state, implemented in an uncompromising way” (1989: 42; Meinecke 1957: 25–27).

An interesting exemplification of the approach to raison d’état (as a norm for those in power) was offered by Ryszard Stemplowski. According to his view, the conception of raison d’état (specifically: a UE member state) is “a doctrinal postulate of pursuing the state’s policy – by the authority of executive power with constitutionally defined governing competencies in this area” – which: expresses the identity of the sovereign, including its vital interests; it is based on the hierarchy of goals and means of achieving them, including goals that cannot be negotiated with foreign entities (goals to be implemented in the EU); it implements constitutional values and principles; it is systematically updated and is publicly justified (Stemplowski 2013: 15).

Raison d’état can be defined based on different criteria. Firstly, the criterion of importance (defining of fundamental interests and secondary ones), secondly – the criterion of content (political, economic or security interests, etc.), thirdly – permanence of interests (permanent and changing), fourthly – the criterion of spatial location of state interests and correlation with other states. In the international dimension, the bipolar division of the world was challenged in the early 1990s, in the internal dimension the question of internal sovereignty arose: the attitude of the state to citizens, the attitude of citizens to the state; and the value system on which state institutions would be based (Jackowska 2008: 294; Rzegocki 2008: 38–40).

The extreme complexity of the concept of raison d’état stems from two principal issues: (1) the conceptual structure of raison d’état comprises raison d’état itself and its many references to specifiable factors and its accompanying phenomena at a given time and place; (2) the concept does not occur by itself but in conjunction with the state and state authority.

The analysis of definitions of raison d’état that are present in (Polish and foreign) political science literature allows us to determine different interpretations of it. Most often, there were definitions describing raison d’état as: the reason for existence of the sovereign state; action according to realistic rules; the necessity of using special measures; ensuring of the security of the state and citizens; seeking of objective rules, determinants of foreign policy; justification for immoral actions by the authorities or the people, and discrepancy between ethics and politics.

The foregoing definitions have two features in common. First, they connect raison d’état with the state as its fundamental and only carrier; secondly, they
explicitly suggest that the issue is the state’s most important values and needs although they (the definitions) do not specify them. It would be impossible, anyway, mainly because of the highly individualized character of this category and its variability in time and space.

The problem of conceptual analysis in political theory is the multiplication of semantic subtypes. This is also the case with the concept of raison d’État. In foreign literature, there are two new definitions of raison d’État that belittle the importance of the nation-state and emphasize the strategic dimension of raison d’État. The first one stresses the international “basis” of the state – participation in international organizations, alliances, etc. According to K.D. Wolf, the government seeking greater and greater independence can implement the strategy for “democratization through internationalization”, which may be perceived as the so-called new raison d’État in the age of globalization and democratic government. It was demonstrated that at present the governing elites use international institutions to gain more clout on the domestic political scene in order to win over the internal opposition to the policies they (the elites) prefer. An example can be the European Union’s Common Foreign and Security Policy (Wolf 1999: 333–335; Koenig-Archibugi 2004: 147–155; Musekamp 2011: 120).

The other conception is the so-called reason of the world or raison du monde, closely linked with the globalization process. According to Philip G. Cerny, the state’s raison d’État is being replaced by the “transnational, globalizing raison d’État” called “raison d’État of the World”. While the state still has an invaluable role to play, this mission has to be manifested in international relations rather than internal policy. The states, especially the strong ones, formulate – apart from state interests – also transnational, increasingly global goals (Cerny 2010: 5 et seq.; Harrison, Boyd 2003: 34)\(^3\). Cannot we call worldwide peace and prosperity the raison du monde?

As R. Stemplowski rightly emphasized, it is necessary to examine raison d’État in two ways. On the one hand, it was, is, and will long be identified with a set of existential interests of the state and the motive for operation of the forces governing a particular state. On the other hand, the process of evolution of the idea of raison d’État as a result of the formation and development of supra-state structures in particular regions of the world began. The contemporary states

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\(^3\) It is closely connected, first of all, with the globalization of economy. A manifestation of this tendency are the conceptions of increasingly strong international integration.
are not yet anachronistic but they are no longer obstacles in the political and economic integration of the states (1997: 112–113).

THEORETICAL ASPECTS OF RAISON D’ÉTAT

The theoretical aspect of the study of raison d’état is associated with the subjective, spatial, objective, and temporal scope of the concept, and with the definition of the function of raison d’état. In theory, the subjective scope of raison d’état embraces the sole “carrier” (subject) of raison d’état, which is the state. In practice, the subject is complex: with the state we associate the forces that govern it, which in fact define and pursue raison d’état. These are constitutionally defined chief state authorities run by those responsible for state policy. In democratic states, the content of raison d’état may be influenced by “nonstandard subjects”, such as civil society acting through non-government organizations, the media circles, and religious associations.

Taking into account the state as the subject of raison d’état, it should be stressed that raison d’état as a separate political category is a result of the formation of the modern state. It is a state-centric category and that is why it is not correct to identify raison d’état with national interest (Rykiel 2006: 37). The concept of raison d’état lays emphasis on the state as the political organization of the sovereign (political nation). It comprises the content of both national and public interests. Raison d’état is always one, and the conception of national interests presupposes that they are many, which requires additional conceptualization already at the fundamental level. In the democratic state, the understanding of raison d’état usually dissociates itself from two positions: (1) legal relativism (for the sake of state interest it is admissible to break the law), and (2) moral relativism (raison d’état as a moral justification for the state’s actions) (Groszyk 1997: 108; Stemplowski 2013: 27).

The spatial scope corresponds to the objective scope because raison d’état is pursued at the territory of the state to which it refers (internal affairs), or in the international arena in relations with other states. Therefore, raison d’état should not be confined to one of the two aspects in question. The two complement each other: in the international relations the problem of the state’s existence, its

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4 A similar duality in understanding raison d’état is discernible in contemporary political thought in Poland.
sovereignty or subjectivity is decided, while stable internal development often determines the power of the state in the international arena.

The objective aspect of raison d’état defines which interests the scope of raison d’état comprises. Scholarship agrees that raison d’état includes primary, superior, most important or universal interests of the state (Kukułka 2000: 222 et seq.). Unquestionably, the state’s “vital” interests comprise the state’s existence, security and its internal political system, as well as national identity, stability, and development prospects. This interpretation means that raison d’état includes only some part of the most important national interests. Kazimierz Łastawski defined raison d’état as a value expressing “the actually existing nationwide interests”. Moreover, Łastawski also points out the changing implementation context of these interests and the influence of raison d’état on the state’s strategy (Łastawski 2009: 27 – 28).

A detailed specification of interests that are included in raison d’état is difficult for many reasons, a significant one being methodological orientation. Scholars professing the realistic paradigm prefer “concrete” interests associated with the state, first of all national security, territorial integrity, sovereignty, and independence. Proponents of a liberal (idealist) approach will eagerly add other values: freedom, human rights, living standards, or the like. Consequently, there is no one intersubjective definition of raison d’état (Zięba 2010: 97; Ponczek 2004: 406).

The contemporary raison d’état (national interest) undoubtedly comprises diversified interests that can be classified into five major groups. The first group covers the interests that are closely related to the country’s existence in the international arena, its sovereignty, unthreatened territorial integrity and coherent identity, and also the shaping of state-oriented, national and social relationships. The second group concerns system-related interests, i.e. establishing a democratic, stable and efficient social and political system, respect for human rights, self-governance, and the like. The third group relates to the optimum socio-economic development of the country, ensuring a continual improvement in the citizens’ well-being. Sustainable economic development, economic sovereignty,
demographic growth, and social and civilizational progress are some of the major challenges faced by a nation’s leaders. The fourth group of interests involves strengthening the country’s international position, which allows it to increase its abilities to improve internal security and to play prominent international roles. This can be achieved by joining international treaties of various types and scopes, and by establishing good relationships with neighbouring countries. The fifth group covers the broadly defined issues of national security, comprising a number of aspects to be distinguished by applying an objective criterion. These include political, public, socio-cultural, economic, energy-related, military, ecological and cyber-safety aspects.

Apart from the objective, subjective and spatial scopes, the theoretical aspect of raison d’état also covers the temporal scope. According to Ryszard Zięba’s analysis, in literature on the subject there are three main approaches to understanding the temporal scope of raison d’état. Firstly, emphasis on the permanence and long-term of interests and values represented by raison d’état. Secondly, the assumption that raison d’état is comparatively stable, and it evolves after the alignment of powers in the state has been redefined or after distinct reshuffling in the international environment. Thirdly, stressing of the historical variability and evolution of interests that make up raison d’état. In this last approach, raison d’état has a definite temporal dimension and embraces interests relevant at a particular moment in history (Zięba 2010: 94).

The last, but not the least important issue is to define the function of raison d’état in relation to the state’s policy and actions. Six fundamental functions of raison d’état have been distinguished: (1) explicative (declarative) – it enables understanding intentions and actions taken by politicians; (2) justificative – it serves to justify political actions; (3) decisive – it facilitates evaluating the situation and defining allies and enemies in the international arena; (4) motivational – it inspires political actions and prompts the formulation of future actions; (5) integrative – it unites people around specific interests and goals; (6) strategic – it contributes to formulating long-term goals of internal policy and to creating a foreign policy strategy.

Some scholars distinguish two additional functions: one that creates the future universalization of the idea of raison d’état, and one that moulds public debate. The first defines the new paradigm of raison d’état – opposed to the

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6 In Poland, in the last decades, it became necessary to re-formulate the content of raison d’état twice: in 1989–1990, and in 2004, right before Poland’s accession to the European Union.
traditional one, developed in the period of sovereign nation states. In the context of the second “new” function, various subjects (actors) of discourse (political elites, society, religious associations, the media, etc.) are pointed out that, by presenting diverse concepts of raison d’état, influence other participants in the debate and are also influenced at the same time (Groszyk 1997: 108–113).

METHODOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF STUDYING RAISON D’ÉTAT

Scholars who study raison d’état will probably encounter methodological challenges connected with the choice of a methodological approach. In the scientific literature, three main methodological approaches can be distinguished. The first – normative, when politicians and scholars formulate the future and desirable objective scope of raison d’état, i.e. the fundamental interests and goals of the state. The second one – declarative, when scholars analyze political declarations of the center of power in the state. This is an empirical approach that examines declarations, i.e. the advocated conceptions. This research attitude leads to the conclusion that raison d’état is the system of the highest political justifications for the undertaken or intended actions. The third methodological approach is called realistic. It is represented by scholars who do not confine themselves to analyzing political declarations or programs but try to reconstruct raison d’état, based on the actual actions of the state. They conclude that raison d’état is a historically changing system of fundamental external and internal state interests implemented in an uncompromising way. The last approach appears to be the most useful, guaranteeing the complete identification of raison d’état. It should be also remembered that the dynamics of international relations requires that politicians constantly analyze and create new views based each time on the changing reality (Pietraś 1989: 39–40). It is the task of the scholar to capture this dynamics.

A similar distinction was made by Paul Seabury, who considered the State’s interests in normative and descriptive terms. In normative terms, the State’s interests form a set of objectives which the State declares to pursue through international relations, while in descriptive terms, they relate to the objectives which are sought to be accomplished at a specific time, i.e. the actually-pursued goals (Seabury 1963: 85–86).

In political science inquiry, raison d’état can be treated in two ways. Firstly, in the traditional terms, as the only binding norm or directive in the activities
of state authorities (it is necessary to analyze government documents, strategies, legal acts reflecting raison d’état). Secondly, as a category of political thought, because any other party defines and formulates their concept of raison d’état in their own way (to fully know the problem it is necessary to analyze not only the evidence of political thought but also its traces, i.e. decisions made by politicians who were active in the political arena or participated in the exercise of power).

As far as the second approach to the national interest is concerned, it should be emphasised that the notion of “political thought” is understood as “any form of reflection on political reality, regardless of the development level, internal cohesion, systematisation, theoretisation or concretisation”. It emerges as an outcome of political thinking, which is reflected, among other things, in the formation of ideas. When the reflection on political reality is detailed enough and organised, and contains a certain theoretical component, it can go through the following three development stages: ideology, concept, and programme. The world of ideas at a given point in time is an amalgamation of several political thoughts displaying various degrees of development. To describe them, we often resort to abstract notions (such as the national interest) which are actually coined by scholars in order to organise and investigate a given subject of study (Paruch 2004: 15–16, 24–25).

Upon the second interpretation, an indisputable problem and challenge will be to indentify which elements make up the raison d’état in the political thought of a party, because politicians eagerly resort to ultimate concepts, usually arbitrarily understood, such as “national interest” or “raison d’état”.

In contemporary Polish political thought, there are different conceptions of raison d’état. The concepts like raison d’état or national interest were often excessively used by politicians and political journalists, without settling the issue whether the state should pursue a liberal or statist economic policy; whether it should be a monarchy or a republic, whether to carry out a pro-German, pro-American or pro-Russian policy.

Referring to the category of raison d’état, it is possible to prove the theoretical rightness of each of the foregoing options. A proponent of statism will prove that the state’s increased control over the economy is necessary for reasons of state; a free-market liberal will prove that state control leads to economic stagnation, thus negating raison d’état. A supporter of monarchy will prove that raison d’état is best fulfilled by a non-party monarchy while a republican will demonstrate that raison d’état is best understood by a sovereign people because no one will take care of their interest better
than that people. In international politics, many political, economic, cultural or historical arguments can be shown which by turns justify Poland’s strategic alliance with the United States, Germany, Ukraine, or with Russia. The differences in understanding raison d’état are fundamental, not reducible, and have two reasons. Firstly, if we define raison d’état as a result of reflection on the condition of the political world, the principal problem are differences, characteristic of the human mind, in perceiving the same facts by different people. These contradictions did not have to stem from ill will but from focusing on other elements regarded as crucial, or from a different assessment of the actual alignment of powers. Secondly, the definition of raison d’état is influenced by many axiological factors. Each political view is determined by the values and convictions of the person that espouses it.

In contemporary Polish political thought, out of the plurality of views on raison d’état there emerge many interpretations of what it is and how to implement it. A politician who uses the category of raison d’état has a specific model of state and society in mind, which he regards as exemplary and as the ultimate goal. To a Catholic politician, this will be a vision of a religious and traditional Poland, in which modern economy harmoniously combines with tradition; to a liberal politician – modernization and individual freedom; to a left-wing politician – the vision of a secular and economically anti-liberal country (Wielomski 2010: 84).

**FINAL CONCLUSIONS**

We understand raison d’état as a system of the state’s existential interests pursued in an uncompromising way, about which there should be a consensus of the main political forces in a state. Raison d’état can also be treated as a separate value or category of political thought, around which visions of the state are built, covering internal and international politics. While analyzing the theoretical and methodological aspects of raison d’état, it should be said that it is characterized by unclear definitions, very broad content, temporal variability, difficulty in defining the catalog of state interests that make up raison d’état, and by different theoretical and methodological approaches. All this discourages scholars from studying this category. Paradoxically, this multidimensional and multifaceted feature combined with the special Polish way of understanding raison d’état may make it attractive in terms of research.
Interesting from the standpoint of the theory of raison d’état is its contemporary evolution towards transnational raison d’état. Inevitable globalization processes and the activities of international and transnational organizations and institutions lead to the universalization of raison d’état. In the course of this evolution, the way of understanding such concepts as sovereignty or state security (indispensable constituents of raison d’état) changes. Sovereignty is replaced by the concept of subjectivity while security acquires an ever new objective scope.

References:


