

The theoretical and methodological problems of defining the concept of "insurgency" as a complex form of political violence



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Abstract:

During the bipolar period, insurgencies were most often considered as a way of fighting for liberation from colonization, repression and other forms of political violence. However, its features as a foreign policy tool were also noticed, so at the unipolar geopolitical moment they gained greater importance. Due to such a variety of manifestations, many definitions of this complex form of political violence have emerged. The problems that researchers encounter in searching for the essential features of the concept of insurgency are semantic and substantive because it is difficult to define what insurgency is, in relation to what it is not. However, the definition of this (and every other) social phenomenon is necessary because it defines its main and constant features, structure, as well as the differences from other similar phenomena. In this way, preconditions for a common approach and joint action in solving social problems are provided. In our search for a valid definition of insurgency, the characteristic features in dictionaries, encyclopedias and lexicons have been critically compared. Also, legal (in national and foreign statutes/laws and in international humanitarian law), military (doctrinal) and research definitions have been analyzed, in order to consider the problem of defining this concept and submitting a proposal for an objective and explicit definition. After analyzing the concept of "insurgency" it can be concluded that insurgency in our lexical discourse is "an armed way of expressing dissatisfaction or disagreement with the policy pursued by the government". Besides motive, doctrinal documents emphasize other important characteristics of this phenomenon, primarily violence, political basis, illegality and its (at least initially) illegitimacy. The genus proximum, or the first term of a higher order in relation to insurgency is political violence, and insurgency differs from other forms of political violence in terms of complexity, illegality, mass and other characteristics. Recognizing nonnegativity, objectivity, content, essential precision, complexity and accuracy as features of a good definition, researchers have differently defined this social phenomenon, but it can be noticed that available definitions only partially meet the mentioned criteria. Some of the definitions emphasize goal or motive (taking over political power, overthrowing the legal order, mastering resources, implementing party policy, changing the constitutional order, etc.). Others emphasize activities or method (subversion, military pressure, coup, etc.). The third group of definitions emphasizes the features of this phenomenon (unconstitutional, violent, ideologically motivated, etc.). Based on the abovementioned, it can be concluded that insurgency, as a complex form of political violence, is difficult to define precisely, so that its definition achieves a broad consensus. Definitions evolve depending on the context in which insurgency took place or is taking place, as well as the political goals and method chosen by insurgent movement or its sponsor. Based on the analysis of available definitions of insurgency and due to the constant change of categorical concepts, different approaches in defining and researching insurgency, an operational explicit definition can be formulated: insurgency is illegal intrastate complex form of political violence used by organized armed groups in order to achieve political goals. We expose this definition to professional and scientific criticism, stating that the problem of defining the concept of "insurgency" will continue to change due to development of this form of political violence because goals, activities, means and methods of insurgent organizations and contexts in which insurgency happens will also permanently change in accordance with current and future socio-political conditions, as well as motives and interests of key actors in this complex form of political violence.

Keywords: definition; defining; political violence; insurgency

INTRODUCTION

Insurgency is not a new social phenomenon; this form of political violence has existed throughout the whole human history¹. However, during the last thirty years, it has become strategically important, because, above all, it has been used as a tool of national, and foreign policy [1]. In the bipolar geopolitical division, insurgencies were most often considered as a way of fighting for liberation from colonization, repression, etc. However, its features as a foreign policy tool were also noticed, so at the unipolar geopolitical moment they gained greater importance. Due to these various manifestations, many definitions of this complex form of political violence have emerged.

The problems that researchers encounter in searching for the essential features of insurgency are semantic, and then substantive, because it is difficult to define what insurgency is, in relation to what it is not, primarily due to the similarity of content with other complex forms of political violence (guerrilla, terrorism, civil war, etc.).

All of this indicates the complexity of the phenomenon and problems that researchers are facing. However, defining some social phenomenon is necessary because it defines the main and constant features, structure, as well as the difference of a phenomenon from other similar phenomena². In this way, preconditions for a common approach and action in solving practical problems are provided in every society.

The paper does not analyse cases of insurgencies identified by available databases on this social phenomenon, such as the database of the Peace Research Institute Oslo [2], other researchers in this field [3] or private research organizations [4] in which features of this social phenomenon are emphasized, but the characteristic features of insurgency are critically presented, using hypothetico-deductive and comparative general scientific method, as well as all main (analytical and synthetic) methods of scientific knowledge from lexical, legal, research and military (doctrinal) definitions, in order to consider the problem of defining this concept and proposing an objective and explicit definition of its content.

THE PRESENTATION OF THE RESULTS OF SEMANTIC ANALYSIS

Although the phrase “armed rebellion” is present in national and international media, military, political and legal discourse, as well as in the discourse of the academic community that studies the problems of political violence, and also the function of security and defence, there is no generally accepted definition. This indicates the complexity, and also the politicization of the concept because the theoretical definition often depends on the current political discourse. Moreover, the phrase “armed rebellion” cannot be found in the Serbian language dictionaries. If we start from the attitude that a syntagm is an organized set of words that means a concept and that there is a main member and one or more dependent members, where a dependent member has the function of an attribute and defines more precisely the meaning of a main member, then in the phrase “armed rebellion” the noun “rebellion” is the main member, while the adjective “armed” is the dependent member.

The word “rebellion” is semantically defined in the 2011 Serbian Language Dictionary (published by the Matica srpska) as an uprising, insurgency, resentment, an expression of dissatisfaction, protest (against the government, politics, etc.). Furthermore, as resistance against someone, something, disobedience, resentment, and also as mess, chaos caused by riots, uproar, commotion [5]. The word “armed” is, in the same source, stated in the meaning - which is performed with a weapon (attack, conflict) or which is created in a fight, by fight. In the Lexicon of Foreign Words and Expressions by Milan Vujaklija from 1980, the word “rebellion” is used to define the concept of “revolt”, which entered our language from French (Fr. *révolte*), meaning rebellion, insurgency, uprising, strong resentment against someone or something. Moreover, the word “rebellion” is also used to define the concept of “insurrection” (Lat. *insurgere, insurrectio*), meaning rebellion, uprising, raising the people to arms [6].

In the 1986 Lexicon of Security, Obren Đorđević defines *insurgency* as „a form of subversive actions, which implies an armed action secretly prepared by an organized group in order to forcibly overthrow the existing legal order [7]”.

In contrast to the English speaking countries, where a term *insurgency* is used for armed rebellion (i.e. a form of violent takeover), the Russian Language Dictionary published in four volumes from 1957 to 1999, mentions several terms for defining an armed rebellion (Rus. бунт, повстанчества, крамола) [8]. The third edition of the Great Soviet Encyclopedia defines *insurgency* as counter-revolutionary warfare, i.e. an attempt by a militarily inferior group (rebels) to usurp and take control of the system by guerrilla warfare and population control [9]. This example indicates the dependence of the definition of the concept on political discourse because the October Revolution is mostly considered by the Western authors as *insurgency* against the Tsar, while the Russian vocabulary considers it as revolution, and later rebellion against the communist government in Russia as *insurgency* (i.e. counter-revolutionary warfare). Moreover, by defining *insurgency* as a form of political violence, the Russian government emphasizes in advance the negative (counter-revolutionary) context of such a political struggle.

Political theory in our country has contributed to the definition of this concept by one of the most cited definitions listed in the 1975 Political Encyclopedia. In this book, rebellion is defined as “an individual mass action or of an indefinite group, which is undertaken to forcibly overthrow a social or state system or to oppose some body or governmental measure”, and *insurgency* as “a form of rebellion in which its participants are all or partially provided with weapons suitable for attack and defence, where it is not necessary for participants to carry weapons all the time, but it is enough to possess them for such purpose and use them occasionally or keep them in places where they can easily use them [10]”. Such a definition is substantive and essentially more precise because it does not emphasize in advance the negative connotation of the phenomenon. Whether *insurgency* is a positive or negative social phenomenon that occurs depends on context. For example, in cases when a group is subjected to some form of political violence (exploitation, terror, repression, etc.), so if after using other political means the group members resort to *insurgency*, it is justified and supported by the international community. However, if motives of *insurgency* are taking control of some resources, secession or forcing the government to make concessions, then it is condemned, and states often help “the victim” state in coalition.

THE DOCTRINAL REVIEW

The doctrinal definition of the concept of *insurgency* is similar to the encyclopedic one. The Doctrine of the Serbian Armed Forces defines *insurgency* as “a specific form of armed violence, which threatens the state security because it seeks to achieve political goals in an unconstitutional manner and by force [11]”. The relevant Concept of the engagement of the Serbian Armed Forces in anti-terrorist and counter-*insurgency* operations states that “*insurgency* is a specific form of rebellion in which its participants, all of them or partly, are provided with weapons suitable for attack and defence, and it is enough that they are available to them, that is, to possess them for such purpose and use them occasionally or keep them in places where they can easily use them with the task of depriving the current regime of legitimacy and gaining Serbian legitimacy for themselves [12]”.

UK defence doctrine defines *insurgency* as “an organized, violent subversion which, as a challenge to the established authority, is used to influence political control, or to prevent political control [13]”.

Similar to UK defence doctrine, the US doctrinal documents define *insurgency* as “the organized use of subversion and violence perpetrated to seize, annul or challenge political control of the region [14]”.

The French doctrine views insurgency as the activities of an organized and ideologically motivated group (or movement), which seeks to persuade and coerce the population or use violence and subversion to provoke a political change of the government over state or region [15].

After redefining the concept, the German doctrine generally considers insurgency as a process of destabilization caused by political, economic and/or social dissatisfaction, which is carried out in order to influence the effectiveness and legitimacy of the state system [16].

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) defines insurgency as “the action of an organized, often ideologically motivated group or movement to influence or prevent political changes or to overthrow ruling authorities in a country or region, focusing on persuasion or forcing the population to use violence or subversion [17]”.

All these definitions respect and emphasize the political context of insurgency, which is reflected in goals such as gaining or challenging political control, the government change, influencing the effectiveness and legitimacy of the state system, etc.

THE THEORETICAL REVIEW OF THE SUBJECT OF THE RESEARCH

There are not many sources in our political and military discourse that deal with the topic of insurgency. There are more foreign sources on this problem, primarily due to the revolutionary character of system change in some countries (China, Russia) or the colonial experiences that the great powers have had throughout history, primarily Great Britain and France. Furthermore, the books of the US researchers stand out, especially during and after the Vietnam War and after the intervention in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The most important and one of the most cited in this field is certainly Mao Zedong. This Chinese real-politiker, the chairman of the Chinese Communist Party and the president of the People's Republic of China from its founding in 1949 until his death in 1976, is considered to be one of the most significant figures in Chinese political and military history. In his book “On Guerrilla Warfare”, which he wrote during the Chinese struggle against the Japanese occupation (1937), he laid the foundation of the organization and manner of executing insurgency. He drew his conclusions on the basis of historical experiences (the Russian resistance to Napoleon and the civil war in Russia), theories known and available to him until then (Clausewitz) and his practice. According to Mao Zedong, insurgency (guerrilla warfare combined with political work) is a powerful special weapons that nations inferior in military equipment and weapons can use against a stronger aggressor nation [18]. Mao Zedong elaborates the position by Clausewitz that war is a continuation of politics by other means in his practice and emphasizes that speed, surprise and deception of activities ensure a victory in such a fight.

On the basis of his (French) experience from Indochina and North Africa, the French officer David Galula wrote the book “Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice” in 1964, which has systematized the knowledge about differences between insurgency and other forms of political violence (revolution, conspiracy, civil wars) for the first time. Moreover, some main characteristics of this phenomenon are emphasized (political basis, longevity, price, importance of propaganda, variability, unconventionality, etc.). Like Mao Zedong, Galula paraphrased Clausewitz, defining insurgency as “implementing party policy within a country by all means [19]”.

The British view of insurgency was systematized by Frank Kitson in 1971 in his book “Low Intensity Operations: Subversion, Insurgency and Peacekeeping”. Kitson defines rebellion as “the use of armed force by a part of the population against the government, with the aim of overthrowing it or forcing it to do something it did not want [20]”.

The US researchers confirm the view that insurgency is not a new phenomenon and that it has been the most common form of social conflict since the organization of the first political communities [21]. The view that from the end of World War II until today insurgency is the predominant form of conflict is particularly emphasized [22]. This view is also held by the US theorist of international relations Joseph Nye, in his book "How to Understand International Conflicts". It states that out of 111 conflicts that took place from 1989 to 2000, as many as 95 of them were of an internal character, and most of them arose due to ethnic reasons [23]. Bard O'Neill defines insurgency as a struggle between groups and authorities in which groups consciously use political resources (e.g. organizational expertise, propaganda and demonstrations) and violence to destroy, reformulate or maintain the legitimacy of one or more aspects of politics [21]. Steven Metz and Raymond Millen, describing the conceptual context, define insurgency as a strategy adopted by groups that cannot achieve their political goals by conventional means or rapid takeover, and are used by those who are too weak to gain power in other way [1].

One of the most cited authors, whose views are included in official documents of the European Union and the US military doctrinal documents is the Australian David Kilcullen. He concludes that insurgency is a public movement that tries to remove the status quo through subversion, political activity, rebellion, armed conflict and terrorism [24].

Noting that insurgency is increasingly becoming a topical form of threatening security of nations and states, Mitar Kovač and Dejan Stojković in their book "Strategic Defence Planning" define insurgency as a type of an armed conflict in which, very often, a group in society (of stronger or weaker political influence) seeks to provoke "changes" by combining subversion, propaganda and military pressure, with the aim of persuading or encouraging broad masses to accept such changes [25].

Miodrag Gordić and Goran Matić define insurgency, from the aspect of threatening security, as „an organized armed political struggle, whose goal can be to take over power by coup and overthrowing the existing government or of much more limited scope [26]". It directs postponed military and political activity (subversion and armed conflict) towards full or partial control of state resources, through the use of irregular military forces or illegal political organizations. Furthermore, from the standpoints of judicial practice and from the aspect of the theory of criminal law, the same authors derive the criminal law concept of insurgency on the basis of characteristics of this criminal act. According to them, the main characteristics of insurgency are:

- a) an individual action of an indefinite number of persons (as a rule, a greater number of participants take part in it, but it cannot be defined in advance);
- b) an organized action (does not occur spontaneously, but as a result of certain previous activities aimed at its preparation and direction, and is most often supported by an organization or a foreign country);
- c) participants are armed with weapons or some tools and are ready to use them, although the use itself does not have to happen;
- d) it is always aimed at forcibly achieving some goals, and most often at threatening the constitutional order or security of a country.

The legal aspect of insurgency can be seen in "Criminal Code of the Republic of Serbia", which classifies this act as a crime against the constitutional order and security of the Republic of Serbia [27]. Insurgency is considered to be an act aimed at threatening the constitutional order, security or territorial integrity of Serbia. For this crime, Article 311 provides for a minimum sentence of five years imprisonment for an organizer of insurgency, and a prison sentence of three to fifteen years for participants. This crime is treated similarly in foreign legislation. For example, in the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation, insurgency is classified as an act against state power and is incriminated as organizing or actively participating in insurgency with the aim of overthrowing or forcibly changing the con-

stitutional order of the Russian Federation or violating its territorial integrity. Twelve to twenty years of imprisonment are provided for this crime [26].

According to Radoslav Gaćinović and Dragan Mlađan, the legal aspect of defining social phenomena is justified because there is no formal consensus on insurgency in terms of content. Namely, the modern system of international law does not deal with rebellion, and considers it as an internal matter of state and is in its exclusive competence. Additionally, Article 1, Paragraph 2 of the 1977 Protocol II, annexed to the Geneva Conventions of 1949, exempts rebellion from the scope of international law. The same authors accept the definition of the Central Intelligence Agency, which considers insurgency as a tool for exercising control over state resources by using irregular military forces or illegal political organizations [28]. Such a narrow organizational (agency) definition is not empirically supported because the motives of rebels across the planet are not only the control of resources, and rebel forces always include legal political organizations, as well.

Milan Mijalkovski states that insurgency is an illegal activity of a greater social group against the current government of home country or against some governmental body. Persons participating in insurgency are mutually connected with goal and readiness to use force to achieve it. Insurgency is characterized by thorough preparation of its leaders, and it starts at the moment when rebel leaders consider it the most favourable for achieving a set goal or an adequate reason has arisen [29]. The same author points out that insurgency is caused by the escalation of terrorism in one of the following cases: (1) when an attacked state is not capable of optimally disabling terrorists; (2) when the terrorist collective has the support of local population, which transforms its public mass forms of support into violent ones; 3) when terrorists have a great number of supporters, and they believe that punctual attacks cannot achieve ultimate goals; and (4) when a foreign sponsor orders terrorist leaders to incite the population to revolt.

It is necessary to emphasize the importance of the view that this form of political violence occurs with or after other forms of political violence, but with the restriction that insurgency must not occur only after some of the complex forms of political violence, but also after some of its simple forms. Furthermore, terrorism, as well as subversions, protests, riots, unrests or guerrilla actions can be a part of tactics (mode of action, activities) of insurgent movements.

The fact that insurgency is an internal state matter has been confirmed by Vangel Milkovski in his article "The engagement of modern military forces in countering terrorist and insurgency forces". This author, whose conclusions are included in the doctrinal document of the Serbian Armed Forces (the Concept of the engagement of the Serbian Armed Forces in anti-terrorist and counter-insurgency operations), points out that insurgency, as a social phenomenon, arises as a complex of processes and relations between and within state entities, whose interests, values and needs are diametrically opposed and cannot be reconciled through processes of cooperation [30].

Recognizing non-negativity as a feature of a good definition from the above-mentioned definitions, it is also necessary to point out differences between this form of political violence and other similar forms that are overlapping. Thus, unlike insurgency, pursuing an opposition policy, forming opposition media and parties, organizing public gatherings, participating in elections, etc. is legal. On the other hand, political parts of insurgent movements can carry out such activities, as well.

Moreover, insurgency is not a phenomenon that occurs suddenly, en masse and with broad, generally accepted goals, such as revolutions, although insurgents often act at crisis moments, when other social circumstances contribute to the potential success of insurgency. In addition, it is important to emphasize that a great part of insurgent movements are fighting for the favour of the undecided majority.

Insurgency is not a conflict of approximately equal parties within a society that differ in opposing views on one or a group of related issues such as civil wars. However, insurgencies often turn into long civil conflicts within a society.

Furthermore, insurgency is not the result of elite conflict at the top of a society, as in coup cases, but success and subsequent exploitation of success depend on the elites that initiate and support it (materially, declaratively), set goals, etc.

Physically, the targets of insurgency forces are not civilian, as is the case with terrorism, but the struggle for "hearts and minds" often has elements of terrorism and coercion. Also, insurgency does not occur spontaneously and suddenly, and rebel forces are mostly supported from outside.

Finally, insurgency is not weapons of the strong like military intervention or war. However, the induction of insurgency in certain regions (states) is done by great and strong states in order to pursue their interests because this "format" of conflict is politically favourable and leaves plenty of room for manoeuvre in case of failure (changing the party being supported, denying involvement, etc.).

CONCLUSION

Analysing the syntagm "armed rebellion" in relation to the terms that define the factors of the syntagm, it can be concluded that armed rebellion in our lexical discourse is an armed way of expressing dissatisfaction or disagreement with the policy pursued by the government. Doctrinal documents respect and emphasize the important characteristics of insurgency, primarily violence, political basis, illegality and its (at least initially) illegitimacy.

To define some concept means to define its content, i.e. a set of its essential features (qualities). Each concept has a *definiendum* (the concept whose content we define by definition – "insurgency" and *definiens* (the expression by which it is defined). Each *definiens* can be broken down into *genus proximum* and *differentia specifica*. A distinctive difference is what distinguishes one concept from others that fall under the same closest categorical concept.

In our case, the first concept of higher order is political violence, and insurgency differs from other forms of political violence in its complexity, illegality, mass and other characteristics. Recognizing non-negativity, objectivity, content, versatility, essential precision, complexity, capability to develop, proportionality and accuracy, as the features of a good definition [31], researchers have differently defined this social phenomenon, but it is noticed that available definitions only partially meet the mentioned criteria. Some of the mentioned definitions emphasize goal or motive as the main *definiens* (taking over power, overthrowing the legal order, mastering resources, implementing the party policy, changing the constitutional order, etc.). Others emphasize activities and manner of execution (subversion, military pressure, coup, etc.). The third group of definitions emphasizes the features of this phenomenon (unconstitutional, violent, ideologically motivated, etc.). On the basis of the mentioned, it can be concluded that insurgency, as a complex form of political violence, is difficult to define precisely so that the definition achieves a broad consensus. Definitions evolve depending on the context in which insurgency took place or is taking place, the manner of insurgency, as well as political goals chosen by insurgent movement or its sponsor.

Based on the analysis of available definitions and sources that are directly or indirectly related to insurgency, and due to the constant change of categorical concepts, the mentioned different approaches in defining and researching insurgency, an operational explicit definition can be formulated: insurgency is an intrastate illegal complex form of political violence used by organized armed groups to achieve political goals. We propose this definition to professional and scientific criticism, concluding that the problem of defining the concept of "insurgency" will continue to be influenced by the development of this form of political violence because goals, activities, means and methods of insur-

gent organizations, as well as contexts that insurgency is taking place in, will also permanently change in accordance with current and future socio-political conditions, as well as motives and interests of key actors in this complex form of political violence.

Endnotes

¹Dragan Simeunović, *Političko nasilje*, Radnička štampa, Beograd, 1989, pp. 70-87.

²On the problems and rules of definition, see more in: Slavomir Milosavljević i Ivan Radosavljević, *Osnovi metodologije političkih nauka*, JP Službeni glasnik, Beograd, 2000, pp. 166-169 [31].

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Теоријско-методолошки проблеми дефинисања појма "оружане побуне" као сложеног облика политичког насиља

Сажетак:

Оружана побуна је значајан унутрашњи безбедносни проблем, али и средство за постизање различитих политичких циљева, не само у унутрашњим већ и у међународним односима. Током успостављања свог теоријског основа најчешће је проучавана у оквиру ширег контекста, односно рата, као сложеног облика политичког насиља, што је произвело више теоријских, доктринарних и других одређења ове друштвене појаве. Различите дефиниције које се могу наћи у литератури на први поглед су доста сличне, јер полазе од оружане борбе против власти (или неке мере коју власт предузима), али се њиховом анализом могу уочити и значајне разлике у садржају појма. У трагању за ваљаном дефиницијом оружане побуне, а примењујући методе дефинисања (методу синонима, аналитички, синтетички, генетички и операционални метод), као и правила дефинисања, анализиране су доступне дефиниције оружане побуне. У раду су анализирана семантичка, доктринарна и истраживачка одређења "оружане побуне" ради сагледавања проблема дефинисања овог појма и формулисања предлога објективног и експликативног одређења његовог садржаја.

Кључне речи: дефиниција; дефинисање; политичко насиље; оружана побуна