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THE PROCESS OF A DEMOCRATIC POLITICAL CULTURE FORMATION IN POLAND

The formation of a democratic political system in contemporary Poland may lead to the question with regard to a relationship between democratic institutions and procedures, and political culture. To clarify, one could enquire which of them came first. Possible interconnections may be reduced to three options: firstly, a democratic political system derives from the former existence of a democratic political culture; secondly, the development of the system coincides with the formation of its equivalent culture; and finally, the emergence of a democratic political culture follows the former introduction of democratic institutions. Oversimplifications present in the sentence above are clear (e.g. with regard to an assumption of the positivistic perspective excluding the discussion of cause-and-effect relationships or the institutional concept of a political system). However, this should lead to a reflection focused on two issues, namely: (1) when were the basic elements of political culture formed? and (2) what happens within the framework of the political culture when it co-exists with democratic institutions and procedures? In what follows, I will attempt to justify the claim that basic elements of a democratic political culture were formed in Poland before 1989, whereas processes jointly referred to as a systemic transformation did not contribute to any further development of these components. On the contrary, in some cases their extenuation might even be stated.

There is no need to provide an extended explication of the notion of „political culture” since the term has been discussed in great detail in a number of papers. For the purposes of this paper, I will employ a definition by J. Wiatr who discriminated a democratic political culture as one of the two types (the other is authoritarian) characteristic of bourgeois society (Wiatr 1999: 189 and ff.). In brief, normative

assumptions of the democratic political culture include: factors facilitating citizens' involvement (such as interest in politics, knowledge of politics, willingness to participate in politics and engagement in issues related to the operation of a political system), an approval of civic rights and liberties, accountability of governing elites, differentiation of opinions, pluralism of organizations and competition between them etc. Citizens' opinions and their political (mainly electoral) behaviour serve as indicators of political culture. The choice of indicators depends, to a large extent, on the availability of relevant research results.

To begin with political behaviour, the period whose origins date back to the August of 1980 has shown that multiple social categories and groups demonstrated deep involvement in political life. „Politicization” proceeded at a fast rate with a rapid growth of interest in politics and participation in political life. A pronounced, dichotomous political division of Polish society was revealed and established in the period. Its fullest and most up-to-date instance entails participation in trade unions. Some trade unions constituted the „Solidarity” movement, while some others supported the Communist political authorities (so-called „branch unions” [„związki branżowe”]). The differences between the two will not be analyzed here. However, it should be stressed that, on the whole, a few million citizens took sides in the conflict, participating in it in a more or less active manner. The development of mass organizations may also be viewed as an indicator of the existence of adequate knowledge and practical skills, whilst aspirations articulated within their framework (together with procedures employed within them) – as a manifestation of strong democratic trends. The programme and activities of the NSZZ Solidarność [Independent Self-Governing Trade Union „Solidarity”] called for political pluralism, free elections and a removal of the PZPR [Polish United Workers' Party] from political authority etc. The demands were not explicit; they appeared inherent in the slogan of „Self-governing Republic”. What did not at the time comply with democratic norms was a rather explicit reluctance on the Solidarity's part to either reveal or define political differences and to bestow them with an institutional shape (which was, in a way, justified by the situation of the „besieged fortress”). Nonetheless, the early predecessors of political parties slowly began to be formed. The KPN [Confederation for Independent Poland] may even be said to have experienced quite a rapid growth in the second half of 1981. What is more, it is worth bearing in mind that within the NSZZ

„Solidarność” many formal structures were born that promoted dissimilar and at times even clashing interests. Its branch units (altogether there were around ninety of the units representing different branches of industry and professions), especially those which represented the most powerful sectors (such as miners, railwaymen, shipyard workers, steelworkers, longshoremen or typographers) were for instance sometimes very difficult to control by the union’s headquarters. Yet another example could be provided e.g. by the *Komitety Obrony Więzionych za Przekonania* [Committees for the Defence of Those Imprisoned because of Their Beliefs], which were under the influence of the KPN or „Sieć” [„the Network”] within which the idea to establish a *Polska Partia Pracy* [Polish Labour Party] that would be very closely connected with the union took shape. Moreover, almost all kinds of milieux, such as students, farmers, journalists, craftsmen, militiamen etc. formed organizations that were independent of the authorities in the period.

The failure of the first „Solidarity” subsequently led to an opportunity to disclose ideological and political differences, organizational pluralism (which, at times, seemed close to absurdity) and to express – in a straightforward manner – a demand for parliamentary democracy. This demand, as regards certain circles and formations, was coupled with a demand for a capitalist system. Naturally, only a relatively small part of society was engaged in the anti-establishment activities at the time. Nevertheless, Polish society, particularly at the beginning of the 1980s, was deeply involved and active. This was reflected, *inter alia*, in a significant number of citizens that participated in various organizations (parties, associations, unions etc.). As far as the later period is concerned, one should also mention a fast pace at which a network of *komitety obywatelskie* [civic committees] was organized. About a hundred thousand citizens were involved in the committees that successfully ran the „Solidarity’s” electoral campaign in 1989.

Moving on to the analysis of beliefs, attitudes and values declared in the 1980s, one can easily demonstrate a strong prevalence of their democratic components. Their presence was, however, considerably more pronounced in the sphere of values (objectives) than in the sphere of institutional solutions that might lead to their attainment. Paradoxically, certain evaluations and types of behaviour concerning the former system’s institutions happened to be more suitable for the democratic system than the ones that prevail currently. The level of confidence placed in the Sejm may serve as one of the examples: it was never low-

er than 50% between 1981 and 1989, whereas at the beginning of 2004 only 21% of respondents declared their confidence in the Sejm and Senate, with 67% voicing lack thereof (*Zaufanie w sferze publicznej* [Confidence in the public sphere]...). The electoral turnout may be another, in a way, controversial example: 72–75% of those eligible to vote¹ partook in the 1985 election to the Sejm. On the contrary, the highest turnout in the Third Republic of Poland did not exceed 69% (with its peak value recorded in the second ballot of presidential election in 1995); the score during the parliamentary election in 1993 amounted to 52,1%. If one is to take the election to the European Parliament into account, not only the poor turnout should be focused upon (which totalled 21% and might, for certain reasons, have been expected) but, most of all, reasons for absenteeism given during subsequent opinion polls. Some of them confirm that the Polish society undergoes depoliticization in the period when democratic institutions and procedures are created. Respondents excused themselves for their absenteeism listing a lack of familiarity with the candidates, which – given the mass media campaign – may be interpreted as their unwillingness to get to know them or a self-induced blockage of information (25%). The other responses included a general lack of interest in politics (23%). The reason indicated most frequently, i.e. the discouragement to take part in all kinds of elections which derives from the political situation in the country – declared by 43% of the respondents – could also be seen as the main cause of political passivity or apathy (*Głosujący* [Voters]...). Political passivity is likely to increase, which raises concern. In October 2004, only 45% declared their willingness to participate in parliamentary elections were they to take place. To compare, during the week preceding the election of 2001, whose turnout totalled at ca 46%, 66% respondents declared their willingness to participate („*Nie wierzę...*” [„I do not believe...”). One of the other indicators that might testify to the depoliticization hypothesis, especially when juxtaposed with the period of 1980–1981, is linked to a relatively insignificant number of citizens who are active in a wide range of or-

¹ Given the governmental data on the turnout (78%) and the data resulting from independent measurements (66%, but this applied only to big cities), such a percentage may be acknowledged as genuine. However, the election took place at the time when fears of punishment related to absenteeism could not have been serious, while the opposition, urging to boycott it, created an alternative to participation in the election.

ganizations within the framework of the political system. Merely 0,7% engage in the activities of political parties and associations for instance, 3,8% are active in trade unions and 1,1% in local governments (*Grupowa...* [Group...]).

Opinions declared by Polish citizens in the 1980s, pertaining democracy and institutions of which a democratic system consists² might be, to a large degree, viewed as already consolidated and conducive to the establishment of a democratic system. Among basic values which manifested themselves in the Polish society between 1980 and 1981, Stefan Nowak listed in the first place clearly outlined values of democratic nature, such as participation in decision-making processes at all levels, *subjecthood* (political agency) and dislike of facade *subjecthood* (political agency). Additionally, he stated that the „social vacuum”, he had previously described, was filled with spontaneous human activity and with a sense of social bonding on different planes (Nowak 1984: 425–428). Analyzing other research results, one may come to the conclusion that a great majority of the society believed at the time in the value of democracy, especially in the necessity to abide by civic rights and liberties.

As of 1981 the majority of the society acknowledged the urge to resort to solutions based on democratic pluralism. A curtailment of the PZPR's political role was for instance advocated by 60,1% respondents, an increase in the Church's participation in public life – by 77,4% and the need to commission new elections to the Sejm and national councils – by 71,3% (in the circumstances, the elections would have to reckon with the existent political pluralism). Moreover, 83% of the surveyed were against restrictions on the freedom of speech and 87,9% in favour of granting to „Solidarity” access to radio and television (Adamski *et al.* 1982: 140–141, 199 and ff.). Discussing the opinions of democratic nature, we should, foremost, underline the value of the last percentage quoted above since it meant that people who held different views, including political opponents of „Solidarity”, also spoke for opportunities to present varying political opinions.

In the mid-1980s, 90,5% of the surveyed listed a need to abide by civic liberties and political rights among democratic principles. 86% stated that a majority should always have a decisive voice. However, the voice of a minority ought to be listened to and respected as well. Fur-

² A well-known catalogue of solutions which are to facilitate democracy (poli-archy) was formulated by R. Dahl. See i.e. Dahl 2000: 81–82.

thermore, 90,7% emphasized equality in law, while 87,5% – equal opportunities in public life. 82% claimed that citizens' participation in crucial decision-making is the most important of all (Ryszka 1987: 279–280). Such a hierarchy (with the exception of a very high ranking statement that an abundance in goods and equal chances to access them is of utmost importance – chosen by 88,7%) does not significantly differ from the way democracy was understood as revealed in the answers to an open-ended question asked in 2001. Most frequently, democracy was then identified with freedom, civic liberties and political freedom – 47%, citizens' participation in governance – 21% and equality – 11%) (*Rozumienie... [Understanding...]*).

According to the research carried out in 1988, in answer to the question concerning the characteristic qualities of „good society”, 81% of the respondents stated that the kind of a political system introduced should be determined by citizens, while 93% maintained that government should be elected by the people. What is more, 73,6% supported a reform of the obtaining electoral law so as to enable citizens to choose between candidates holding different political views. Moreover, 96% polled in the same survey came to the conclusion that there should be a freedom of speech and a possibility of expressing various opinions in public, while 89% noticed a need to facilitate uninhibited formation of social, economic and political organizations (Reykowski 1993: 30). There was some shift in comparison to the earlier period – insofar as in 1981 the majority of the society also recognized the importance of democratic institutions, 70,9% declared that there was no need to create new political parties³. The latter opinion evolved, as might be seen. An approval of party pluralism increased substantially in the second half of the 1980s.

One may say that the society entered the 1990s with already formed democratic views, the majority of which were consolidated till the end of the decade. Since then, the perception of democracy has started to deteriorate, accompanied by ever worse assessments of the functioning of the democratic political system⁴ – 21% satisfied vs. 68%

³ It is one of the results of the opinion poll „Polacy '81” The widespread presence of such a view was interpreted by the authors as a result of a taboo that covered the leading role of the party. See: Adamski et al. 1982: 148–150.

⁴ That it is not good and requires changes, believed in March 2003 more or less as many respondents as in January 1989, that is, in the latter case, just before the old system collapsed. Cf. *Polacy o...* When the degree to which changes in the political system

dissatisfied (*Postawy...* [Attitudes...]) and the worsening image of the political class alongside political parties and institutions. For example, in May 2004 the view that a democratic system has an advantage over all other regimes was held by 60% of the surveyed (contrasted with 70% in the year 2000), whereas 42% (37% in 2000) were in favour of the statement that non-democratic regimes may sometimes be more desirable than democratic ones (*Postawy...*). The changes may not seem striking. Yet, together with many other indicators, they evidence a reversal of the tendency of a constant or growing support for democracy. This stems from the fact that the functioning of institutions which are fundamental to parliamentary democracy obtains an ever worse evaluation. The Sejm of the Fourth Term was for instance negatively evaluated by ca 80% of the society, with only 10% of positive evaluations⁵. Aversion prevails as regards all political parties and a decrease in the level of identification with the parties has been recorded in the last few years (*Spadek...* [A decrease...]). The conclusion that the electorate has no adequate candidates to vote for is reached more and more often. If this is the case, one is inclined to believe that the level of support for the democratic system – viewed as virtually without an alternative – will decrease further. What is more, juxtaposing some recent research results with the previously quoted 1980s-results, one may find other examples that bear witness to the shift in the attitudes, which is rather unfavourable from a democratic point of view. It pertains, among other things, a substantial decrease in the value attached to participation in governance, which is manifested by the ratio of those who wish to partake in governance (16%) to those who want to be governed well (79%) (*Rozumienie...*). Moreover, a number of people supporting the need to impose some restrictions on the freedom of speech has increased. For example in June 2001, 42% of the respondents concurred with the statement that society should not tolerate political views which are radically different from those held by the majority, whereas 41%

had been introduced in 2004 is evaluated, the rating is the worst in the whole research series the question is asked – 42% stated that the changes bring it closer to an undemocratic system, while only 18% that – closer to a democratic one (to compare: in 1993, the percentages were, respectively, 39% and 22%) (*Postawy...*).

⁵ See: *Oceny...* It might be added that the level of confidence placed in MPs (9%) or in political parties (10%) is the lowest in Central and Eastern European countries. See: *Zaufanie...*

approved of the statement that the principle which says that everyone is entitled to their own opinions goes too far nowadays. Moreover, 34% would like the press to be controlled because it sometimes provides misleading information. 59% of the respondents would like to impose film and magazine censorship in order to maintain social morality at a certain level (*Rozumienie...*).

The feeling of one's practical inability to influence the way the system functions has not changed as compared to the 1980s. A sense of lack of one's impact on public decision-making dominated in the second half of the 1980s. In 1988, 85% of the interviewed stated that ordinary people did not have any influence over decisions made by politicians (Reykowski (ed.) 1993: 38). This was rather obvious in the regime which did not allow for free elections – a basic mechanism that makes it possible to influence the direction of decision-making processes. Subsequently, i. e. in 1990 and in 1997, the feeling of influence slightly increased but the number of people declaring a sense of having an impact on the state affairs did not exceed 20%. In 2000 such a feeling was declared by 15%, with 83% stating lack thereof (*Poczucie...; Zagórski, Strzeszewski 2000: 58*). Therefore, in terms of one of the most basic indicators that testify to a subjective perception of the level of democratic development (substantial and not only formal), a democratic system does not differ much from a non-democratic one. The way the political structure of the society is perceived does not comply with the normative vision of a democratic system either. The society perceives the structure as an explicit dichotomy (elites vs. masses). Furthermore, holding a position of power is also related to economic differentiation (elites enjoy unjustified privileges) and moral differences (politicians are dishonest and the political class is viewed as pathological) (*Kto naprawdę... Opinie o polskiej...*). The belief that political representatives of society do not represent its interests, while political institutions primarily serve interests of particular individuals and groups that stay in government is for instance reflected in the way in which fundamental social conflicts are viewed. Conflicting parties which in 2003 were listed as strong and very strong included farmers and government (88%), government and society (76%) and elites and masses (75%) (*Opinie o sile...*). Noteworthy, the conflict between elites and masses does not seem to be directly transposed from the previous era (at the time its sides were described as „we” – the society vs. „they” – the Communist authorities).

The conflict was, in a way, less explicitly present in the common consciousness of the people at the time (indicated by 24,8% in 1984 and 22,4% in 1988 cf. Adamski et al. 1989: 227), although one has to bear in mind that these percentages may not be altogether comparable). Most importantly, the discord weakened with the outset of the new regime. In 1990 it was listed by merely 4,2% of the interviewed despite the visible growth in a general conviction that social conflicts do take place (Ryszka 1987: 230–235; Adamski et al. 1991: 119). To simplify, one could say that the system which had changed the manner in which governing elites were recruited not only did not bring about a stronger association of masses with elites, but altogether failed to live up to social expectations, ultimately accentuating the perceived differences linked to one's position in the power structure. Moreover, according to the majority of voters, the political class fails regardless of its ideological and political differentiation, which only strengthens the feeling of the lack of alternative⁶.

Authoritarianism is yet another set of opinions and beliefs, manifesting continuity in the discussed period, which is relevant to the analysis of societal attitudes towards democracy. Basing on research results, one could state that authoritarian attitudes, characteristic of ca two-thirds of the society, have all along co-existed with the approval of democracy and democratic solutions. For example, in the opinion poll *Polacy '88* [Poles '88], 77,6% of the surveyed agreed with the statement that Poland needed a strong leader who would introduce order in the state (Adamski et al. 1989: 284) This is also confirmed by current research. 69% of the respondents hold the belief that a strong leader is capable of doing more for the state than laws, discussions and consultations. More than 60% of the respondents support an opinion that is indicative of the authoritarian personality: the world consists of two types of people only. These are the strong and the weak (*Psychologiczne...*). The discussed data mean that, to a large extent, the very same people hold ambivalent feelings and beliefs (both „democratic” and „authoritarian”). This may result in an approval of totally dissimilar solutions in the political sphere (e.g. support for both semi-loyal oppo-

⁶ 66% of voters who supported AWS [Solidarity Electoral Action] and UW [Freedom Union] in the 1997 election were frustrated with their political performance. The same feeling prevailed among 83% of those who voted for SLD [Left Democratic Alliance] and UP [Labour Union] in 2001. Cf. „*Nie wierzę...*”.

sition and restriction of democracy⁷). Analyzing the variegated types of social behaviour, one could, taking advantage of Stanislaw Ossowski's analytical categories, submit a hypothesis stating that democratic values belong, in a way, to a sphere of commonly recognized and therefore easily declared values. On the other hand, the authoritarian values belong to a sphere of values which are „sensed” and thus are more frequently manifest in action one undertakes.

Having discussed the aforementioned data, one comes to the following conclusions:

– The elements of political culture which are functional with regard to the democratic system were formed earlier. The majority of them originated under the non-democratic regime (which did, however, refer to popular sovereignty on the ideological plane); the formation of the system of democratic institutions was, *inter alia*, an outcome of their influence.

– Under the influence of e.g. the actual manner in which democratic principles are put into practice, the elements in question become weakened, while support for the democratic system on the level of behaviour does not increase; the support on the level of beliefs decreases, which in time may give rise to problems with legitimization of the authorities.

– The above-mentioned elements of political culture – dysfunctional with regard to the democratic system – either persist (the level of authoritarianism), have not been changed by the democratic system, as desired (the feeling of one's political influence) or have been formed anew (a feeling of conflict between the elites and society), resulting from the perception of the modes in which power is actually exercised. The perception has, most frequently, an indirect nature since it is mediated by the mass media. It is thus worth remembering that it is more focused on instances of pathology than normality.

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⁷ The semi-loyal opposition (as well as a mechanism of democratic decay) is discussed by J. J. Linz. Cf. Linz 1998.

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