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SOCIAL EVALUATION OF PRL

It has been almost 21 years now since the events symbolizing the end of PRL [Polish People's Republic] and the initiation of the transformation changes took place. This is a period long enough to expect on the one hand that the process of forgetting or idealizing of the past has started, while, on the other hand, the growing share of Polish society does not know the past period from their first hand experience. As a result, beliefs that are too generalizing and simplifying the past clearly start to spread, especially in the situation in which opinions concerning the past have become an object and instrument of currently played out political struggles. One of such beliefs that has already been present in some milieus earlier, entails a perception that the dominant majority of the society before 1989 formed enemies of the previous system and that a considerable part of them took part in oppositional activities. This manner of perceiving reality could be evidenced for example by the following words of Marcin Kula: „In spite of what is today said – and what I myself used to say towards the end of PRL – ultimately Poles had not been so much divided into «us» and «them», the authorities and society” (Leszczyński 2010: 20). In many surveys, the membership in PZPR [Polish United Workers' Party] or „Solidarność” [Solidarity] in 1980–1981 is taken as an indicator of political attitudes from before several decades ago – the researchers do not want to remember that those were not reciprocally exclusive statuses: about 1/3 of the PZPR members (that is ca. 1 mln people) simultaneously belonged to „Solidarność”¹.

In the circumstances, it is worthwhile considering *inter alia* an answer to questions concerning the proportions between the supporters

¹ This indicator is used among others in surveys by Ośrodek Badania Opinii Publicznej and Centrum Badania Opinii Społecznej; see also e.g. Wasilewski (ed.) 1999; Grabowska, Szawiel 2001.

and enemies of the previous system, the extent to which that system had been accepted, if and to what degree it was legitimated. The answer to the last question is not easy. This is a consequence, among others, of multiple ways to understand and define the concept of legitimization and of its subject; difficulties in assessing to what degree the system is stabilized by legitimacy that it enjoys; and to what extent this is a result of other factors (such as effectiveness in satisfying needs, getting accustomed to the system, apathy, lack of alternatives, coercion etc.) as well as difficulties related to interpretation of data². Since limited space does not allow here for a broader analysis of these issues, I will restrict myself only to a few presuppositions: I reject the sometimes voiced opinion that one may not speak about legitimacy of power in the case of the previous system at all because of its origins (or its undemocratic character); I acknowledge that legitimization is a multi-dimensional phenomenon (in accordance with the position taken by among others D. Easton and D. Beetham) and is gradual in nature (following, among others, J.J. Linz, in connection with the efficiency and effectiveness of the system); I assume that, because in thus defined conception of legitimization an important role is played by articulating an alternative vision of the system, this was the case on a bigger scale only at the end of 1981 within a forum constituted by NSZZ „Solidarność” [Independent Self-governing Trade Union „Solidarność”]. I take legitimization to mean, in accordance with L. Sobkowiak’s description, a „really existing state of acceptance by society or by its significant circles of the existing political system and its components [...] that is rooted in positive evaluations of their origins and/or means and results of their functioning” (Sobkowiak 1997: 154).

At the beginning, it needs to be clearly stated that, as in the case of any other issue that becomes an object of social evaluations, the evaluation of the PRL system was differentiated: it varied considerably depending on particular aspects of that reality, while the passage of elapsing time brought about changes in social perceptions. Also, the accomplishment of the regime change was an obvious testimony to the ultimate predominance of the system’s opponents. Taking the last claim as a fact that does not need to be proven, our attention will be now concentrated primarily on answering the question concerning the extent to which views functional with regard to the previous reality did exist,

² I write more about this in: Łabędź 1991.

which will among others demonstrate the degree to which that political system had been legitimized. It might also be interesting to see, what evaluations of that historical period have been retained in social memory after so many years and after so many effects of the introduced changes materialised. The discussion of the problematic that is presented here is based on a review of various existing data rather than a novel analysis.

Below, we will take into account only views that were expressed in surveys that had been fairly regularly carried out during the last two decades of the PRL period, that is in the situation of a gradual opening to the West (travelling abroad, television, films etc.) and organizing opposition and then a mass social movement that made it possible for the respondents to gain a broader perspective within which to form their opinions and make evaluations. The reliability of those surveys, which is questioned by some, was in a way confirmed by the fact that in their majority their results had not been published (sometimes they had even been made secret): this is why it is hardly possible to assume that the authorities were keen on having the findings forged. However, by contrast, it is impossible to determine to what extent the respondents themselves had been keen on hiding their real views – although even here the similarity of results obtained in surveys that had been carried out by diverse research centres seems to suggest that this factor had played a limited role. In our analysis, we will also take into account some social behaviours, mainly those that are evidenced by data that allow for assessing their extent. In this case, it is worthwhile recalling P. Blau's remark that in the practice of functioning of political authorities one cannot distinguish between voluntary behaviours and involuntary ones.

One of the indicators used in the public opinion surveys was a comparison of some features of socialism and capitalism. The findings suggest that as regards social issues, socialism was evaluated much better than capitalism, while in the case of matters connected with observance of civic rights, positive evaluations of capitalism prevailed. For example in 1979, better achievements of socialism in the area of comprehensive education were indicated by 82%, in the area of securing jobs by 86%, in the area of health care – 78%; in 1983 those shares decreased a little and were, respectively – 79%, 79%, 68%. In the case of such an area as the influence of citizens on governing the state, the distribution of opinions was more complex: the predominance of socialism was in 1979 stated by 34% of respondents, of capitalism –

23%, while in 1983 25% people acknowledged that socialism was better, while 26% that capitalism was better. The predominance of capitalism in terms of opportunities to associate was absolute (in 1979 – 52%, in 1983 – 46%), just as in terms of freedom of speech (54% and 48%). It needs to be added that in the case of questions that had to do with civil rights, the category of those respondents who had no opinion was numerous (20–32%) (OBOP i SP, maj 1984). In consequence, one may state that in accordance with stereotypical ways to perceive those two systems, the manner in which social issues were tackled in socialism was decidedly assumed to be better than the one in capitalism – that means that the dominant majority of the society saw good sides of their situation in that period.

A general evaluation of the history of PRL was a more synthetic indicator – OBOP asked respondents for such an evaluation a few times, every five years. Answers to the question how – in the respondent's opinion – historians will evaluate in the future the post-war period of our history were in the subsequent surveys (conducted in 1974, 1979 and 1984) as follows:

- decidedly positively 23%, 27%, 7%,
- rather positively but emphasizing some negative sides 51%, 58%, 50%,
- rather negatively but emphasizing some positive sides 11%, 7%, 21%,
- decidedly negatively 1%, 1%, 4%,
- it is hard to say 13%, 7%, 18% (OBOP i SP, June 1974, September 1979, June 1984).

The above quoted data demonstrate that, just like in the majority of other surveys, respondents were more willing to choose less explicit evaluations. However, in 1984 the number of people who evaluated PRL decidedly positively decreased markedly, even though positive evaluations still prevailed in total (57% vs. 25% negative opinions). As long as in the preceding years positive evaluations dominated (in 1974 – 74%, in 1979 – 85%), in 1984 they were less frequent, but their share still appears significant taking into account that that was the period of an open crisis that had been evolving already for several years, changed consciousness because of the interval of legal operation of „Solidarność”, and the use of violence during the martial law.

In the circumstances, a question arises what were the causes of the relatively significant share of such moderately positive evaluations. The answer could draw on three elements that are evidenced in the surveys (without going into the question what processes led to their formation): memories of the best years in the history of PRL, the congruence of

society's opinions with regime principles that had been propagated by the authorities (especially in the socio-economic sphere, although one may not ignore the political sphere either), the perception that the martial law had been justified.

Basing on the results of research carried out in 1984, one may notice that from the perspective of the experiences in the 1980s, the 1970s were remembered as a good period in the history of PRL (especially 1971–1975 – by 76%); also the years following 1956 were evaluated as good (64%), predominantly probably because they had brought some improvement after the Stalinist period. In the context in which negative evaluations of the 1980s prevailed (the period of 1980–1981 was evaluated as bad by 69%, and the years of 1982–1984 – by 58%), the past period of 1956–1980 had been perceived as years that had brought stabilization and improvement in the social conditions of many respondents (OBOP i SP, June 1984). It was probably then that the tendencies to idealize the Gierek period began that continue until today.

Declarations referring to desired arrangements in the area of principles underlying the economic system, although diversified, reveal a picture of a society that supported the rules of the existing system (irrespective of the fact how much their implementation diverged from those assumptions), and did not accept free market arrangements. The respondents in their majority were in favour of: the welfare state („it is better when citizens work with dedication for the enrichment of the state which takes care of their needs” – 62%), centrally managed economy („the state should precisely identify people's needs and then oblige enterprises to produce what is needed” – 52%, „prices of most products should be set by government” – 63%), economic equality (the system „in which people's incomes are more or less similar, there are no rich people and no poor people, all live at a medium level, regardless of their entrepreneurship and energy” – 52%, and in the situation when there is a shortage of goods, prices are not raised but instead regulation of the goods is introduced – 72%) (OBOP i SP July 1985).

As far as the political regime, the findings of a survey that was carried out in December of 1981, in the period of the highest tensions in society, when a vision of an alternative regime had already been articulated, brought the following results as regards the desired forms of political power: strong and centralized power with the leading role of PZPR – 13,7%, strong and centralized power but without the leading role of PZPR – 19,1%, decentralized power with preserved leading role of the party – 10,8%, decentralized power, without the leading role of

the party, based on participation of various social forces – 33,6%, other opinion – 6,3%, no opinion – 16,4% (Adamski et al. 1982: 207). Assuming that the political system then had been premised on the principle of the leading role of PZPR, one may state that the first and the third of the listed categories (jointly 24,5%) were declared by supporters of that system. A similar conclusion is reached when one looks at the number of members of either of the trade unions in that period, which provides a relevant indicator since membership in a union was a consciously made choice in the situation when this choice was allowed, and in consequence it was a variable most indicative of differentiation in political views – NSZZ „Solidarność” had about 9,5 mln members, while the so called branch trade unions that were supportive of the authorities counted about 3 mln members. Those proportions are actually reconfirmed by all later surveys as well as by certain behavioural indicators discussed below. The number of that political system’s supporters was then big enough not to identify them with those ruling alone. By the way, it is worth adding that the society in their majority (70,9%) did not see any need to create new political parties; also, it was not fully convinced to the self-governmental system that was to constitute an alternative to political party pluralism (Łabędź 2004: 281–283). This is why one could say that even the supporters of the changes, to a considerable degree, did not conceive of them in institutional categories, that is ignored their concrete shape. What characterised social opinions about changes in the 1980s was in their majority an expectation that the political conflict would be resolved by establishing a „big coalition” – already in September of 1989, among the answers to the question which government would be the best, most frequently selected answer (44%) read that it should be: a „government of a big coalition including both Solidarność and ZSL [United Peasant Party], SD [Democratic Party] and PZPR” (incidentally, this was soon to become a reality) (OBOP i SP, September 1989).

Surveys that used other indicators demonstrate that in time the pressure for fundamental changes only weakened. In 1985, the distribution of answers to the question concerning the evaluation of the system of political power was as follows: the existing system of power is good and does not require changes – 23,7%; the existing system of power is in principle good, although it would require some changes – 26,9%; the existing system of power was theoretically to be good but in reality it shows many flaws and big changes are needed – 26,1%; the existing system of power is bad and it should be changed completely – 5,7%; it

is hard to say – 17,7% (Kwiatkowski 2004: 409). Therefore, one may assume that the proportions of supporters to opponents of the system (assuming that the answer „it is hard to say” is more suggestive of being an opponent) were more or less equal. When the respondents were asked what was to be done in order to improve the situation in the country, the options „change the government” or „change the system” were chosen in the following shares: in 1983 – 17% and 14,8%, in 1984 – 8,4% and 8,2%, in 1985 – 5,5% and 4,5%. The answers: „make people work better”, „reform the economy”, as well as „improve the work of administrative officers, institutions” and „reform the political system in accordance with the principle socialism without distortions” dominated (Kwiatkowski 2004: 325). The preference for reforms was thus decidedly dominant in the social thinking in comparison to thinking in categories of revolution. In some other research conducted in the same year, in terms of their political orientations, the respondents were divided into the following categories: those contesting the existing political order – 15,7%, the centre – 23,2%, supporters of the existing political order – 28,4%, the silent minority – 32,7% (Ryszka 1987: 243). It should be added that the last of the listed categories, preserving a more or less the same share, was a characteristic feature of surveys carried out in the period post-1981.

As may be seen from the quoted data, the introduction of martial law and the events associated with it, did not cause any breakthrough: the martial law had been seen as justified by the majority of the society – in 1982. In the next survey, of such an opinion were between 69 and 62% of the respondents (OBOP i SP, July 1982). Also Gen. W. Jaruzelski, who decidedly was a „frontman” associated with the martial law, was not evaluated too critically – he was trusted, as declared by 54,3% in 1984 and by 67,9% of the respondents in 1988 (*Polacy* 1989: 234–235), and after he had been nominated President in 1989 – by 59% (OBOP i SP: September 1989).

Special attention must be paid to the results of parliamentary elections in 1985 and 1989. In the first case what is interesting is the attendance, in the second case – the proportions of votes cast in favour of candidates representing each of the sides. The attendance cited by the authorities after the election in 1985 (about 78%) could be for the first time verified since the opposition had conducted its own surveys. Those surveys indicated that the attendance in big cities was 66%. In this situation, assuming that in smaller towns and in the countryside the attendance was higher, the real rate could be estimated at 72–75%.

Taking into account that the opposition appealed to the voters to boycott the election and assuming that the feeling of being afraid of not voting (especially after the experiences of the early 1980s) could not have been the decisive factor in the decisions to participate in the voting, the actual attendance needs to be, at least in part, taken as an expression of support for the authorities (some research suggested that it was not political reasons that had been to a large degree present in the motivations both to attend and not to attend in the election). In the case of the June elections, their results are most frequently presented through the prism of the number of deputy mandates won by the opposition, which in an obvious and indisputable way demonstrates the failure of the authorities. However, it is also worthwhile taking into account the actual number of people who voted for candidates of each of the sides – S. Gebethner's calculations evidence that despite many obstacles generated by the then existing system of voting, it turned out that slightly fewer than 11 mln people voted for candidates of the opposition, while still about 7,6 mln voted for candidates associated with the authorities. It is worth highlighting that more than 1,3 mln of the voters had cast their votes simultaneously for the candidates of each of the sides (Gebethner 1989: 9 and ff.). The attendance then (62,3%) should also raise the questions such as: Why it was so low? What were the convictions of the people who had not gone to vote? Also, in this context it is worthwhile taking a look at the attendance in the previous election again. Apart from that, it might be added that some other behaviours were registered as well – the ones that could be interpreted as expressions of support for the authorities – for instance the participation of 9,3 mln people in the official celebrations of 1 May in 1986 (Dudek 2004: 73).

What is the current perception of the PRL period by the Polish society? Despite generational changes and the fact that the feeling of being satisfied with the current situation has been on the rise for some years now, there is no visible increase in the critical evaluations. In 2002, 39% of the surveyed would prefer to live in socialism (42% in today's Poland), while 40% evaluated the rule of PZPR well (35% negatively) (TNS OBOP 2002). Among the persons who were at least 18 in 1980, 63% evaluated E. Gierek positively (only 6% negatively), who was mainly associated with economic development (55%) and improvement in the living conditions (50%) (*Opinie* 2001). In 2009, 52% of the respondents believed that W. Jaruzelski served Poland well,

while 42% predicted that he would be remembered as a positive figure (*Wojciech Jaruzelski...* 2009).

In response to a question concerning the evaluation of the changes that have followed since the end of the 1980s, alongside the positive opinions, there occurred statements that emphasized deterioration as compared with the previous system, and that means a positive evaluation of some aspects of living in PRL. The deterioration was primarily indicated in the spheres of: the incidence of crime (68%), health care (54%), social security (45%), friendliness of people towards each other (54%), intensity of socializing (49%), religiosity (48%), strength of family bonds (46%), honesty of Poles (44%) (*Od końca...* 2009). The general evaluation of the PRL period has remained little changed for years – in a survey from 2009, 44% respondents chose positive evaluations, while 43% negative ones (*Oceny...* 2009). This result, similarly to others, demonstrates that the Polish society is divided into two quite equal parts as far as its evaluation of PRL is concerned.

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