

Włodzimierz Mich

The Conservative Press about the Threat of Poland's Totalization (1936–1939)

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Introduction

The year of 1935 witnessed events that fundamentally changed the situation of Polish conservatives. Piłsudski’s death, dissolution of Bezpartyjny Blok Współpracy z Rządem [Non-partisan block of cooperation with government], decomposition of *sanacja*, including activization of some leftist groupings, pushed them to the margin of political life (Gałka 2006: 46–47; Władyka 1977: 230). At the same time, some disadvantageous tendencies were triggered that were changing Poland’s internal situation. The passing of *Konstytucja kwietniowa* [the April Constitution] constituted an epitome of long lasting efforts by the conservatives to have the political regime changed. However, the subsequently adopted electoral law and then the practice of political life created – according to the conservatists – a threat of turning Poland into a total state.

Within the present paper, I am going to present opinions of the conservative press concerning the issue of Poland’s totalization. I take into account three dailies: „Czas”, „Dziennik Poznański” and „Słowo”.

The individual and the state

Following Piłsudski’s death, the conservatists, pushed to the margin of political life, believed their task was to counteract Poland’s totalization. Their ideal was an authoritarian system in which the freedom of the individual and the power of the state were reconciled. By contrast, they opposed totalism, meaning depriving the individual of his/her free will by an all-powerful state. They stressed that Poland’s future de-

pended on taking advantage of all social forces for the purpose of the country's development. They maintained that the democratic regime did not secure accomplishment of that goal because social energy was fruitlessly spent on partisan (political party) struggles. Totalism was, however, not a good solution, either. It could work in some other countries as a method of political mobilization, forcing societies to sacrifice for the sake of economic development or territorial expansion. In Poland, where people in the countryside continued to live in extreme poverty, such drastic methods were not useful. Besides, the totalists in Poland did not have so ambitious goals (provided they had any programme at all). The introduction of totalism would thus mean sacrifices without benefits. In the context, they pointed out that totalism invariably led to depletion of resources (economic exhaustion and spiritual impoverishment) of society. They highlighted the declining level of culture, including political culture. This was specially dangerous in the Polish case – they believed that if totalism – being a type of political regime that destroys individual creative initiatives, which are decisive for the fate of nations – was applied to the Polish national character, that would produce deplorable results (K.P., 8 IV 1938: 5; *O nowy typ Polaka*, 13 V 1938: 1; (jm), 9 IX 1938: 1; Cat., 22 VIII 1938: 1; 24 X 1938: 1; 25 X 1938: 1; Pruszyński, 2 IV 1939: 1, 3).

They wrote about Poland's totalisation in terms of a certain dangerous tendency. However, they assumed most frequently that that process had not been as yet completed. An opinion dominated among the conservatists that Poland was not threatened by totalism basing on the mono-party principle since there was no such political party that would be able to secure for itself that kind of monopoly. The real danger lay in the rule of all-powerful bureaucracy ((jm,) 9 IX 1938: 1; (jm,) 30 X 1938: 5; Szczutkowski, 15 I 1936: 1; Lup., 3 VII 1938: 1; J.W., 9 VI 1937: 1).

They argued that such a bureaucratic regime broke up the bond between the authorities and society. Government did not attach much meaning to the society's or parliament's opinions. In the meantime, Poland's situation required a solidary effort by social forces together with the state. In the face of external challenges „we should build the Polish reality basing on collective responsibility of the whole nation” (J.W., 10 VI 1938: 1). The conservatives were in favour of national consolidation but they did not want it to proceed by means of imposing upon the whole society only one political option – that of the ruling forces. They claimed that rather than consolidating society, totalism led

to its intimidation and discouraged it from participation in political affairs. The existence of state that was not based on a moral and political strength of society was always shaky (K.P. 8 IV 1938: 5; Cat., 3 IX 1938: 1).

Consolidation of society

The conservatists cherished an ideal of societal integration, a joint effort to promote the state interests. They positively evaluated the experiences of BBWR. Coming to terms – faced with *fait accompli* – with its dissolution, they claimed that a new organization mediating between the state and society should be created in order to secure articulation of particularistic interests so as to avoid the danger of the society's disintegration and the state's destabilization. Initially, they did not believe that political parties could perform this function – they maintained that their activities were exclusively negative. They feared the society's disintegration and the wasting of what had been achieved during the post-May period ((jm), 2 XI 1935: 1; J.W., 12 XII 1935: 1; *Trzy warunki powodzenia*, 24 IV 1936: 1).

Convinced that it was necessary to create an institutional form through which the society would be integrated, the conservatives lent their support to Colonel Adam Koc's initiative. They were persuaded that Koc's declaration was conservative in its nature. However, they soon came to the conclusion that in practice Obóz Zjednoczenia Narodowego [National Unification Camp] turned out to be too radical (Koc's declaration had not been implemented). In 1938, they vociferously criticised OZN, accusing the organization of striving to create a mono-party system. They argued that OZN may not provide a foundation for political organization of Polish society. They even claimed that the *sanacja* camp did not create any socio-political organization. To an extent this gap was to be bridged by an alliance of groupings of the right (national ones); the conservatists were to collaborate within its framework with Stronnictwo Narodowe [National Party] ((jm), 14 VII 1938: 1, 3; (jm), 20 XII 1938: 1; *Jubileuszowy obiad przyjaciół „Czasu”*, 30 XI 1938: 3; Gałka 2006: 55, 152, 190; Władyka 1977: 232).

However, this was only to be a partial solution. They thought that consolidation of the whole nation is a necessity, among others in order to support government facing external challenges. Adolf Bniński point-

ed out that they should strive for a single political organization of society but not in the form of a mono-party system. Rather, they should create a common programmatic platform, for example around the idea to strengthen the national defense (Bniński 1938: 65–66; Jaruzelski 1987: 175, 198; Gałka 2006: 59, 172).

Also, they argued that the unification of the nation must be preceded by reforms: creating a politically unified government (so far the particular ministries acted incoherently), changing the rules of parliamentary elections, organizing self-governmental elections without pressure from administration, emigration of Jews to Palestine that would free Poles from their financial predominance and cultural influences, declaring amnesty, determining a Ukrainian programme (A.G., 14 V 1938: 1; (jm), 8 VI 1938: 1). They supposed that the unification of the nation for the purpose of the state struggling to promote its powerful interests was hindered by anachronistic attitudes of some circles of *sanacja* that were still living as if in the past (cultivating old grievances) (X., 21 XI 1938: 4; J.W., 4 VII 1937: 1). On their part, the conservatives spoke in favour of expanding the possibilities of the opposition to act. They believed that an amnesty should be announced that would free the Brześć prisoners, that censorship should be loosened, which would enable the press to criticise activities of the authorities, that the prison-camp at Bereza Kartuska should be liquidated. Also, they thought that it was necessary to admit the opposition to competition for power at the self-governmental level.

Fighting for political pluralism and the subjectivity (agency) of the individual, at the same time the conservatives did not want to contribute to disintegration of society, especially in the face of threats to the state's independence. Attacking OZN, they claimed that the society must be consolidated around the army headed by Edward Rydz-Śmigły. Simultaneously, they argued that this consolidation of society in the face of an external danger might not be interpreted in terms of support for the regime – while such an interpretation was offered by OZN ((jm), 9 VII 1938: 1; Mackiewicz 1990: 340; Szychowski, 4 X 1938: 1; Gałka 2006: 160).

Parliament

The conservatives believed that *Konstytucja kwietniowa* established a proper relation between the organs of the state authorities. It guaran-

teed a strong position of president and government, securing thus realization of *raison d'état*, at the same granting Parliament a possibility to articulate social groups' interests and to control government. According to the conservatists, a properly functioning Parliament was an indispensable link between government and society. Only owing to such a Parliament collaboration of the two sides was possible and the impact of society on the course of events at the state level secured. Also, Parliament channels political fighting, directing it towards a safe arena. Thanks to this, „the fighting goes on in the Chamber and not in the streets” – depriving the opposition of parliamentary representation would result in riots and strikes in Poland. Besides its controlling function, Parliament contributed to better performance of government, provided that it was kept in its appropriate bounds ((jm), 25 X 1936: 1).

Nevertheless, in practice the balance envisaged by the Constitution was not preserved: the executive gained the upper hand over the Parliament that did not fulfill properly its constitutional role. This had been caused, according to the conservatists, by wrong electoral rules. So critical evaluation of the electoral ordinance formed in the conservative milieu gradually. Already in 1935, they applied in their analyses of the political situation a model basing on the assumption of good will of the governing forces, bad will of the opposition and immaturity of the society. Immediately after electoral regulations had been passed, they were received positively, or at least there were no protests against them. They did not question the results of the elections either, while evaluating critically the activities of the parties of the opposition. They indicated the readiness of government to collaborate with society ((jm), 3 XII 1935: 1; Z.T., 10 X 1935: 1; Cat., 4 VI 1935: 1; Podoski, 20 VII 1935: 1).

Starting in 1936, the conservatives ever more critically evaluated the rules of parliamentary elections (they paid less attention to the manner in which the Senate representation was elected since in their conception it did not play the role of a representative of social groups' interests). After a year of experiences, Jan Moszyński stated that the Parliament did not function properly because it did not represent any social forces – due to the electoral rules ((jm), 31 X 1936: 1). The conservatives rejected the basic assumption underlying the electoral law, that they used to share before, that was to eliminate party politicking (*partyjniactwo*). Maciej Starzewski pointed out that the authors of the ordinance condemned political parties as organizations that were only interested in power struggles. They wanted to block the parties' partici-

pation in parliamentary elections and instead to base the elections on organizations that do some real work. According to Starzewski, that was a noble conception but unrealistic. The elimination of political groupings would mean impossibility of „any legal organization of society on the political basis” (Starzewski, 1 XI 1938: 3). They spoke in favour of free operation of political parties. They maintained that they were an essential organizational form, enjoying support of the society. The elimination of the parties from the political stage would thus result in an exclusion of society from the state life. The society would limit its activities to everyday labour. The absence of political groupings could cause incidents of uncontrollable social protests against the current political order. They believed that it was possible to avoid party politicking without destroying the political parties, and even made them take into account the factor of *raison d'etat*. They favoured a multi-party system, assuming that this was an only option following the rejection of the mono-party system as well as of the existing system in which administration represented the needs of the society. ((jm), 11 I 1937: 1; J.W., 5 XII 1937: 1).

The conservatives believed that the nation's consolidation could only be effected by means of admitting citizens' co-responsibility for the fate of the state. On the one hand, this was to require a change in the electoral rules, while on the other hand – making the society more active and giving up by the political parties of their tactics that involved boycotting elections. They thought that the *sanacja* camp made a mistake attempting to govern without participation of society and keeping only appearances of parliamentarism. They demanded that the electoral rules should be given such a shape so as to make Sejm a real representative of the whole society, which was to require admitting to Parliament representatives of those political parties that enjoyed societal support. They were in favour of deferring elections until a new government was created, the electoral regulations changed and political consolidation achieved – otherwise the government would interfere with the elections or the Parliament would not be capable of work (*Jeszcze o dekompozycji społeczeństwa*, 7 I 1937: 1; A.G., 14 V 1938: 1; (jm), 8 VI 1938: 1; *Uchwały Rady Naczelnej Stronnictwa Zachowawczego*, 21 VI 1938: 4).

When in 1938 new elections were announced, they appealed to the society, including parties of the opposition, to take part in them. The conservatists were then fearing the society's distancing itself from politics. They thought that boycotting elections by the opposition was

a mistake which facilitated the building of the total state (*Leniwa akcja wyborcza*, 10 X 1938: 1; (jm), 31 V 1938: 1).

Evaluating the elections, the editors of „Czas” noted that the attendance was bigger than in 1935. They stated that the parties of the opposition did not succeed in persuading the society to boycott the elections – it is worth adding though that the propaganda of the boycott was punished, which limited its effectiveness. Remarking on the victory of OZN, they claimed that it could not be interpreted as an expression of support for the Obóz – the voters simply had to make their choice between OZN candidates since there were no other candidates (*Refleksje polityczne*, 9 XI 1938: 1). The Sejm composition was evaluated critically, while that of the Senate’s was praised. In the subsequent months, the parliamentary practice was to prove that the new Sejm did not perform properly its constitutional functions (*Sejm ludzi nieznanych*, 15 XI 1938: 1; *Nowy Senat*, 16 XI 1938: 1; Studnicki, 16 I 1939: 1).

Pressing for changes in electoral rules at the Sejm was to be one of the basic goals of the conservatives, simultaneously constituting a platform for their co-operation not only with Stronnictwo Narodowe and Stronnictwo Pracy [Labour Party] but also with Stronnictwo Ludowe [Peasant Party] and even with PPS [Polish Socialist Party]. However, in 1939 the issue of reforming the electoral law became unimportant in view of the endangered state’s existence. Co-operation with the other parties of the opposition was to be started owing to an initiative by Stronnictwo Zachowawcze [Conservative Party] that warned against totalization of Poland. Simultaneously, they looked for ways to make contacts with the military circles and Minister E. Kwiatkowski (Gałka 2006: 161, 193; Szpopier 1999: 308–309).

Conclusion

The conservatists were situated in the margin of political life at the end of the II Republic. Their political conceptions did not have any impact on the course of events. Nonetheless, the opinions that they formulated constitute an interesting and, in my opinion, valid contribution to the debate concerning the evolution of Poland’s political regime. Regardless of ineffectiveness of their appeals and actions, I believe that the conservatives’ efforts to counteract the state’s totalization constituted one of the brightest pages in the history of the Polish conservative movement.

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