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Consolidation of Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe after Enlargement – The Polish Case in Comparison

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Abstract

In vielen der neuen EU-Mitgliedsstaaten traten in jüngster Zeit Spannungen auf, die Fragen nach der Verankerung ihrer Demokratien aufwerfen. Der Beitrag beleuchtet die Ursachen dieser Spannungen und konzentriert sich dabei auf drei Faktoren: die Logik der Transformation, die Schwäche der politischen Institutionen und die Art der sozialen Präferenzen und Werthaltungen. Der Beitritt zur EU hat zwei Wirkungen: Er verbessert die demokratischen Bedingungen durch die Kräftigung der Institutionen, der Selbstregierung und des Rechts. Aber er stärkt auch den – für die Periode der Transformation charakteristischen – Vorrang ökonomischen Wandels gegenüber dem politischen Engagement der Gesellschaft. Darüber hinaus stimulieren EU-Entwicklungsfonds wirtschaftliches Wachstum, dämpfen aber zugleich das politische Interesse – mit der Konsequenz, dass populistische und euroskeptische Eliten in Polen eine überwiegend pro-europäische Gesellschaft regieren. Daher sollte von einer „Eliten-“, nicht von einer „Massenrevolte“ gesprochen werden. Auf lange Sicht dürften die formalen demokratischen Mechanismen zu einer Verringerung der gegenwärtigen Diskrepanz zwischen Eliten und Gesellschaft führen.

The political situation and the condition of democracy in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe raise astonishment and concern among observers. Many of them ask why, several years after regaining independence, Hungary is torn by conflict and street demonstrations, the Czechs have problems forming a govern-

ment, and in Poland and Slovakia the ruling coalitions are made up, among others, of populist and nationalist parties. Until recently, only Poland has been mentioned as a country with an unstable and unconsolidated political system. Now, many more new EU member states have problems. Integration does not have direct influence on the political system of a country, and certainly its effects are not visible in the short term. Therefore, a question arises about the factors that may cause the increase of political tension in the new member states.

I. Integration Has Strengthened the Logic of Transformation

In some Central and Eastern European countries the transformation took place due to the priority of economic over politics. Those who implemented the reforms in Poland, Deputy Prime Minister Leszek Balcerowicz and the economists close to him, acknowledged that introduction of market mechanisms and building of economic institutions would, in a natural way, result in a strengthening of democracy in the future. Development of civil society was not treated as important, and the constitution was adopted in Poland only five years after the transformation started. One could even say that politicians had an interest in the public's civic activity level remaining low while introducing the new economic system; they were afraid of the public reaction to the initial fall of many social groups' living standards and the increase in social inequality and unemployment. They believed that a high level of civic activity and a high turnout at the polls might block the market reforms as post-communist and populist parties would win. The politicians and economists introducing reforms believed that the low level of civic and political activity will facilitate the implementation of a market economy.

According to Edmund Mokrzycki,¹ in the first phase of transformation market reforms could be implemented thanks to the fact that the main groups whose interests were threatened did not use the democratic mechanisms that could block the introduction of those reforms. The lack of political participation of the main groups and actors was favourable to the implementation of market reforms and, consequently, to the economic participation of a number of people.

Undoubtedly, that logic of the first stage of transformation affected the consolidation of changes in Poland and, in particular, the way in which democratic and market institutions operate. While creating favourable conditions for market reforms, it made it difficult for the elite groups and for society to learn democracy.

1 Cf. Andrzej Rychard, Threats to democracy: on some Polish paradoxes. Paper delivered on a seminar commemorating Prof. Edmund Mokrzycki, organised by the Institute of Social Studies of the Polish Academy of Science, September 2002.

As a result, in Poland in 2005 the level of legitimisation of the market economy was much higher than the legitimisation of democracy.² This applies to the four levels of analysis on which the attitude to democracy is examined: 1) legitimisation of the system, 2) functioning of the principles and the political system, 3) assessment of institutions, and 4) assessment of actors.

First of all, in Poland, while the legitimisation of the democratic system is relatively low, that of the market economy is much higher. In international comparative studies carried out in 2001, only 52 % of Polish respondents were of the opinion that democracy is the best form of government, whereas the average for other countries in the region was 65 %.³

Centre for Public Opinion Research (*Centrum Badań Opinii Społecznej* - CBOS) polls indicate that the general level of legitimisation has not increased after Polish accession to the European Union, as indicated in Table 1.

Table 1: Political system preferences (Do you agree or do you not agree with the view that democracy is better than any other form of government?)

	Replies of respondents according to the time of interview (Percentage)										
	Oct 92	Jun 93	May 95	Oct 97	Mar 99	Apr 00	Oct 00	Nov 01	Mar 02	May 04	Nov 06
I agree	52	62	67	63	64	71	70	63	66	60	62
I don't agree	15	11	17	16	19	12	12	17	14	18	18
It is difficult to say	33	27	16	21	17	17	18	20	20	22	20

Data: <http://www.cbos.pl>.

I will devote a separate part of this paper to institutions; here it is only worth emphasising that the institutions of democratic order do not enjoy a high level of confidence either. The most important market economy institutions, on the other hand, such as private companies, banks and the stock exchange, receive positive assessment. According to 76 % of Poles, the activities of private companies are beneficial to the society, while the activities of the Parliament are beneficial in the opinion of 20 % of respondents. The respondents believed that private

2 Cf. Lena Kolarska-Bobińska/Olga Pucek, *Polski kapitalizm po piętnastu latach – społeczna ocena funkcjonowania systemu gospodarczego*. In: Institute of Public Affairs (ed.), *Świadomość ekonomiczna społeczeństwa i wizerunek biznesu*, ed. Lena Kolarska-Bobińska, Warsaw 2004, p. 132-154.

3 Cf. Dieter Fuchs/Edeltraud Roller, *Learned Democracy? Support of Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe*. In: *International Journal of Sociology*, 3 (2006), p. 70-96.

companies contribute to the economic development of the country (81 %), create new jobs (79 %), and also work for charity (64 %).⁴

In addition, in the opinion of Andrzej Rychard, inclusion in market economy is much stronger, compared to rather limited political participation in Polish society.⁵ That also applies to participation in the role of producers, which is indicated by an increase in the number of small enterprises, as well as in the role of consumers. The author concludes that “the post-communist transformation is, to a greater extent, based on consumers rather than on citizens”.⁶

As I have already mentioned, EU accession has not had any significant effect on social support for democracy or confidence in democratic institutions. Nor has it removed the inequality between the level of approval for the market economy (as opposed to politics), and between economic, political and civic participation. Furthermore, European integration seems to strengthen the current logic of transformation. Right now, the most strongly perceived effect of European integration is the influx of EU funds and economic growth; these factors stimulate citizens’ economic activity, but not political participation. Poles focus on starting new companies, they go to work abroad, and implement EU projects; they perceive politics as irrelevant to their lives.

Furthermore, the well-developing economy strengthens the citizens’ conviction that politics is a remote, unimportant area, which performs badly while the economy performs ever better. Many people seem to think that “It does not matter who is in power, what matters is that they should not hinder the economic development and should not prevent us from improving the situation of our families”. As a consequence, their identification with democracy is low, as indicated in Table 2.

Table 2: Identification with the democratic system (For people such as me it does not really matter whether the government is democratic or undemocratic.)

	(Percentage)							
	Oct 92	Jun 93	May 95	Mar 99	Oct 00	Mar 02	May 04	Nov 06
I agree	44	44	45	41	38	49	42	42
I do not agree	36	40	45	45	47	40	43	44
It is difficult to say	20	15	10	14	15	11	15	14

Data: <http://www.cbos.pl>.

4 Cf. Bolesław Rok, *Biznes w społeczeństwie – oczekiwania i ich realizacja*. In: Institute of Public Affairs (ed.), *Świadomość ekonomiczna społeczeństwa i wizerunek biznesu*, ed. Lena Kolarska-Bobińska, Warsaw 2004, p. 76–98.

5 Cf. Rychard, *Threats to democracy*.

6 *Ibid.*

Therefore, economic prosperity does not necessarily lead to development of civic attitudes, as some democracy researchers would expect; just the opposite, it may reinforce the attitudes of civic passivity and political alienation. Thus, the key question is: What conditions must be fulfilled for economic growth to improve the functioning of democracy, to stimulate civic participation?

Perhaps the key factor explaining people's attitudes towards democracy is the type of political culture. Thus its evolution, not related directly to the European integration, may lead to an improvement in the quality of democracy. Another hypothesis may also be proposed: even though integration does not have any direct influence on the general acceptance of democracy, it may, however, stimulate growth of criticism against the way in which democracy functions in certain countries.

Another hypothesis may also be formulated concerning the influence of integration over the institutional order and not on attitudes towards democracy. It seems that while EU accession does not have any significant influence on the general legitimisation of democracy, it does significantly affect the institutional order of a country.

II. Institutional Consequences of European Integration

In democracy, procedures and institutions play a key role. The most recent survey published by Eurobarometer shows that in the new member states the level of trust in political institutions is very low, much lower than in the states where democracy has been deeply rooted.⁷

One reason for this discrepancy is that elite groups in Poland, and also in some other Central and Eastern European countries, do not understand the role that institutions and mechanisms play in democracy. Politicians who have been in power since 1989 have been learning the basics of politics in opposition to the communist system of law and government. The opposition would function thanks to circumventing the formal mechanisms and avoiding contact with public institutions. After independence was regained, that attitude towards institutions has had significant influence on how the Solidarity politicians that came to power have perceived the role of institutions. Democracy has been more often understood as freedom and justice, rather than as procedural democracy based on law, mechanisms and institutions.⁸

During transformation, Polish elite groups did not attach much importance to the public institutions because these institutions, to a great extent, served to fur-

7 Cf. European Social Reality, Special Eurobarometer 273, European Commission, December 2006, http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/index_en.htm, http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/index_en.htm.

8 Cf. Fuchs/Roller, Learned Democracy?

ther party, or even group, interests. They were expected to facilitate the building and consolidating of the political party that was currently in power. Political goals took precedence over long-term perception of public benefit, and party interests were more important than public interests. The institutional order, instead of being increasingly consolidated, became the object and the aim of political games of subsequent groups that gained power. Now, the role of the formal mechanisms in regulating and stabilising social behaviour is increasingly less important, while the institutional order itself increasingly becomes a source of uncertainty. As a result, the low effectiveness of many institutions representing the legislative, executive and judicial powers results in a low level of public approval and trust.

Jan Kubik, comparing the performance of institutions in different Central and Eastern European countries, points to the particular weakness of the state and the state administration in Poland. He writes that in the countries of the region the state is “runaway and bloated” and that those countries lack a professional civil service. World Bank reports also mention a “capture of the state” that is submitting the state to party and group interests, which the reports regard as one of the most important problems for Central and Eastern European countries.⁹

Many people hoped that EU accession would bring about an improvement in the way democratic institutions and state administration operate. They believed that since the European institutions were efficient, the institutions in Poland would become “Europeanised” as well. Studies carried out by the Institute of Public Affairs before Polish accession to the EU indicated that the respondents trusted EU institutions much more than Polish ones. They also believed that, unlike Polish institutions, the EU institutions operated efficiently, in the interest of the citizens, and that they were not corrupt.¹⁰

As we can see in Tables 3 and 4, after the accession the perception of Polish institutions has not changed, whereas the assessment of EU institutions has become less favourable. In Poland after the EU accession, the trust in democratic institutions has not grown either. The new rule of the radical parties that came to power in 2005 – with the promise of increasing public trust and the efficiency of the state administration – and public trust to them has not contributed to a growth of confidence in democratic institutions (see Tables 5 and 6). The confidence level remains one of the lowest in Europe. The rule of populist and nationalist parties has however, contributed to a growth of confidence in the administration of justice, as this government attaches great importance to the reform of that sector and fighting the fight with corruption.

9 Cf. Tomasz Grzegorz Grosse, *Agency System in Poland after 1989*, Institute of Public Affairs, Warsaw 2004; Jan Kubik, *East Central Europe: political trends after the last round of elections*, presentation at the conference “the future of the Political scene in Central Europe”, Institute of Public Affairs, Warsaw 2006.

10 Cf. Krzysztof Pankowski, *Parlament Europejski oraz polskie i unijne instytucje w opinii Polaków*, Institute of Public Affairs, Warsaw 2003.

Table 3: Opinions on the operation of EU institutions

Institutions of the European Union:	Replies of respondents according to the time of interview (%)	
	Mar 2003*	Sep 2005
- care first of all for the interests of ordinary citizens	39	30
- care first of all for the interests of officials	32	44
It is difficult to say	29	26
- operate efficiently	50	45
- do not operate efficiently	15	23
It is difficult to say	35	32
- generally act honestly	51	43
- are rather corrupt	18	28
It is difficult to say	30	29
- usually deal with important matters	66	52
- usually deal with unimportant matters	10	22
It is difficult to say	24	26

* Data: Institute of Public Affairs, <http://www.isp.org.pl>. Source: <http://www.cbos.pl>.

Table 4: Opinions on the operation of state institutions in Poland

The existing state institutions in Poland:	Replies of respondents according to the time of interview (%)	
	Mar 2003*	Sep 2005
- care first of all for the interests of ordinary citizens	4	7
- care first of all for the interests of those who are in power and officials	89	83
It is difficult to say	7	10
- operate efficiently	7	8
- do not operate efficiently	80	78
It is difficult to say	13	14
- generally act honestly	8	8
- are rather corrupt	78	78
It is difficult to say	15	14
- usually deal with important matters	17	17
- usually deal with unimportant matters	65	65
It is difficult to say	18	18

* Data: Institute of Public Affairs, <http://www.isp.org.pl>. Source: <http://www.cbos.pl>.

Table 5 : Assessment of the activities of the Parliament

Assessment of the Parliament	Replies of respondents according to the time of interview																							
	2000			2001			2002			2003			2004			2005			2006					
	Mar	Sep	Dec	Mar	Sep	Dec	Mar	Sep	Dec	Mar	Sep	Dec	Mar	Sep	Dec	Mar	Sep	Dec	Mar	Sep	Dec			
Positive	20	22	21	17	21	32	16	25	17	16	14	11	11	13	9	8	11	11	8	11	26	25	15	21
Negative	67	60	64	71	62	51	67	58	67	66	74	77	78	76	83	84	80	84	84	80	50	62	71	65

The "It's difficult to say" reply has been disregarded.
assessment of the current term of the Parliament since December 2005

Data : <http://www.cbos.pl>.

Table 6 : Assessment of the activities of the President

Assessment of the President	Replies of respondents according to the time of interview																							
	2000			2001			2002			2003			2004			2005			2006					
	Mar	Sep	Dec	Mar	Sep	Dec	Mar	Sep	Dec	Mar	Sep	Dec	Mar	Sep	Dec	Mar	Sep	Dec	Mar	Sep	Dec			
Positive	76	72	71	71	72	81	75	77	78	77	73	65	60	57	50	47	52	55	41	51	55	41	31	35
Negative	14	19	19	20	17	12	18	15	15	17	17	24	32	34	38	40	38	36	37	53	36	37	53	49

The "It's difficult to say" reply has been disregarded.
* until December 2005 the assessment applied to Aleksander Kwaśniewski, and since January 2006 - to Lech Kaczyński

Data : <http://www.cbos.pl>.

Currently, the institutional development in Poland is uneven. The consolidation of the party system and strengthening of political parties coincides with the weakening of other institutions, including the central administration. This weakening has been caused by a change to the law on civil service, introduced by the ruling Law and Justice party (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*); as a result, the civil service is slowly disappearing before it has even properly developed. Political nominations predominate in public institutions and in companies in which the state has a share. The latter have lost a number of specialists, who have been replaced with loyal and trusted friends. That process is accompanied with some anti-institutional rhetoric promoted by the right-wing and populist parties currently in power in Poland. This rhetoric emphasises personal connections and leaders' trust as a desired mechanism of personnel selection. Procedures, competitions and qualifications are unimportant, but personal assessment by the leaders plays the key role. Statements such as, "I'm losing my patience with them" or "I trust him" etc., reflect the imperial mentality of Prime Minister Jarosław Kaczyński. Such rhetoric weakens not only the already weak public institutions, but also undermines people's faith in the possibility of having apolitical mechanisms existing and operating in a state. The weakening of central institutions is accompanied by the strengthening of local self-government and institutions.

One of the reasons for the uneven development of institutions is, apart from those mentioned above, the method of funds distribution. At the beginning of the transformation, the public administration was the one who had resources that parties were willing to use to build their power base. Privatised companies had contracts to award, and permissions or concessions for business activity were issued. It seems that after the EU accession, the EU funds will strengthen regional and local self-government authorities, which manage those funds. European integration will primarily strengthen the local authorities, local self-government and some non-governmental organisations.

A few years ago, local self-government in Poland was granted more power and possibilities to make decisions with respect to different spheres of life of their citizens. However, proper funding did not follow that empowerment. Local authorities often complained that they were responsible for roads, schools or hospitals but had received very little funding for their development. Now, after several years, significant funding for various projects will be within the reach of local authorities for the first time.

Recent local elections were the first such elections in which Polish accession to the European Union had a significant impact on their course. Even though the turnout was similar to the elections four years earlier (45 %), it did not fall because of the negative attitude towards central government policies. In big cities it was the parties who fought the battle, but in small towns and in rural areas the winners were those who had been believed to be good administrators. Distribution of European funds turned out to be an important argument for both voters and their elected representatives. In that sense, European integration has

played a positive role in local elections, which has been confirmed by the voters themselves.

Various EU-funded projects have already started in many cities and towns, which is how the re-election of some incumbent mayors has sometimes been explained. Local authorities which have been successful in applying for EU funds benefited from it. The newly elected authorities also have a great chance to see their regions developing, and a chance to be re-elected in a few years.

EU integration, by strengthening local self-government, will be beneficial to local democracy. There is still a question whether this will eventually translate in to better consolidation of democracy on a more general level.

However, an analysis of the use of structural funds, the most powerful tool to accelerate the process of equalising the level of economic development, in thirteen EU Member States has shown that it is an effective tool only in those countries which have "high quality" institutions.¹¹ The countries which have put particular emphasis on strengthening their institutions have managed to make good use of EU funding. A question arises as whether the hitherto weak development of institutions responsible for distributing EU funds will not cause improper use of those funds, and whether those funds will not be wasted before they contribute to the development of a number of local organisations.

III. Social Consequences of Joining the European Union

Attitudes towards democracy and political preferences depend on the economic situation of a country and of individuals; they also depend on socio-psychological attitudes. Ivan Krastev, a well-known Bulgarian sociologist, explains the political instability in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe as a revolt of the masses.¹² In his view, citizens who have been used to stable living conditions must, after their countries join the EU, adjust to a situation of uncertainty caused by globalisation. Joining the European Union has negatively influenced fragile democracies, in part because governments prefer to agree their policies with Brussels and not with their voters. As a result, Krastev claims, the division between the political left and right has been blurred, and the line dividing the corrupt elite from ordinary citizens has become more apparent.

I think Krastev's diagnosis is only partly true. Central and Eastern European governments have never discussed their policies with the public, so it is hard to claim that after the accession they stopped doing so. Social dialogue hardly exists in post-communist countries. The market reforms were agreed to by the anti-

11 Cf. Sjeff Ederveen/Henri de Groot/Richard Nahuis, *Fertile Soil for Structural Funds?*, Amsterdam 2002.

12 Cf. Ivan Krastev, *The Revolt of the Masses*. In: *The Wall Street Journal* from 27.9.2006.

communist elite and by groups ruling during the previous regime, and they were introduced with the approval of various international institutions. Also, the Polish public was not consulted with other reforms, including territorial, social security and educational reforms. The voters simply voted every four years, rejecting subsequent governments which had implemented the changes. Neither Brussels nor European integration can therefore be “blamed” for voter alienation and low civic participation.

Joining the European Union, however, did influence the current political situation. Integration, like any other significant change, raised a lot of concerns and doubts, as well as uncertainty. It was, after all, the final stage concluding the system transformation that started in 1989. After the EU accession, even though the public support for integration grew significantly in Poland, the public released their initial fears. In the first parliamentary elections after the accession, in 2005, some people voted for populist and nationalist parties, which promised to introduce law and order as well as seek the country’s independence and stabilisation.

It is also important that after the accession the consensus of the elite groups has been broken. Before, there was general agreement as to the main direction of changes in Poland, consisting of the introduction of a market economy and joining NATO and the European Union. Now those goals have been achieved. What is more, European policy has partly become the internal policy of the member states. In such a situation where the main objectives constituting the *raison d’état* and providing for consensus disappear, some ideological issues have come to the front. This has led to a strong polarisation of debate and to a distinct division of the elite groups into political camps – populist and liberal – which are unable to reach agreement even on the issues that are the most basic and vital for the country.

Therefore, what is happening now in the Central and Eastern European countries should be called a revolt of some parts of the elite, rather than a revolt of the masses. Right now, in Poland we have a society that is pro-European, that makes use of the opportunities provided by the Union, and politicians who emphasise their scepticism towards the European Union. In a democratic system, in a situation of such divergence of views, politicians promoting unpopular ideas resign, or lose in the next coming elections.

In the short term, the influence of EU membership is ambiguous and multi-directional. In the long term, the strengthening of the mechanisms of law and the institutions will enhance democracy in Central and Eastern Europe.