

How to Live in a Hostile World

On the Polish Paradox

by Michal Kozłowski

How can the rise to power of the far-right in Poland in 2015 be explained? Was it the result of an effective propaganda strategy? Or because of the refugee crisis? Michal Kozłowski discusses the underlying causes and consequences of this new political situation within the European Union.

Neoliberal globalisation has exploited or demolished local economic resources, impoverished large fractions of population, increased social and economic inequalities, introduced the ruthless law of the fittest and harsh struggle for survival and, last but not least, privatised social services depriving millions of basic life security. A necessary outcome of those policies was widespread desperation, which subsequently led the masses into the hands of political charlatans, greedy for power and unwilling to share it. The reader must be familiar with such an explanation for the rise of extreme right populism throughout the western world (and perhaps beyond). Not only is such an explanation popular on the left, but it seems to have convinced the enlightened liberal centre as well:

In the past quarter century liberalism has had it too easy. [...] Amid growing inequality, society's winners told themselves that they lived in meritocracy – and that their success was therefore deserved. The experts recruited to help run big parts of the economy marvelled at their own brilliance. But ordinary people, ordinary people often saw wealth as a cover for privilege and expertise as disguised self-interest.¹

This bit of social criticism comes from no other than the British journal *The Economist*.

Since 2015 Poland has been run by a far-right government, that has gradually but firmly dismantling the basic institutions of its modern democratic state (by ignoring court rulings, taking to bits the judicial autonomous institutions, corrupting the media, disciplining

¹*The Economist*, Dec. 24th, 2016, p. 11

cultural and artistic production along ideological lines, chronically breaching the constitution and getting involved in police harassment of political protestors). A recent devastating report of Amnesty International exhaustively listed out these proceedings. The further the government moves on this path, the more it consolidates and even widens its support. Since we talk here of a wider phenomenon, the outcome of this process is quite predictable. The blatantly illegal takeover of the Constitutional Tribunal (and as such condemned unreservedly by the Venice Commission of the Council of Europe) was the beginning of a long-term strategy, followed by the equally unconstitutional subjection of the Supreme Court, the National Council of the Judiciary and the National Electoral Commission to the political power. The “renewed judiciary”, as in the Turkish and Russian cases, may be a formidable tool to discipline both the media and the political actors (not to mention the business world). The emerging regime is aware that it needs a substantial popular support in order to survive. Yet, it does not ultimately want to put its power at risk with the hazards of “uncontrollable” competitive electoral process. It seeks to place itself within the domain of postmodern conservative party-state which is so successfully established in Hungary, Russia and many other places.

I do not intend here to explain the nature of this new regime nor its quite remarkable (even if not original) political technology. What interests me is the accumulated history on which it gained momentum. Such dramatic political change in time of peace and relative prosperity cannot be solely an effect of a new miraculous propaganda strategy. In fact, there has always been some agitation but it is only now that it has found so many enthusiastic recipients. Ultra radical critique aimed at the treacherous elite, which is supposed to incarnate both imaginary continuity of the communist regime and globalist/cosmopolitan conspiracy, found its way to the hearts and minds of the people. How did such a deep, revolutionary delegitimation come about? Even if I fail to provide an answer, at least one hypothesis will be put aside: it was not because of the economic depression, stagnation, growing unemployment and social misfortunes that those now in power have succeeded. It is rather because of the revolt that followed an opposite logic: the rapid improvement of living standards has provoked ever-increasing aspirations and hopes. When those cannot be fulfilled, deception often leads to contestation. In that case, however, an astonishing ideological content of this revolt remains to be explained.

Economic Surge

Polish economic expansion during recent decades has somewhat become a journalistic cliché. It has largely been devalued on the domestic market of ideas — for some good reasons but mostly for bad ones. It still is worthwhile to remind the reader of the proportions of this

growth. In the ten years following the accession to the EU, Polish GDP grew by 59 %.² (2004-2015). In the seven years after the subprime crisis (2007-2014) it still grew by an impressive 22.1 %. In the very same period Greece's growth contracted by almost 24%.³ In fact, since 1992 Poland has enjoyed uninterrupted economic growth that has boosted its GDP per capita by more than 7 times. It has experienced the biggest growth among all middle- and high-income countries (it is almost a rule that the poorest states achieve relative GDP growth more easily) and the biggest of all in the old continent. This has largely been achieved through massive reindustrialisation – in 2015 the exports exceeded 200 billion dollars. It was only worth 31 billion in 2000. Manufactured goods, machinery and transportation equipment made up for 81% of exports.⁴ In 2015 Poland achieved a trade surplus and has since managed to maintain it.

Was this advancement achieved at a great social cost? This can only be assessed comparatively. It certainly was in the beginning – the restructuring and dismantling of the socialist state industry was rapid and unprecedented in scale. It brought about a massive unemployment rate throughout the 90s (the peak of 20,7% occurred at the beginning of 2003⁵) and it hit particularly hard the province and rural areas. There were big strikes in 1992 and general discontent ran high. The tide was reversed however. By the end of 2015 the unemployment rate went down to 9% and kept on decreasing. The wages increased sluggishly but other significant social indicators improved greatly: child mortality rate fell close to EU average while life expectancy increased by nine years by 2015. Polish women were expected to live 81.2 years. Consumption soared after Polish accession to the EU: for instance, the number of privately owned cars has almost doubled in a decade. At the same time, violent crime has diminished by 40% (even if it never was particularly high by European standards).⁶ Moreover, the level of income inequality has remained relatively moderate (Poland ranked 122 in the list of the 150 most unequal countries in CIA World Factbook). In other words, the last two decades have brought in Poland an unprecedented rise in the average standard of living. Poland has gone from being an extremely fragile and isolated middle-income economy to a stable, high-income one (it officially reached the status in 2009 according to the World Bank). It can be debated whether Poland is the most developed semi-periphery country or already an embankment of capitalistic centre. Yet, such a debate appears merely scholastic. The Polish liberal camp (in the absence of a better conservative designation of the centre-right and of what remains of the once powerful post-communist camp) that took most of the credit for this success was quite understandably in shock when in 2015 it was wiped out by a blitzkrieg-style offensive of ruthless nationalist populists. Their election slogan was: Poland is in ruin!

²According to Polish Ministry of Finance

³According to *Eurostat*.

⁴ *Statistical Yearbook of the Republic of Poland*, 2016, Central Statistic Office p. 874

⁵ *Stopa bezrobocia według GUS w latach 1990–2017*. stat.gov.pl.. [accessed 2016-01-13].

⁶According to *Statistical Yearbook of the Republic of Poland 2016*

The inconvenient truth

Poland's integration into the global capitalistic market after 1989, usually referred to as a "transition", has long been praised as a role model for the successful implementation of neoliberal policies (a combination of privatisation, free trade, deregulation, low inflation and taxation, fiscal austerity and, in general terms, a promotion of competitive economic and social relations). Beyond a doubt, such was its ideological self-representation. Poland was embracing capitalism at the very peak of the free-market rush among western governments and financial institutions. Polish new elites thought it was reasonable to adapt to the dominant mood. But there were also internal reasons — neoliberalism, as a right-wing ideology of modernisation, was to a great extent socialism reversed and it helped both legitimise policies and mobilise to reform. Leszek Balcerowicz, deputy prime minister and the mastermind (along with Jeffrey Sachs) of the "shock therapy" of the early transition, is still very active in the public sphere and his neoliberal devotion would make even Milton Freedman blush. The critics were content as well, at least the left-wing ones – they could import and re-export ready-made patterns of social critique developed under the banner of alterglobalism (the author gladly admits he contributed to this trade).

What was left out of the picture, both by the enthusiastic and by the discontent people, was the quite unique position that Poland enjoyed. Let's be clear about this: the country is most probably the biggest receiver of foreign aid (in absolute terms) ever recorded in an interval of a quarter-century. Even if, to my knowledge, no solid comparative statistics exist on that matter, it is nevertheless difficult to find an example disproving such assertion. But foreign aid is one part of the assistance Poland has received; the other, no less vital, is the rights given to its citizens.

In the early nineties Poland was in absolute terms the world's 4th biggest foreign debtor, behind Brazil, Mexico and Argentina. By 1994, following a complex process of negotiations, Polish debt was reduced by some 40% and the conditions of repayment for the remaining 60% were changed in Poland's favour. Effective debt relief was estimated at 42% of the initial burden of 48.5 billion dollars.⁷ Debt relief was instrumental to the stabilisation of the country's economy and the improvement of the government's borrowing capacities. It allowed Poland to maintain the backbone of social services developed under socialism. It is likely that in the absence of such relief the country would have followed the path of several other countries caught in the debt trap.

Since its accession to the EU Poland has received over 88 billion euros in net transfers from the European Union. Roughly one third of this sum was a part of the Common Agricultural Policy and reached some of the most impoverished regions of the country. The rest went to mostly desperately needed infrastructural investments, the lack of which could directly hamper growth. In 2014, the year preceding the dramatic political change, Poland

⁷ *The New York Times*, March 12, 1994.

received an aid of a net value of almost 13 billion euros for its total GDP of 356 billion.⁸ Prior to 2004, Poland had received some 2.5 billion euros in pre-accession funds.

Although the exact estimations differ, it is clear that over two million Poles left the country after 2004 for the western countries of the EU (or to be precise for the European Economic Area since Norway was one of the major destinations). This robust migration has often been perceived as the symptom of economic misfortune. There is no doubt that Polish low wages and relatively high unemployment were fuelling the flow. But there was another important attractor: the unique legal status conferred to eastern European migrants (most of them Poles). Critiques of globalisation have rightly pointed out that its framework is biased against labour: the freedom of circulation is being extended for commodities and capitals and remains restricted for the workforce. Due to EU-sponsored freedom of movement Polish working classes, along with those for other eastern European EU members were exempted from this restriction. They enjoyed civil rights and social protections in the receiving countries. Not only have they improved their own life opportunities but they have also increased the bargaining power of the ones who stayed. In other words, the departure of hundreds of thousands reduced supply of labour, and, with the economy still growing, pushed the wages up. Some migrants sent the money home, others were free to move back and forth. In fact, the freedom of movement has been the most formidable form of support ever granted by the capitalistic centre to a semi-periphery society.

The aid Poland has received in the last quarter of century was neither charity nor assistance for subsistence. Each step of the way, integration to the global capitalistic market was at stake. Geopolitics and ideology played a role as well. In any case it cannot be denied that it's also and in a big part thanks to the aid it has received that Poland has managed to preserve the backbone of its public services, health and education systems and public pensions as well as to escape the fate of Chile with its record high level of inequality; or Mexico with its extreme inequality and violence (NAFTA has never offered Mexicans the opportunities that the European Economic area has to East-Europeans); or Russia with its plethora of oligarchs (corruption in Poland is in fact moderate); or Turkey with its famously horrid labour relations. The countries mentioned, like Poland, were considered the champions of economic progress during the last decades. Yet, unlike Poland, they were not granted any aid and only let trade – to paraphrase Bill Clinton's slogan from the nineties.

The great disillusionment

Ironically Poland's new ruling ideology holds ethnocentric sovereignty as its essential component. Not only does it reject any notion of interstate solidarity but its proponents consider states as in perpetual conflicts of interests. In order to successfully take part in this

⁸ Polish Ministry of Finance, [Transfery Finansowe Polska-Unia Europejska](#).

ruthless struggle for survival the state needs to be ethnically/culturally/religiously homogeneous (depending on which is more convenient). In fact, the state media depiction of the European Union is hardly distinguishable from that of *Russia Today* especially as it propagates the image of EU's alienated and cosmopolitan elite imposing a leftist utopia of multiculturalism on its own societies. Since Poland's prosperity so strongly depends on complex and extremely deep economic relations within the EU and the country still remains a receiver of substantial subsidies, such position could seem awkward. But it is not so in electoral terms. In 2015 it was precisely the refugee crisis that triggered the surge of nationalist or anti-immigration camp in a country with almost no migration. The idea of settling some 7,000 refugees became a major political issue. Those who approved of it were politically doomed. This has not changed at all. In 2017 the government kept the official line of "zero refugees" and polls suggest that any political party who would agree to increase that number will face failure. In fact, this vision of a homogeneous, selfish nation state has an enormous appeal across society, being even dominant among the young, and overwhelmingly so among young male Poles. This last category is also the most hostile to potential refugees and the least enthusiastic towards the EU. Even if general public support for EU membership remains high, it seems shallow — in July 2017 the prestigious weekly *Polityka* published a survey according to which 51.2% of respondents willing to leave the EU, if staying, would demand the acceptance of refugees.

This short essay does not seek to explain this unwieldy logic of Polish recent history. Yet Polish case sheds some doubt on classical left-wing explanations of the nationalist turn in western societies that emphasised deindustrialisation, stagnating wages, high unemployment as causes. Obviously Polish capitalistic readjustment had many flaws. As a capitalistic venture, it has had its winners and its losers, its capitalists and its proletarians. It is true that in the later years of the boom the number of people living under absolute poverty line increased. Yet it was never an election issue nor it had a political effect. Poland with its low election turnout of roughly 50% is the country where the poorest simply don't vote. Nevertheless, "the transition" has been one of the most successful capitalism has ever known—in large part thanks to foreign aid and the preferential treatment Poland has received. The nationalistic turn of 2015 was not a social revolt, even if it obviously carried a simulacrum of social critique, as all nationalisms do ("It is enough not to steel!" — the slogan shouted). In recent years, social unrest within the massive Polish production sector has been almost non-existent — despite social and economical conditions favouring conflicts over wages. One could claim the revolt was not aimed at improvement but at preservation. But it was and it is essentially reactive, not to say reactionary, saying in essence: Let us keep what we have, don't trust anyone, keep the aliens out.

Published in *Books & Ideas*, 22 February 2018.