Poland: The Politics of “God's Playground”

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Map 10.0. Poland
Poland was the first and one of the most successful transitions from a centralized communist state to a liberal, more Western-style democracy. During the European economic crisis, Poland's economy maintained one of the highest growth rates in the European Union (EU). Its political system stabilized. It has been both an active member of the EU and a strong advocate for liberalization of its eastern neighbors as well as for their inclusion in European initiatives. Its prime minister, Donald Tusk, was the first East European elected head of the Council of Europe in 2014. His successor, Ewa Karpacz, signaled a shift to more social welfare programs aimed at the middle and lower classes.

But getting there was not easy. Its early and fast start on democratization and economic reform, as well as reformers’ fear of opposition from the Soviet Union or even from the police and military in Poland, created complications that impact Polish politics even today. Since Poland was the first state to begin a transformation out of communism, its new leaders went only as far as they thought the Soviet Union and the rest of the bloc would tolerate. But within months, communism had collapsed everywhere except the Soviet Union, which was clearly too weak to hold back change. So the other former Soviet bloc states went much further much faster. As a result, the Polish political system was a “work in progress” for years, changing its constitution and laws in response to what did and did not work. In the process, Poland went from an uneasy coalition of former communist leaders, Solidarity activists, and experts in 1989, to a system in which the right and then the former communists battled for power, and finally, by the end of its first two decades of democracy, to a stable system with two dominant parties close to the center and a number of smaller parties.

Capitalism worked on a macroeconomic level from the start but brought with it dramatic losses for much of the country. A “shock therapy” economic program was implemented in 1990 to stabilize the currency and allow prices to adjust to the marketplace so that a rapid shift to capitalism would be possible and Western aid would be approved. This process was the swiftest and most dramatic economic change in the region. But these reforms caused a dramatic drop in living standards for many. As a result, Poles were, for a long period, some of the least satisfied people in the former communist world, and Polish politics was often more about blaming and punishing the “bad guys” for economic
problems than about building party loyalty or popular trust in the new democratic institutions and leadership.

When the European economic recession started in 2008, the Polish economy had been well enough reconstructed that it was not affected by problems elsewhere in Europe and was the only economy in Europe to grow throughout the recession. Now, though, as the recession tapers off elsewhere in Europe, an increase in the national debt, unemployment, and continued inequality may weaken some of Poland’s macroeconomic success.

Poland came into the transition with a far more liberal political system than existed elsewhere. The three worker revolts before 1989 each ultimately resulted in concessions. Support for the Catholic Church was always strong enough to force rulers to concede to many of its demands and even seek its support. Solidarity, the trade union that emerged out of the 1980 Gdańsk workers strikes, had, at its height in 1981, over 10 million members, easily the majority of Poland’s workforce. Even after it was declared illegal and its leaders and activists were interned, it remained a force with which the regime ultimately had to negotiate. And the shortages and hardships of “real socialism” in Poland created friendship and professional groups that helped people survive and counter the controls in the communist system. These groups, as well as the high level of social resistance, also allowed alternative elites to establish themselves, provided the personal ties between groups that helped in the transition, and gave people organizing experience that facilitated Poland’s negotiated transition.

The weaknesses of the old communist system that made it liberal also complicated the transition. Poland was, by 1989, over $40 billion in debt to the West and still enmeshed in the Soviet bloc economic system. This meant that its options for economic reform were limited by its need to satisfy its Western debtors. Its opposition had been the strongest in the communist world well before Solidarity’s 1980–1981 advent, but it also had ideological divisions, and many suspected that others were reporting on them to the secret police. From the 1970s on, most Poles had real knowledge of and very high expectations for democracy and capitalism because they had been guest workers in the West, had ties to family members there, and had an elite that tried to buy them off with its openness to the West. The image of democracy and capitalism they took away from this was of prosperity not inequality. In Poland, they learned to work around or oppose the system. They did not learn, however, how to function as citizens in a normal democratic system. In the end, the communist-era reforms left them with high hopes for democracy, little practice with working within a democracy, and an economy of foreign debt, inflation, and failed factories.

The political ramifications of the communist past and the way the initial postcommunist leadership reformed the system and dealt with the past haunted Polish politics for almost two decades, even though Polish communism had been “communism light,” with freedom for small businesses, peasants, and the Catholic Church and much more tolerance for dissent. The first prime minister in postcommunist Poland, Tadeusz Mazowiecki, having entered into a unity government with the communists who handed over power, tried to “draw a thick line” to avoid divisions over the abuses of the past as Poland struggled to deal with the many challenges of starting a new system. Doing this, though, left an opening for claims and counterclaims about what had happened and who had been responsible that reached its height in 2006 when the hard-liners of the right-wing
Law and Justice Party (PiS) led by President Lech Kaczynski and his twin brother, Prime Minister Jaroslaw Kaczynski, labeled anyone who disagreed with them a communist. In addition, the Mazowiecki government’s choice of “shock therapy” to reform the economy by freeing the currency and prices while holding wages stable benefited the economy in the long run but, in the short run, impoverished many and turned them against the very reformers who had brought democracy to Poland. This further complicated political debates over options and popular faith in the new system. Substantive policy discussions often took a back seat to battles over what had happened and who was responsible.

Precommunist History

Situated in the “heart of Europe” between Germany and Russia, Poland has a long history of struggle against outside conquerors. By 1795, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth had been split between the Russian, German, and Austrian empires. From then on, Poles fought at home and abroad for Polish independence. It took World War I and Woodrow Wilson’s commitment to “national self-determination” for Poland to get its independence back. Within the boundaries set by the post–World War I peace accord, Poland stretched from western cities, like Poznań, that had long been part of Germany into the eastern areas with large Polish populations along with Ukrainians (Lwów/Lviv) and Lithuanians (Vilnius/Wilno).

In the interwar period, this made Poland a multiethnic state: one-third of its population was not ethnically Polish. This new state was burdened by having to establish national structures, deal with a diverse population of peoples with long histories of conflict, and build an economy and infrastructure out of parts of three empires, focused on Moscow, Berlin, and Vienna, as opposed to Warsaw. Democracy and capitalism enjoyed brief success in the initial years of independence, only to be virtually washed out by the Great Depression. From their history, Poles learned to maintain their culture and national identity under foreign occupation. The Catholic Church became closely identified with Polish national identity. Ultimately, all these lessons served Poles well in their resistance to the German occupation of World War II and remained with them for the more than forty years of communist rule.

Poland was devastated during World War II. In September 1939, it was first divided between the Soviets and Germans. Then, in 1941, the Germans turned on the Soviets and took over the rest of Poland. They used it as a base from which to annihilate Jews and Poles. Large numbers of Poles fought in a nationalist underground force against the Russians and Germans, while a far smaller group, identifying with communism, fought the Germans and the nationalist underground. Ultimately, one-third of Poland’s population perished (including almost all of its Jewish population); its capital, Warsaw, was razed to the ground; and much of its industrial base and many of its other cities were destroyed. At the end of the war, the Soviet army took control despite Poles’ attempts to prevent a Soviet takeover. In the process, the factories and infrastructure that survived were taken back to the Soviet Union to rebuild its own infrastructure. To add to the complications of rebuilding, in postwar agreements the boundaries of Poland were moved far to the west into what had been Germany, and most of Poland’s eastern territories were annexed by
the Soviet Union. With this shift came a massive population transfer: most Germans in what became western Poland were forced out or went willingly to Germany. Many Poles and Ukrainians moved or were forced west to settle in the areas the Germans had vacated.

**Communist Experience**

Soviet troops brought a communist regime in as a “baggage-train government” when they marched across Poland and pushed the Germans out in 1945. That new leadership was an uneasy alliance between Polish communist officials who had spent the war in the Soviet Union and communists who had fought in the small pro-communist underground. These new rulers had to rebuild most of the country and, at the same time, impose unwelcome communist rule. The Communist Party took control of the government, established state ownership of Poland’s economy, and tried to control and limit the Catholic Church. With this came Stalinist terror, eased only by the communist leadership’s reluctance to repeat Stalin’s prewar destruction of the Polish Communist Party leadership by purging and killing those leaders who had spent the war years in Poland (as was done elsewhere in Central and Eastern Europe). The top leaders were also restrained by the refusal of the Catholic Church and the predominately Catholic population to submit totally to the new regime. At the same time, there were those who gained from the ongoing reconstruction and industrialization when large numbers of new industries were built and young peasants moved to cities to work in factories. In the process a whole new working class was established and educated.

With the deaths of Joseph Stalin in 1953 and of Poland’s Stalinist leader, Boleslaw Bierut, in March 1956, fear and control decreased. In the summer of 1956, Polish workers demonstrated in the Western city of Poznań, demanding “bread and freedom” and calling out, “The press lies.” Polish troops fired on the demonstrators, killing almost a hundred. Open intellectual protests spread throughout Poland in the fall. Many Polish United Workers’ Party (PUWP) members demanded reforms in the party itself. The party leadership tried to end this “Polish October” by bringing back Władysław Gomułka, a party leader jailed in the Stalinist period for his independence. When returned to power, he started “a Polish road to socialism,” allowing private farming, small private enterprises, more freedoms for the Catholic Church, and greater freedom for public discussion. From then on, Poland remained on its own “freer” road.

These events were the first in a series of revolts against communism’s failings, including student and intellectual demonstrations in 1968 and workers’ riots in 1970, 1976, and 1980 triggered by price increases and economic failures. After each of the workers’ demonstrations, the communist authorities made concessions to maintain their hold and buy support, only to fail to meet their promises. With each uprising, though, the opposition grew and became more organized until, after the 1976 workers’ demonstrations, the Workers’ Defense Committee (KOR) was formed to aid arrested workers and their families. It then produced underground publications to let people know about their rights and about human rights violations in Poland and to encourage independent thinking. By the late 1970s and early 1980s, this opposition had flowered into a massive underground press empire, a number of human rights organizations, and a whole alternate cultural
milieu, including a “Flying University” offering courses taught by instructors not permit-
ted in the communist curriculum.\(^2\) It was from this opposition, in combination with the
shipyard workers who had demonstrated and lost in 1970, that Solidarity emerged and
the men and women who would take Poland into its transition gained influence.\(^3\)

When Edward Gierek took over as head of the party after the December 1970
Gdańsk shipyard strikes, he promised Poles their lives would improve. To jump-start
the economy and provide for a higher living standard, Poland borrowed from the West to
build new factories with Western equipment and began importing Western consumer
goods. These loans were to pay for themselves with earnings from the export of products
to the West. However, the plan did not work: much of the money was wasted, Polish
goods did not sell, and Poland had to borrow more and more just to pay the interest on
its debts. By the beginning of the 1980s, the shelves of Polish stores were bare, and Poland
was in the midst of a debt crisis with $8.1 billion—far more than its ready cash and assets
would cover—of its over $20 billion debt to the West due in 1980.

The government was so desperate to placate Western creditors without touching off
demonstrations that it imposed price increases on food staples (under Western pressure),
region by region, with instructions to local leaders to negotiate pay increases if there were
strikes or demonstrations. By August, rolling price increases on food and consumer goods
had been imposed across the country.

The plan was that price increases would be imposed last in the seacoast towns where
the 1970 riots had brought down the Gomulka regime. In response to the price increases,
workers in the Gdańsk shipyards went on strike and simply refused to negotiate pay
increases. Under the leadership of dissident worker Lech Wałęsa, workers occupied the
shipyards in Gdańsk and other Baltic towns, demanding not just the economic and social
welfare benefits communism had promised but also the right to have an independent
trade union, the right to strike, and more media freedom so that they would know what
was really going on. Intellectuals joined them. Workers from other places in Poland sent
messages of support, and some joined in support strikes. The Polish government con­
ceded to the workers’ demands by signing the Gdańsk Agreement. Solidarity became a
national movement for economic and political change in Poland.

Poles were further emboldened to stand up to their leaders by the election of Karol
Wojtyła, the former archbishop of Kraków, as pope in 1978 and his triumphant return
to Poland in June 1979 as a conquering hero whose trip was organized and run by vol­
unteers rather than the government, even as he was feted by communist leaders and the
population alike. The rise of Solidarity was dramatic. By the end of its first year, more
than one-third of the population had joined the movement. A farmers’ Solidarity and a
students’ union had formed and forced the government to recognize them. Workplaces
organized. Many party members joined Solidarity and sought to bring its openness into
the Polish United Workers’ Party. Independent press and discussions appeared every­
where. Solidarity elections and a national congress were held. Popular demands on the
government increased. Poland’s economy simply could not work well enough to feed
its population, much less provide the gains the Gdańsk Agreements promised. As the
economic situation worsened, strikes and demonstrations became the order of the day.
What food supplies were available were rationed, or individuals had to use their connec-
tions to get meat and other necessities. The government could only make more and more
political concessions, even as the Soviet Union and other Soviet bloc states pressed for a crackdown. For Polish leaders and their allies, the potential for chaos and threat of contagion were all too real. Party leader and head of the Polish military Wojciech Jaruzelski and those around him were convinced, by the end of 1981, that the Soviet Union would invade if popular actions and government concessions went any further.

On December 13, 1981, martial law was declared, and the freedoms Solidarity had enjoyed for fifteen months ended with a Polish military “takeover.” Solidarity and other independent groups were declared illegal and shut down. Thousands of Solidarity and intellectual activists, as well as some top PUWP leaders accused of corruption and mismanagement during the Giererek era, were interned. Polish soldiers and police were on the streets when people woke up. Military officers supervised factories, schools, media, and government offices for months. Media freedom and free discussion ended. Individual parishes and Catholic organizations provided havens for discussion and distributed food and clothing to the struggling population. Most Poles were too shocked to act. The United States and some other Western countries imposed sanctions on Poland. Martial law under Jaruzelski, as head of the Polish military and Communist Party, continued formally for a year and a half.

Until the mid-1980s, the economic situation remained severely troubled. The sanctions imposed by the United States and some other Western countries remained in place. Some activists continued to be interned, and Solidarity and the other independent organizations were illegal, but an active underground movement functioned, and dissident publications and activities proliferated. At the same time, the difficulties of daily life amid constant shortages meant that most individuals focused on feeding and supplying their families rather than engaging in open political protest.

Transition from Communism

By the late eighties, Poland’s economy had failed to rebound and provide what Poles thought they had been promised. The communists’ efforts to win support or even draw in respected activists and intellectuals largely failed. Much of Poland’s population was alienated from both Solidarity and the communist government. Random strikes with no specific goals worried both Solidarity leaders and the communists. To deal with this alienation, communist leaders reached out to the opposition as they tried to get the economy moving by decreasing controls on prices and forcing factories to be self-supporting. When none of these maneuvers worked, the government, with the support of the Catholic Church, sought Solidarity leaders’ agreement to begin discussions on systemic change. Church leaders helped bring the two sides together and agreed to facilitate Roundtable talks between them.

No one thought communism would end. For the rulers, the Roundtables were a way to hold on to power by getting Solidarity to share responsibility for Poland’s problems and move toward a new, more open system of government over the next four years. For Solidarity’s self-appointed representatives, the most important goal of the Roundtables was to force the relegalization of Solidarity as a trade union (something the government conceded on the first day of the public Roundtables). The population hoped that the
Roundtable agreements would protect the economic guarantees of a social welfare state and that the freedoms of the Solidarity era would be returned. The Catholic Church wanted the Roundtables to stabilize Poland and ensure its interests and position.

After five months of private discussions and nine weeks of public discussions, the two sides agreed to defer decisions on economic reforms and move ahead with political reforms and parliamentary elections designed to give the PUWP and its former allies a majority of seats in a parliament that included Solidarity and other nonparty people as “junior partners.” In the process, they created a system that broke taboos but did not initially violate the Soviet Union’s old limits.

The Polish political system was redesigned to have a second legislative chamber (the Senate) and a president elected by the two houses together. To ensure the dominance of the communists and the two subsidiary parties that had run with it in the communist era, in this transitional election, 65 percent of the seats in the traditional parliament (Sejm) were designated for candidates who had been in one of these parties, and 35 percent of the seats were designated for candidates who had not belonged to a party in the communist era. The candidates of Solidarity and other opposition groups could run for the latter. Finally, forty seats were reserved for the so-called National List of the regime’s notables and reformers. The new Senate, as a trade-off, was elected without any constraints. A majoritarian election system, in which those who did not get a majority in the first round had to run against the next-closest candidate in a second election, was used for both “party” and nonparty seats in the Sejm and new Senate as well as for the National List.

The results of the elections on June 4, 1989, defied all expectations. Candidates Solidarity identified as theirs (signaled by posters showing the candidate with Lech Wałęsa) won every nonparty seat in the Sejm and all but one in the Senate. Only a few of the Communist Party candidates, on the other hand, got the requisite majority to win in the first round. Most of the “party” seats had to be decided in the second round. All but the two men whose names were at the bottom of the National List lost in the first round, and few ran again in the second. The presidency (elected by the Sejm and Senate) went, as had been tacitly promised, to Jaruzelski, the man who had both called for the hated martial law and championed the Roundtable talks. His victory was the result of a political compromise Solidarity leaders engineered to placate Communist Party and military hard-liners in Poland and hard-line leaders elsewhere in the Soviet bloc.

The 65 percent majority established for the Communist Party and its old allies did not hold. The smaller parties, long Trojan horses to draw peasants and small entrepreneurs into the system, broke with the PUWP and joined Solidarity. That reversed the percentages for the “establishment” and the “opposition” in the Sejm: people elected as PUWP members now held 35 percent of the seats, and 65 percent of the seats were held by Solidarity and its new allies from the old system.

The Soviet leaders accepted the results. But no one knew what would happen next. Solidarity deputies’ platform had been against communism, but they had no actual plans for instituting real change in Poland. Communist deputies, on the other hand, were not prepared to be in the minority. They had expected to share power with nonparty members. They too had no plan for what would happen next. And their tries at forming a coalition government with Solidarity and their old allies failed.
A new, noncommunist government was formed in September 1989. Tadeusz Mazowiecki (longtime Catholic editor, dissident, and advisor to Solidarity leader Lech Wałęsa) was named prime minister on Wałęsa's recommendation. He formed a unity government of dissident intellectuals, experts in economics, specialists from the parties formerly aligned with the Communist Party, and three communist ministers to manage the most important ministries for Soviet interests: the Ministry of Interior (police and spy services), the Ministry of Defense, and the Ministry of Foreign Trade. Western-educated economist Leszek Balcerowicz was named minister of finance and deputy prime minister to manage economic reform.

The new government confronted the task of "unmaking communist control" and agreeing on concrete policies for the transition. What had been the Solidarity monolith against the communists dissolved into many factions. Faced with minority party membership after forty years of party rule, Communist Party deputies wanted as little to do with the rejected system as possible. By January 1990, the Communist Party, PUWP, had dissolved itself and passed its resources on to the new Social Democratic Party of the Polish Republic (SLDRP).

Solidarity and Communist deputies all worked to cut-and-paste the communist constitution to fit the election results and the Roundtable Accords. They excised from the constitution provisions like the "leading role of the party" and the promise of fealty to the Soviet Union. All national symbols dropped their communist elements. Then, under pressure from the United States and Western Europe, the Sejm passed bills instituting "shock therapy" economic reform (the Balcerowicz Plan) to make rapid privatization, foreign aid, and investment possible. This program—coupled with the inflation that began after the last communist government freed most food prices so they skyrocketed with the reforms (while salaries remained stable)—triggered a drop in the purchasing power of the zloty by 40 percent at the end of the plan's first month (January 1990) and brought a rapid end to popular euphoria over communism's end and Poland's "return to Europe."

For most Poles, their economic losses and gains were far more important public policy issues than Poland's foreign policy, dealing with the communist past, or imposing Catholic values by adding religion to the school curriculum and prohibiting abortion. Public opinion shows that, although Poles believed in democracy, their faith in the way the political system was run, its politicians, and its economic and political policies took a sharp dip after 1990 and declined over the years, only to begin to stabilize and even improve after 2007, when the economy stabilized and centrist parties dominated. Popular participation in elections has most often been under 60 percent—even during the euphoria of the first partially free elections and then communism's collapse. Respect for and involvement in the Catholic Church, once the symbol of the nation, has dropped steadily. There is also evidence of some popular nostalgia for the communist days and a decrease in faith in elected institutions and the Catholic Church. 5

Political Institutions

For most of its postcommunist history, governance and political battles in Poland were more about which institution (president, prime minister and Council of Ministers, Sejm,
Senate, or courts) could do what. Initially, the “Small Constitution” of 1992 codified the additions and deletions made in 1990 to take communism out of the constitution and defined the powers of the major institutions. This did not, however, provide a framework to set out, coordinate, and balance what institutions could and could not do. So, in the first years, elected officials established the rights and responsibilities of their offices either, if they were legislators, by passing more legislation or, if they were the president or prime minister, by simply claiming the right to act and setting precedents. Only in 1997 was a full constitution passed.
Poland’s constitutional system began as a strong semi-presidential one in which the president had the right to veto legislation or refer it to the constitutional court for review, disband parliament and call new elections, declare a state of emergency, play a role in selecting the prime minister and cabinet, appoint some top judges and officials to some supervisory councils, and represent the country in international politics and military affairs. Wojciech Jaruzelski, as Poland’s first president and a remnant of the defeated regime, used virtually none of these powers unless asked to do so by the Solidarity government. After Lech Wałęsa, the former leader of Solidarity, became president, he took control by ignoring limits on his powers. In response, the 1992 and 1997 constitutions reined in the powers of the presidency and increased the powers of the prime minister and cabinet.

Under the 1997 constitution, the president has the right to step in and name a prime minister only if the Sejm is too divided to agree. The prime minister and his cabinet can be removed only by a vote of no confidence by the parliament. The prime minister is responsible for selecting his cabinet and presenting his choices to the Sejm for approval. The government also has the explicit responsibility to lead the policy-making process in domestic and foreign affairs, carry out the laws passed by the parliament, put forth regulations as authorized by the Sejm, and manage the state budget. Finally, the president and prime minister must cosign all laws.

The powers of legislation are concentrated in the Sejm. It also has the right to appoint officials to various public boards and to specific seats on the court. The Senate, on the other hand, is primarily a body to review and revise Sejm legislation and serve as a moderator in conflicts.

So, although the presidency formally retains most of its powers, each is now counterbalanced by the power of the legislature or the prime minister. Until 2005, even in the one period when the president and the government were from the same party—the Democratic Left Alliance (SLD)—these rules held. In 2005, the Law and Justice Party dominated the parliament, and its leader, Lech Kaczyński, was elected president. There were conflicts between the president and prime minister. These ended when Kaczyński appointed, as prime minister, his identical twin brother, Jarosław, who then lost the post after the 2007 early elections. Subsequently, Lech Kaczyński used his veto to block legislation by the Civic Platform (PO) majority and ignored constitutional limits by intervening in policy decisions in both domestic and foreign policy.

As is clear, the powers of the presidency, the prime minister, and the parliament have often stemmed from the politics and personalities of the moment rather than from constitutional provisions. Poland’s first four presidents cut very different profiles. The first three claimed to represent not a political party but the Polish people as a whole. What they tried to do depended on their own interests and sense of power. Jaruzelski avoided conflict with the new Solidarity government and served as a figurehead. Lech Wałęsa rode in as the leader of the Solidarity movement and attempted an “imperial presidency.” Although much of what he claimed he could do never happened, his threats alarmed many. Two years into his rule, he faced a very divided parliament. There were deadlocks with the government, public opposition to and disgust with his style of leadership, and even claims among former supporters that he had been a secret agent. All of these weakened not only his popular support but also his ability to lead. After he disbanded the parliament, following a vote of no confidence in the government in 1993, and an early
parliamentary election, he found himself trapped in a continuous conflict with the SLD’s majority and its prime minister and cabinet. In the end, no matter what Wałęsa did, he was checkmated by the parliamentary majority.

Aleksander Kwasniewski, who was elected president in 1995 and again in 2000, differed greatly from his predecessors. Given the public attacks on his party (SLD) and on him for having communist connections, he focused on disproving stereotypes about communists. He was a “by-the-book” president, taking no more power than was constitutionally mandated. At the same time, he was able to work effectively behind the scenes. In his first term, he had an SLD and Peasant Party parliamentary majority, so legislation was passed and conflicts avoided. As a result, in 1997, a full constitution was passed with support from all sides. After the 1997 parliamentary election, he worked with the right-wing coalition by focusing on avoiding direct conflict and presenting himself as a professional. He became the representative of Poland to the world, with a special emphasis on the West and leading Poland into the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). In the process, he returned prestige and the faith of the public to the presidency.

In 2000, Kwasniewski was so strong that other parties fielded candidates with little hope of winning. His slogan, “Poland: A Home for All,” emphasized his apolitical leadership. One year later, the SLD returned as the dominant party balanced against a fragmented right wing. By default, Poland moved back to a semi-presidential state, with the
president appointing economist Marek Belka as prime minister and taking leadership in areas like foreign policy that were the constitutional purview of the presidency.

In 2005, Lech Kaczynski of the Law and Justice Party was elected president, and parliamentary elections resulted in his party being the largest in the Sejm, so it could form a government with two very different but small radical parties (Samoobrona, or Self-Defense, and the League of Polish Families). He and his twin brother, Jaroslaw, in the role of prime minister, appointed allies to ministerial posts. There was no credible means to rein in his actions or his party and its fractious coalition. Changes in the electoral laws for local governments and leaders’ commitment to “cleansing” the system of “agents” from the communist period enabled the Kaczynski brothers to expand their powers by claiming individuals who disagreed with them had been communists or agents. They then changed the lustration process, making all the old secret police files public and allowing the removal of individuals from public office based on the contents of their files. This

Photo 10.3. The late president Lech Kaczynski congratulating his twin brother, Jaroslaw Kaczynski, on his swearing in as prime minister in 2006. He left office in November 2007. (Rzeczpospolita)
made opposition to the government risky. At the same time, the Law and Justice Party and its allies engaged in continual internal battles over charges and countercharges.

Early parliamentary elections, held on October 24, 2007, showed popular disaffection with attacks regarding the past. A movement spearheaded by young people to get out the vote brought the more policy-focused Civic Platform to power. When the Civic Platform won parliamentary elections in 2007, that party’s centrist leader, Donald Tusk, became prime minister. He worked to modernize the bureaucracy so that the government was more responsive. He and his coalition reversed what the rightest coalition had done by moving back to closer relations with Germany. Tusk’s positive and professional style of leadership, as well as Poland’s economic health during the recession, made him a popular leader. In the process, though, he faced constant attacks and vetoes of legislation by Kaczynski.

Lech Kaczynski essentially wielded right-wing power through his presidential veto powers and public attacks on his enemies as “communists.” When Lech Kaczynski began his campaign for a second term as president in 2010, public opinion polls showed that he was not popular enough to win. He escalated the rhetoric in his battle for power with Tusk. In foreign policy, he battled with the prime minister over who could speak for Poland. After Prime Minister Tusk’s participation in the official Russian-Polish commemoration of the slaughter of Polish officers by Soviet soldiers at the start of World War II, Kaczynski, as president, led his own delegation of political leaders and survivors to the site in Russia. The plane carrying them crashed in Smolensk, killing all aboard and beginning a political battle between Polish authorities and his twin brother, the head of

Photo 10.4. Donald Tusk, head of the Civic Platform, with supporters when they won the parliamentary election in 2011 and had a majority in parliament. (Adam Lach)
the Law and Justice Party, over whether the accident was the result of pilot error, bad landing conditions, or a Russian attack.

Despite the tragedy and the battles over what happened and how to memorialize Lech Kaczyński, his brother, Jarosław, Law and Justice’s candidate for president in the special election in 2010, lost to the Civic Platform’s candidate, Bronisław Komorowski, whose campaign focused on the promise of civility and compromise in governance rather than conflict. With Komorowski’s election to the presidency in 2010, the Civic Platform has controlled both parliament and the presidency. The circle was, in some sense, closed since Komorowski had maintained close ties to the leaders of the postcommunist government of Tadeusz Mazowiecki. Although there have been tax increases and demonstrations over the low incomes of professionals in health care and education as well as mini-scandals, the Civic Platform remained popular and cohesive under Donald Tusk. It will, though, face Law and Justice again in the presidential and parliamentary elections in 2015, with its top leader, Tusk, serving not as prime minister but as head of the Council of Europe.

**Parties and Elections**

After 1989, holding elections became politicians’ way of solving political conflicts and battles over institutional powers. In the process, rather than clear policy divisions, elections came to reflect the individual battles of increasingly radicalized political leaders. As a result, until the mid-2000s, elections actually increased fragmentation, parties came and went, and the public was often disenchanted with its elected officials.

In the first decade after the fall of communism, parties on the right fought with each other and attacked other parties as “communist.” The clearest divide, among voters and parties, was between those who saw the communist system in a positive light and those who identified with the Catholic Church. This divide was more significant than economic interests in determining how people voted." By 2007, though, the parties (and their leaders) on the far right and those connected with communists had destroyed themselves, leaving two major parties, the moderate Civic Platform and the populist Law and Justice, to do battle.

In the first year after the end of communism, a rush to elections began in the summer of 1990. Local government elections were held before the duties and new powers of the various levels of local government had been established. Almost at the same time, a campaign by Lech Wałęsa and his followers got underway to force Jaruzelski’s resignation and the passage of a law for direct popular election of the president. Jaruzelski conceded to this pressure and resigned.

Lech Wałęsa won the first popular presidential election, defeating then Prime Minister Tadeusz Mazowiecki and, more narrowly, defeating Stanisław Tyminski, an émigré with no clear platform or qualifications who promised instant wealth for everyone. This election, in the fall of 1990, caused more fragmentation of Solidarity.

Voting for someone new who promised dramatic improvement in living conditions and, on the right, condemned all opponents became the pattern in Poland’s first decade and a half of democratic elections. Two other long-term features of party affiliation in Poland also began at this point. One was the regional difference in party support between
the prosperous west, with its big cities, which supported pro-reform candidates, and the impoverished east and other areas where factories had gone bankrupt and small-scale agriculture had failed, which supported the right with its promises of social welfare and condemnations of those who had made the changes initially. The other feature that emerged was the focus of right-wing parties and voters on accounting for the communist past as a way of explaining and dealing with current economic problems.

Initially, a plethora of tiny parties emerged, making coalitions difficult if not impossible after the initial free elections. In the early parliamentary elections of 1991, one hundred parties ran candidates, and twenty-nine parties were elected in the Sejm’s proportional representation elections. The Senate was also fragmented after its elections. In addition to two warring Solidarity-based parties and the Solidarity trade union, there were various small right-wing parties that condemned both the former communists and Solidarity deputies for the losses “caused by” the Balcerowicz Plan, in a campaign marked by nationalist and religious rhetoric. Only the former communists, the Social Democratic Party of the Polish Republic, remained unified.

So divided was this parliament that, within two years, it was unable to make policy and turned in on itself. In the process, the largest of the many parties in the Sejm pushed through two laws that impacted party politics. First, to cut down on the fragmentation of the Sejm, political parties were required to win 5 percent of the national vote and coalitions 7 percent to hold seats in the Sejm. Second, the Sejm legalized a system allowing parties represented in parliament to receive national government funding for their campaigns if they had won at least 3 percent in the election. The amount of this funding was proportional to the number of seats a party won in the Sejm or Senate.

In 1993, this electoral law resulted in the SLD, with only 20.41 percent of the votes, and its former allies, the renamed Polish Peasant Party, with 15.4 percent of the vote, winning 60.5 percent of Sejm seats. The nine right-wing parties that ran could not form a coalition, and none reached the 5 percent of the vote required to hold seats in parliament, so they got no seats even though, together, they polled 34.45 percent of the vote.

Polish parties, with the exception of parties from the old communist system, have had neither the incentive nor the resources to do ground-level organization and build an infrastructure. After the era of Communist Party rule, the very word “party” and the notion of being a party member had negative connotations, so most of the groups that ran for elections eschewed the word “party” and did not build structures or enroll members. Candidates, even from the most established parties, have had to invest their own money in campaigns; only if they win seats in parliament are they reimbursed. The expenses of being in parliament are paid through their party directly from the parliament’s budget. This financing is complicated by defections from parliamentary parties while the parliament is in session.

This funding has not resulted in political parties with permanent structures. Only the former communists (SLD) invested in the infrastructures typical of European parties. It started ahead because it had inherited some of the PUWP’s buildings, equipment, and membership lists, as well as old members who had long organized for the party. These cadres of old party workers were willing to work for the SLD, even though it voiced a pro-capitalist ideology, because the other parties attacked or shunned anyone who had been in the Communist Party. Then, after the 2001 elections, when the collapse of the
right-wing coalition handed victory to the SLD, the party destroyed itself by trying to expand its leadership, bringing in new people, and allowing them to profit from their positions in the party.

The other political groups in Poland initially did not have the resources or desire to invest in increasingly expensive infrastructure and offices. In the early years of Poland’s democracy, some right-wing parties received support and facilities from the Catholic Church in exchange for advocating for its interests. But in the years between elections, even the more successful parties remained essentially “couch parties,” focused on individual leaders and existing only during political campaigns. Most still have no real formal membership; leaders and parliamentary deputies only hold together because they get funding, beyond their salaries, from their party in parliament, not as individuals. Even the dominant party since 2007, Civic Platform, has not built a strong party organization. It has basically functioned as a Western catchall party focused on its strong and popular leadership.

Parties’ ideologies have been unstable and confusing at best. The dramatic defeat of the Communist Party in 1989 resulted in the dissolution of the Polish Communist Party (PUWP). Its legacy party, the Democratic Left Alliance (SLD), cast off its Marxist ideology and voted for the Balcerowicz Plan, then shifted to advocating for “trickle-down economics,” holding that the poor would gain from excess profits in a capitalist economy. This position was amplified by the victory of SLD leader Aleksander Kwasniewski in the presidential race in 1995 and again in 2000. He essentially ran as a modern, pro-capitalist, European leader who was above the political fray. The SLD, once it won the 2001 parliamentary election, became known for corruption at its lower levels and, as a result, lost its popular support. And Kwasniewski’s attempt to save the left by linking those from the old Solidarity who stood for workers’ rights and social democracy—who had never gotten an electoral foothold—and the SLD together in a group called Left and Democrats in the 2007 elections failed. Little remains of the left except for small groups of young politicians who began in the SLD who advocate for what are marginal issues in Poland.

The initial political center (Freedom Union) could not disassociate itself from the losses people had suffered due to the Balcerowicz Plan. As a result, its candidates were defeated in the 1990 presidential election and the 1991 parliamentary elections and returned to government as an element of the Civic Platform. This center stands against Polish nationalism and for establishing a liberal market economy, democratization, and a return to Europe. Although some of its leaders were lay Catholic opposition leaders during the communist era, this center has not supported giving the Catholic Church real power in politics.

In 2001, the center reemerged with 12.7 percent of the vote as the Civic Platform and came in second to the Democratic Left Alliance with its 41.0 percent. In 2007 and 2011 the Civic Platform won the parliamentary as well as the presidential elections in 2010. It maintains a pro-European and pro–free market position and supports a strong Polish presence in the European Union. Equally important is its reputation for rational and reasoned political action rather than politics marked by strong rhetoric, charges, and countercharges, seen as a negative characteristic of the right.

The right wing has focused and focuses on Poles’ bitterness over their losses in the initial move to capitalism. It has advocated for social welfare and protecting workers even
as it has railed against communist-era repression, the profits communists made by using their positions to buy up valuable properties during the transition, and communists' supposed connections to Russia and the old secret police. Most right-wing parties, including the League of Polish Families, Solidarity Electoral Action, and Law and Justice, also, implicitly or explicitly, support Catholic religious values and Church authority as the core of public policy. In identifying themselves as Polish nationalists, they have opposed Poland's deep involvement with both the West and the governments of the former Soviet states. As such, they did not fully support joining the European Union and wanted to insure that Poland had a strong position even vis-à-vis Germany in spite of Germany's greater population.

The most powerful and long-standing of these parties, Law and Justice, led with calls against corruption by government officials and "the elite" and with promises to end inequality and to punish communists and their agents and to exclude them from power. Since their defeat in 2007 in early parliamentary elections after their 2005 coalition with the centrist PO fell apart, they have continued to focus on this mix of attacks and demonstrations of Polish nationalism.

None of these parties on the right or their small successors today ever claimed to have had a clear, viable plan to solve the problems they identified. With the exception of those closely tied to the church, they have run "against" elements of the status quo—ranging from women's rights to "Europeanization"—rather than for any specific policy. Although many campaigned promising social benefits, most are parties of outspoken politicians rather than ideologically based organizations. As a result their coalitions have fallen apart every time they have taken the lead in parliament.

The other stable party in the political constellation has been the Polish Peasant Party. It has never failed to hold seats in the Sejm and Senate even as it has lost support since 1993. It has been in coalitions with both sides. Initially, it focused on the interests of the agricultural sector; more recently, it has positioned itself as a moderate party supporting both economic development and a preservation of social supports. In the 2005 election it did lose some of its peasant supporters to the radical Self-Defense Party; in 2007, however, it regained voter support as a party not involved in the ideological fights and also as the one major party that did not support the war in Iraq.

In the long run, these fluid and irresolvable noneconomic divisions have meant that the battles in Polish politics have been more over issues of the past and religion than over how best to deal with the economy and the needs of people for state support services. As a result, without alternative policies on soluble problems, political rhetoric has often focused on charges and countercharges. In the end, the rationality and professionalism of the SDP under Aleksander Kwasniewski and the Civic Union's image allowed them to win sequential elections.

Civil Society

Unlike the rest of the postcommunist world, Poland began with well-established alternative institutions from the communist period, including the Catholic Church, the intellectual opposition, and Solidarity. Intellectual opposition groups had clear leaders
known to the public, produced elaborate and regular sets of publications, ran an alternative educational system, and provided legal and financial support for individuals working in the opposition or workers punished for participation in demonstrations. Professional associations also acted more independently than their equivalents elsewhere in the Soviet bloc as they pressed for privileges and power for their groups. At the same time, in the communist period, Poles were part of elaborate friendship networks that often crossed lines between the regime and the opposition. These facilitated the negotiations that made the transition possible.

Tragically, these institutions rapidly lost out in the transition. The informal networks were no longer necessary. Professional groups did not work in a system where there was competition for jobs within professions. And while established opposition groups and Solidarity retained their symbolism, they lost popular support when they had to be for something (particularly economic reform) rather than simply against communism. Their authority was also tarnished by allegations and some revelations that some prominent figures had been, at some time, agents of the secret police.

Solidarity, the trade union formed as a result of shipyard workers’ requirement for ending their strike in 1980, was a powerful, if decentralized, organization until martial law was imposed to end its activities in December 1981. Initially, strikes and other work actions (or the threat of them) brought concessions from the government. Solidarity also spun off unions of students and peasants. After it was declared illegal and a broad swath of its leadership was interned, it remained a powerful force as a symbol and rallying point for broad popular opposition. When the government sought a partner for negotiations in 1988 and 1989, it turned to Solidarity’s former leaders, who generally sent their intellectual advisors as negotiators to the Roundtables. Solidarity, under the guise of the Citizens’ Electoral Committees, then organized a massive campaign for the 1989 elections, signifying the candidates it supported in every district by papering the streets on election day with posters showing them with Solidarity leader Lech Wałęsa.

After the formation of a Solidarity-based government and the passage of the Balcerowicz Plan, Solidarity lost public support. Its old unity against communism’s failures fragmented rapidly when policy had to be made. First, there were splits between the intellectuals who had advised Solidarity and those who had come to leadership from the working class over who should lead and what policy should be. Its dual role as trade union fighting for workers’ rights and reformist political party dissuaded supporters.

More recently, organizations identifying themselves as Solidarity have appeared but have not had the draw or power that Solidarity did in 1980 and 1981 and then in 1989 and 1990. Solidarity has not been able to focus on the interests of workers in private businesses and industries (now the vast majority of Polish workers). As inflation ate away at their salaries, public-sector employees, such as teachers and medical personnel, marched under the Solidarity banner against changes in benefits, but they were never able to gather enough demonstrators to gain real traction.

The Catholic Church was once such a popular force that the communists allowed it to function as a religious institution and symbol of the limits of communist rule. In the communist period, going to church became not just a religious obligation but also a political act for many. Catholic intellectuals and students groups, the Catholic University of Lublin, and a number of theological schools also helped link the church to the secular dissident
movement. In the 1980s, its role was magnified by the election of Karol Wojtyla, the former archbishop of Kraków, as the first non-Italian pope in four hundred years. The pope’s first trip to Poland served as proof that people could organize without the state. This was critical in the mobilization of Solidarity a year later. The church served as a symbol for Solidarity and a haven that provided donated food and clothing for the needy during martial law.

From the first semi-free elections on, local churches and the national hierarchy inserted themselves directly into politics, supporting individual candidates and parties. The Catholic Church and the parties they supported pushed through and won required religious education in all schools and, eventually, strict limits on abortion. In the process, the church went from Poland’s most respected institution to one of its least respected. Although Poland remains one of the most Catholic countries in Europe (88 percent identify as Catholic, although only 58 percent claim to be practicing8), the number of births out of wedlock and the number of abortions continue to increase. So, while Polish politicians were and are wary of going against the Church’s wishes, much of the public sees the church as having too much influence in politics and so ignores its directives.9 At the same time, Catholic institutions have fragmented. The right-wing, privately owned Radio Maryja, with its xenophobia, racism, and anti-Semitism, became so powerful and popular that the Church hierarchy had no way to moderate it or stop it.

As the economic transition reduced the free time and resources of most people, other civil society institutions failed to fill the void left by the reduced influence of intellectual and professional groups, the Catholic Church, and Solidarity. Initially, Western foundations created or funded civil society organizations in Poland. Most of these lasted only as long as the funding from the outside did. Other organizations appeared. Some were charities for needy groups, but most focused on providing special benefits and privileges for their members or substituting for poor state services. They have not been significant political actors or avenues for popular participation in politics.

The Economic Transformation

The economy was the Achilles’ heel of Poland’s leaders in the communist period and during the transition. But, in the years that have followed, Poland’s economy has become one of the stronger in the postcommunist world. In fact, Poland had the highest growth rate of any EU country during the European recession that began in 2008.

In 1989, the economic reformers inherited an economy distorted by the communists’ attempts to avert disaster with piecemeal reforms and their efforts to placate the population by importing Western goods and allowing some privatization. So, reformers faced a population with higher expectations than elsewhere and a crushing debt to the West.

Western countries also had more power over Poland’s economic decisions than they did in the rest of the communist world because Poland was so heavily indebted to the West. After all, Poland’s attempt to jump-start its economy in the early 1970s by borrowing from the West had failed, pinning it under more than $43 billion of debt by 1989 (making it, then, the third most internationally indebted country in the world). This meant that Poles’ decisions about how they transformed their economy were very much dependent on the approval of their Western creditors because they needed debt write-offs as well as aid.
Postcommunist economic reform began with “shock therapy,” or the Balcerowicz Plan to curb high inflation and open the Polish market to competition with the outside. This reform involved ending all price controls January 1, 1990, a month after the bill was passed. This made the Polish zloty convertible to Western currencies, eliminating trade barriers and government subsidies for state enterprises so that they would be self-supporting, restricting wage increases, reducing the money supply, and increasing interest rates. Its results were disastrous for most individuals. By the end of January 1990, individual purchasing power had dropped 43.2 percent. Registered unemployment went from 0.3 percent in December 1989 to 6.5 percent a year later, jumping to 11.4 percent in December 1991 and 16.4 percent in 1993. Declines in all the major economic indicators for the next two years were equally dramatic. Gross domestic product (GDP) dropped over 18 percent. In the first month of 1990 alone, industrial production dropped 30 percent, and the purchasing power of wages and salaries went down more than one-third. Peasant incomes fell by about half. Polish agricultural goods lost out to better-packaged and heavily subsidized Western goods that were often cheaper than their now unsubsidized Polish equivalents. Old state cooperatives and private enterprises that had survived the communist era collapsed because they could not compete with mass-produced Western goods or pay soaring costs for rent, materials, and salaries. At the same time, a small group of wealthy “owners and consultants” emerged. Poles reacted by voting government after government out. By 1993, the economy had begun an upswing that lasted through the mid-1990s, when it slowed perceptibly. Growth hovered around 5 percent per year in the mid-1990s.

Even as the economy grew, however, there were problems. The growth was happening only in specific areas where new technology brought productivity increases and job losses. The export sector lagged behind, leaving Poland with a serious deficit. Inflation remained high. For a large percentage of Poles, the new buildings and foreign investments in the major cities were coupled with bankruptcies in the smaller cities and rural regions. These triggered significant regional unemployment outside the major cities in what was known as “second Poland” and a slide into poverty for a majority of the population, even as a small but ever increasing number of people gained from the changes. This socioeconomic division remains today.

The solution for the government was to push privatization. New small firms, largely based on imports and street trade, blossomed. They often began by working around the existing rules, selling on the street and paying little or no tax. Many state stores were simply privatized by their employees. As a result, the share of employment and the national income in the private sector grew from less than one-third to more than half of the Polish economy by 1993, even though larger and weaker state firms continued on, virtually untouched by privatization.

The next step proved extremely complex and contentious. Solidarity leaders advocated moving toward employee ownership and maintaining cooperative enterprises. Leszek Balcerowicz, as deputy prime minister and minister of finance, and his supporters wanted simply to privatize state industries as quickly and completely as possible by establishing a stock market and letting weak industries go bankrupt. Only after eleven draft laws were rejected did this Margaret Thatcher-style privatization become law.
In the end, Poland’s privatization was piecemeal, done largely through foreign investment and mass privatization, where salable firms were consolidated into national investment funds. In this process, only 512 of the 8,453 state firms were included, most of them small. As a result, initially only about 2 percent of the total workforce was involved. Much of the money earmarked to prepare firms for privatization went to managers rather than to upgrading and reorganizing the firms. Every adult Pole got a share certificate for 180 zlotys (about $40) to invest in these funds. For most Poles, this minimal “mass privatization” was far from enticing. Rather than enlivening the market, the process caused the worth of the firms and the certificates to fall to less than half their original value.  

Most foreign direct investment involved government and private firms buying up state firms and Western businesses moving in to renovate them or open new businesses. The bulk of new investments were in construction and the opening of huge supermarkets and discount stores. In the end, the Polish economy, 75 percent of which was in private hands by 2000, was a “subsidiary economy” of foreign firms. At the turn of the century, after these initial investments, foreign investment decreased dramatically: between 2000 and 2002, the total direct foreign investment dropped from $9.341 billion to $4.131 billion.

There were serious political complications in both mass privatization and foreign direct investment. For most Poles, privatization seemed to hurt rather than help. Newly privatized firms were often sold or transformed to make money for their managers. Wages and work conditions in many foreign firms have been below Polish standards. Many Poles felt Poland was being sold off, at bargain prices, to the West. Almost 75 percent of banking services are controlled by Western capital, and large parts of other key institutions, such as the media, some postal services, and telephone services, are owned by outside interests. The public’s disgust at not getting the benefits it expected from capitalism was magnified by accusations and revelations of corruption involved in selling off, with huge tax and price breaks, Polish industries and resources to Western firms and, in early 2000, Russian interests.

The growth in Poland’s GDP during the European recession was in large part a result of the funding benefits the European Union gave to prepare Poland’s economy and infrastructure for accession; the comparatively small amount of its GDP that comprised foreign trade (and the fact that most of that trade was in agricultural products rather than modern, large-scale manufacturing); the slowness of its banking sector to modernize and lower its standards for loans or loans in foreign currency; and the fact that it had not joined the Eurozone. This meant that the Polish economy had funding for investment projects and was not as affected by the economic problems of other states when the recession hit. Its agricultural sector, after opposing joining the EU, found itself actually benefiting from Poland’s membership. Not only did the EU provide substantial agricultural aid as Poland was joining, but Poland’s small, traditional farms found a valuable niche as producers of organic foods.

As Poland moves ahead, the one troubling economic factor is the level of its national debt (more than 50 percent of its GDP since 2009), even though it is far lower than in many economies in Europe. Efforts to reduce the debt by cutting state costs and benefits have not been well received. And the pressure of unemployment on the economy
has grown as the loss of jobs elsewhere in Europe has forced Poles who had left to work abroad to return, heightening unemployment, particularly among youth.

Social Conditions

For all of Poland’s macroeconomic successes, those gains have not been matched by the growth of salaries and employment rates for most of the population. The unemployed population has grown, and the worth of most workers’ earnings has dropped because of high inflation rates. To keep the state sector solvent, many (mostly larger) firms that could not easily be sold off were closed down or sold off at low prices. Because so much of Poland’s industry had been concentrated in single-industry towns and regions, outside the major cities, there were areas of mass unemployment in what came to be known as “second Poland.” That still remains a problem alleviated only by the out-migration of workers to other areas where there are jobs.

Indeed, Poland now has one of the highest levels of inequality in the European Union: 17 percent of the population lived below the government-established social minimum (enough income to cover not only food and housing but also clothes, limited cultural events, and education) in 2005, and 26 percent of children lived in poverty.13 By 2013, unemployment hovered around 10.3 percent, down from 19.1 percent in 2004, with approximately 27.3 percent registered unemployment among youth, down from 39 percent in 2004. Much of this is long-term unemployment. These decreases occurred, in large part, because the elderly population is decreasing; as of 2010, nearly 5 million people were on early retirement, unemployment, or social welfare. The cohort of young people entering the labor market was much smaller than it had been previously because, as of 2010, nearly 2 million were working abroad and others were attending universities. But by 2013, many young people going into the labor market, after working abroad or finishing their educations, found there were no jobs for them.

The impact of these inequities and demographic changes has been aggravated by the economic reforms’ negative effect on the very aspects of social welfare that were “givens” in the communist era—free education and health care and guaranteed pensions. Reforming the welfare system has never been high on the government’s agenda. That, coupled with EU pressures for a low budget deficit, made either reforming or supporting social services difficult at best. So, doctors and teachers experienced a steady decline in their salaries, financial support for hospitals, schools, and other social welfare institutions dried up, and the wealthier segment of the population now uses private hospitals, clinics, and schools. Many professionals shifted to the new private sector in education and health care, took on multiple jobs, or left the country.

These trends were also aggravated by the heightened demand on and costs to the state for health care and education as well as unemployment assistance and pensions. The economic reforms increased the cost of basic necessities dramatically, even as privatization and the commitment to an exchangeable currency and meeting EU requirements decreased the money the state could spend on such services.

The results of these social demands and the inability of the state to meet them have resulted in a number of changes in society. Unemployment and family support funds are
most often so limited that no one can live above the biological minimum level on only unemployment benefits or the family subsidies regions give out. Most of the unemployed have drifted away into the gray economy of illegal trade and crime. Particularly in the rural areas and small towns, poverty has become a steady state. After 2000, youth unemployment and the promise of work for those with the right training increased the demand for some form of higher education. This in turn resulted in the proliferation of private schools not only at the lower levels but also in higher education. A decade later, universities, even the more prestigious ones, are unable to fill their departments, and many of their graduates are left to survive on part-time jobs.

State support in these areas has been limited at best. After 1989, Jacek Kuron, a longtime member of the opposition and the first noncommunist minister of social welfare, fought for decent unemployment benefits and even set up his own soup kitchens as a model for private action to deal with problems for which there was no government money. Only after the 1997 election was there an attempt to create coherent public programs to reorganize the health-care and pension systems and their funding. But by 2005, neither the right-wing Solidarity Electoral Action government nor its social democratic successor had been able to implement effective reforms in these areas. Hospitals closed down for months at a time because of a lack of funds. In one case, the Constitutional Court declared a health-care reform law unconstitutional, leaving the health-care system to function with no legal structure for more than a year until a new law was passed in 2004. The crisis in the public sector has decreased slightly with the passage of some health-care and education legislation, but it is far from over. Salaries for public-sector employees remain a major political issue, as does the extent to which cutbacks can be made in government programs to reduce Poland’s debt.

**Transitional Justice**

Poland’s negotiated revolution and the unwillingness of many of its leading dissidents, once they became leaders, to punish the men and women of the former regime, its secret police, and network of agents led to “drawing a thick line” between the past and present. This action deferred dealing with what had happened under communist rule until 1996, when the first lustration law was passed. In the void this delay caused, politicians on the right made accusations and claimed to have proof in what came to be called “wild lustration.” This forced politicians on the left to move to establish a legal process for dealing with the past, complicated as it was by the fact that the secret police files had remained in the hands of the police, vulnerable to being destroyed or tampered with, until 2007. The Institute of National Memory was opened after a more developed and broader law was passed.

Transitional justice in Poland has officially focused on three processes: trying leaders accused of ordering attacks on major demonstrations, lustrating politicians listed as agents in the past, and setting up programs for recognizing and getting information out on long-ignored moments in Polish history. Ironically, public opinion surveys show that these processes have not been of great interest to the population; they have, however, been significant in political battles.
Until 2007, individual politicians were “lustrated” (barred from public office for having served as agents of the secret police) only if they lied in the declaration required of each candidate and some state officials by claiming not to have been such an agent. These declarations were posted in election district polling stations but did not deter voters from supporting strong candidates even if they had lied about their pasts. If top government officials were found to have lied on their forms, they were given the choice of either vacating their positions or going through a trial in a special, closed court. In 2006, the Law and Justice Party pushed through legislation expanding the requirement for lustration to the legal, media, and education professions, as well as to other state offices, and opening up the police files of those who had been spied on not just to the victims but to journalists and scholars as well. That legislation, though, was largely eviscerated by the courts as against European rights standards. Even with the opening of files and lustration, however, charges of having been an agent of the secret police or the Soviet Union, as well as references to the past, remain regular parts of political discourse. To the extent that they had credibility, these attacks not only muddied political battles but also the public image of the Church and the opposition movement, both prime targets for secret police pressure. And although most of the victims and perpetrators are now dead or elderly and there is little political support for the politics of attacks, the secret police and their agents remain a popular topic in Polish film, and “who did what” is of interest to younger generations as well.

Pressure from the right also resulted in trials of Wojciech Jaruzelski and others around him for the killing of workers in 1970 (although Jaruzelski did not sign the order and was not in the area when the attacks happened) and for the imposition of martial law. The trial for the 1970 killings dragged on for years. In 2007, based on documents in the files taken over by the Institute of National Memory, a trial of Jaruzelski and his close associates over the declaration of martial law in 1980 began. Both trials drew little public interest and were ended because the defendants were too old and ill. Ultimately, they had no effect on public opinion: a significant part of the population saw martial law as “the lesser evil.”

The institute has also taken an active role in historical discussions of the communist period, publishing books, sponsoring meetings, and even producing games designed to remind people and teach youth about the problems of life in communist systems. At the same time, new museums and monuments are being opened on issues ignored in the communist era: the Warsaw Uprising at the end of the war, the history of Jews in Poland, and repression under the communists.

Foreign Policy

Poland’s foreign policy has tried to bridge three worlds: the United States, Western Europe, and the former Soviet bloc. Given the strength of the Polish lobby and the size of the Polish economy and unpaid debt, US interests were early and powerful players, as were West European interests.

For all the initial government’s interest in returning to Europe, it was impossible to turn away from the Soviet Union totally. The Soviet responses were key to how the Poles
designed the limits of their transition. The Soviet Union and former Soviet states that border Poland (Ukraine, Belarus, and Russia) have been an established market for Polish goods. Russia was also the major source of energy resources for Poland.

Former Soviet peoples’ desire to go to the West or have their systems follow Poland’s model proved to be a blessing. On the one hand, Poles first worried that there would be a mass exodus from these poorer states to the West, flooding Poland with refugees. Instead, they got a plethora of skilled laborers from Ukraine and other former Soviet states ready to work at low wages in Poland to cover their expenses in their home countries. On the other hand, foreign policy leaders came to value the idea of Poland as a bridge between East and West. In playing this out, Poland has been far more engaged than other countries in Central and Eastern Europe in working with countries to the east and advocating for their democratization. Aleksander Kwasniewski, as a former communist and president of Poland, was used by the Ukrainian government and the Our Ukraine candidates to lead top-level negotiations that ended the Orange Revolution. And then, once Russian engagement in Ukraine began in 2014, Polish politicians were leaders in NATO and the EU, pushing for strong stands against the repression and Russian actions.

This balancing act was complicated as it was coupled with incentives, largely for those on the left, to legitimize themselves by being welcomed by US leaders, NATO, and the European Union. For all of Poland’s former politicians, especially the former communists, one key way to legitimize themselves and the economic reforms they advocated was to stress Western ties and the fact that reforms were required for Poland to rejoin Europe as a part of the transatlantic alliance.

It fell to the right wing to emphasize Polish nationalism and the risks and costs of alignment. Those on the right were inclined to picture Poland as being sold off to Western (and former Soviet) interests. Hence, the Euroskeptic candidates in European Parliament elections were, most often, from right-wing parties in Poland.

The balancing act required was not easy; nor was responding to the demands of membership in the EU and NATO or to US demands. Although Poland was the central geographic corridor for NATO and the European Union’s expansion eastward, it lagged in making the necessary reforms. It also did not always side with the Europeans in economic and political matters. In fact, Poland was long called by some “America’s Trojan horse.” When faced with a choice between American and European producers, it leaned toward US products. At the same time, for Poles, the United States’ refusal to lift its visa requirement, as it has for the other Central European countries, has been a serious issue, especially now that Poles have money and there is no longer any real incentive to work illegally in the United States.

NATO membership was an important symbol of Poland’s turn to the West. It was, for Poles, a guarantee that they were safe from their eastern neighbors, even though there was no commitment, until Russia’s intervention in Ukraine, to protect Poland in the event of an attack. The costs of joining and retooling its military were partially cushioned by Western aid it had received earlier and aid targeted to smooth its movement into NATO. After Britain, Poland was one of the first European states to join the “coalition of the willing in Iraq,” with a sizable contingent of troops that governments on both the right and left maintained, and one of the last to withdraw. In response to Russian actions in Ukraine, NATO agreed to station rapid response forces in Poland.
Poland’s membership in the European Union was guaranteed by its geographic position. Even if it lagged in its preparations, it could not be ignored and could not have its membership delayed. Many in Poland and the West feared the results of Poland’s inclusion in the European Union, even as they cheered this visible end to the division of Europe. Many thought Poles would leave en masse to work in Western Europe. To calm fear of what came to be known as “the Polish plumber,” provisions were enacted allowing many countries not to give Central and East Europeans, particularly Poles, work permits for long-term stays in most of Western Europe. But until the recession, the emigration of Poles to Great Britain and Ireland proved a boon for those economies.

In its east, Poland built (with West European money) one of the most heavily guarded borders in the world to keep emigrants from getting into “Europe” through Poland. And yet, Poland’s neighbors from Ukraine and Belarus could enter with only a visa—given out for free at embassies and consulates. So, Poles have been able to maintain their temporary-worker labor force and to provide a haven in times of political repression in Belarus and Ukraine. This new border had unexpected side effects: it cut off or reduced the barter trade that had been “big business” for eastern Poland, where factories were so poorly developed and produced such low-quality goods that they could only trade with the even poorer countries to the east.

European Union subsidies and special provisions eased the major concerns about the domestic impact of entry into the EU, which also triggered fear that Germans would retake their prewar property in western Poland. The European Union responded to the latter concern by ruling that, for the first seven years after Poland joined the EU in 2004, foreigners could not purchase Polish land.

Poles’ limited enthusiasm for joining the European Union was clear in the initial vote for EU membership in May 2003, when 77 percent of those who went to the polls voted yes for membership—less than in any other Central and East European state except the Czech Republic and Slovakia—after an active government campaign in favor. In the elections for the European Parliament in June 2004 (less than two months after May 1, 2004, when Poland officially joined the EU), only 20.4 percent voted, and of those, 55 percent supported candidates from parties that were, at best, skeptical of the EU. In the 2009 EU elections, participation had risen slightly to 24.5 percent, and the Euroskeptic vote had decreased, with 44 percent of the Polish vote (and half the seats) going to Civic Platform candidates.

As a result, Polish policy toward the European Union has been split. On the one hand, the social democratic government treated membership in NATO and the EU as its great achievement. The Law and Justice government that began in 2005 was Euroskeptic, painting itself as the defender of Polish interests and the traditional Catholic faith in the EU. With a majority of Poland’s deputies hailing from the Euroskeptic right, Poland did not always go along with standard EU procedures. So Poland was a leader in the demand that the EU constitution define Europe as a Christian society. Poland has also worked to increase its power in the EU, going so far in 2007 as to nearly block an agreement on vote counting provisions for the new EU constitution. A last minute compromise delaying the new voting system until 2012 ultimately placated the Poles.

The victory of the Civic Platform in 2007 resulted in a dramatic turn toward closer ties with Western Europe and the United States, despite the objections of President Kaczyński. Prime Minister Donald Tusk rapidly developed close ties with Angela Merkel of Germany and other West European leaders. His work with these leaders facilitated his election to the Council of Europe, giving him even greater influence in European policy toward Russia.
As it has moved westward in its foreign policy, Poland has also maintained strong ties to Russia and the former Soviet states. In the process, Polish governments have tried to ensure continued access to Russian energy resources and markets. The Polish economy has also benefited from the cheap laborers that have come west to Poland to work. Poland's delay in dealing with the past complicated policy debates with accusations about who did what in the past. Then, as the European recession began and politics grew more troubled elsewhere, Poland's was the only economy that had a constant growth rate; it returned to being a model for politics in the region and became a leader in Europe itself. Polish foreign policy has, explicitly and implicitly, advocated for democratization in the countries to its east. When Russia under Vladimir Putin became more authoritarian and popular upheavals took place in Georgia and Ukraine in 2003 and 2004, Poland's ability to maintain itself as a bridge between East and West declined. Indeed, particularly since Aleksander Kwasniewski helped broker the transition in Ukraine in 2004, Russian-Polish relations, along with Polish-Belarusian relations, have grown colder, with Russia circumventing Poland in building an oil pipeline from Russia to Germany. But the conflict never went so far as to threaten Polish supplies of Russian energy.

In 2013, beginning with the Euromaidan, Poles were engaged. Then, when the agreement fell apart and Russia entered Crimea, Polish foreign minister Radoslaw Sikorski took the lead in pressing NATO, the G7, and the European Union to take a strong stance against Russian aggression. In Poland, Poles watched the events closely and collected clothes and money to help the Ukrainians. And Poland moved to provide financial support for Ukraine until International Monetary Fund and other monetary aid could be agreed on and delivered to Ukraine.

Conclusion

The grand irony of the Polish transition is that Poland had veered the furthest from Soviet-style communism (with the exception of Slovenia) before the transition began, had the best-developed civil society, and was the first state to begin the transition. Of the former communist states that are new entrants to the EU, Poland is the largest country with the biggest economy. Yet its initial transition, while clearly oriented toward democracy and capitalism, was one of the most troubled, with the public quite willing to vote out regime after regime; serious economic problems, even when it had the fastest-growing economy in the region; and real popular disaffection. In the end, the weakness of Poland's communist regime and the success of the former communists in returning to power as pro-democracy politicians not only opened the door for a negotiated transition but also made the construction of a new polity difficult. At the same time, these "rebranded" politicians took the lead in tying Poland to the West.

Poland entered the EU haunted by old problems. For many individuals, the pains of the economic transition and the gap between their expectations and reality delegitimized the new system. Its failure to provide for youth employment decreased young people's excitement about building a "new Poland." The original reformers and the communists who turned democrats lost credibility, leaving Poland's political system bereft of parties that participated in the change or are supported because of their work on economic reform and Poland's new position as a part of NATO and the EU. At the same time, Poland's delay in dealing with the past and the secret police files on agents, who came to
symbolize the evils of communism, made the past a political football to shut down opposition and explain away economic failures.

But with the recession in Europe, Poland’s problems with reform worked to its advantage. Poland had been less successful, after the transition, in getting foreign investment, opening up lending, and borrowing to modernize its economy. That meant it had not taken the steps that backfired for other countries. Politically, the back-and-forth of Polish politics destroyed both the ideological left and right. It reduced people’s expectations of politics and politicians. And it left Poland with only a center of less ideological parties and a population with few expectations of their government.

As this plays out, there is a clear move by most of the public toward rational and civil rather than extremist political parties. The policies of Civic Platform candidates may not all be popular, but their style of governance is. The geographic divide remains, with the eastern territories being far more impoverished; however, people there are far less politically active. In the end, Poland’s parties have moved to the center, and the radical rhetoric and leadership battles have largely given way to more rational policy debates. And because of both its geographic position and its commitment to bridging divides, Poland is a major player in Europe itself.

Study Questions

1. Why was Poland’s communism less repressive and more inclined to liberalization of the economy and some aspects of society than that of other states? How did this impact the nature of the transition?

2. Why was Poland’s transition a fully negotiated one, and how did this impact the nature of the initial government and the making of its critical decisions? Why did its politics evolve, over nearly twenty-five years, into a centrist two-party system?

3. How was Poland’s economic transition begun? What was the political effect?

4. What are the structures of government and their powers in postcommunist Poland? How were they established formally and informally?

5. What are the key political parties and civic society organizations in Poland, and why have they proved weak?

6. How did Poland’s initial economic transition happen? How has it worked for people in Poland?

Suggested Readings


Websites

Gazeta.pl: http://www.gazeta.pl (general news website with limited English translation)
Warsaw Voice: http://www.warsawvoice.pl (weekly English-language publication)

Notes

God's Playground is a two-volume history of Poland by Norman Davies (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982). In the title of this definitive history of Poland, Davies makes the point that Poland has been the country most conquered and fought over in Europe and has undergone successive experiments and disasters.

4. Those two probably won only because, for the National List, voters could use a single x to mark out all the candidates on the two-column National List ballot. The names at the bottom of the two columns often fell below the x and so were not counted as being crossed out.
5. These results come largely from the research of the Center for Research on Public Opinion (CBOS), which publishes its results online in English monthly at http://www.cbos.pl/EN/home_en/cbos_en.php.