

The political situation in the countries of East-Central Europe is very distant from what is happening in the Western part of the continent. That is why the answer to the questions included in the survey on the transformation of the radical Left seems to be very problematic from a political point of view.

1. Poland – a country with no political Left.

The current political scene in Poland is reminiscent of the situation in Ireland. The party system is dominated by two right-wing parties. The post-communist social democratic party, which ruled the country in 2001-2005 employing a neoliberal economic policy and a pro-American foreign policy (e.g. Poland participating in the war in Iraq), is only the third political force. The radical Left plays no role in the Polish political party scene whatsoever.

2. Poland – a country of populists.

For the last 20 years rightist populists served as the main exponent of the disenchantment, anger and the aspirations of those who did not benefit from the political and economical transformation.

What were the reasons behind the electoral successes of the radical parties in Poland? One must look for answers in the beginnings of the economic and political changes which occurred after the fall of the communist regime. Although the authoritarian system was overthrown and the country began to build a market economy and employ democratic institutions and procedures, that did not prevent the public sphere from attaining a quality of exclusiveness, based on the fact that there was no democratic ground upon which to confront the different visions of the transformation. The opponents of the direction of governmental changes in Poland established through an agreement of the elites, were considered “enemies of the indispensable reforms”. Rather than being divided according to the various visions for transformation, the public sphere became an arena with the “modernisationist” camp on one side, and the “traditionalist” camp on the other.

When in the beginning of the nineties renowned figures of the “Solidarność” movement, Jan Józef Lipski and Karol Modzelewski attempted to create a non-postcommunist social democracy, their work met with cold reactions of their former colleagues from the left wing of the democratic opposition. Adam Michnik and Jacek Kuroń were among those who refused to join the new formation, the latter maintaining that organising workers into a leftist formation might make it impossible to establish a market economy since it was still in the process of being formed. During the final years of his life, Kuroń revised his views and criticised the stance he assumed in the beginning of the nineties. He started to realise the danger behind the anger and frustration of people who were excluded from the benefits of the transformation being governed by populists.

Professor David Ost formulated a similar opinion in his fundamental book *The defeat of Solidarity: anger and politics in postcommunist Europe*. Ost, an American sociologist and political scientist, performed an analysis based on many years of research in Poland. It later turned out to be prophetic: Ost finished his book in April of 2004, while a year later populist parties formed the new Polish government.

In his work, Ost points out that after the year 1989 social indignation was being expressed with the use of right-wing populist terms and was directed against the imagined enemies and institutions of liberal democracy.

In the beginning of the transformation, “Solidarność” spread a protective layer over market reforms. Rather than addressing specific economic solutions, the union leaders directed the discontent of workers at former communists, communist intelligence agencies and the alleged conspiracies schemed by the elites which ruled the country after 1989.

In the nineties, a coalition of right-wing groups formed around the “Solidarność” movement. In his public statements, the union leader in charge, Marian Krzaklewski, cared little for the need to respect workers' rights, instead calling for the spreading of Christian values and the punishing of former communists. During the ongoing debate concerning a new constitution, he attacked the project prepared by the liberals and post-communist social democrats calling it an act that is “atheistic and deprived of God.” He did not acknowledge the chapters concerned with social rights.

The lack of a pluralist public sphere which would serve as an arena to confront the different visions of the transformation—with the participants accepting the principles of liberal democracy—resulted in the channelling of social indignation through anti-liberal populism.

3. The dominant socio-political cleavages in Poland.

There are three main socio-political cleavages recognised in the countries of East-Central Europe:

- i) *The family of territorial and cultural cleavages:* Traditionalist forces stress historical continuity, ethnocentric nationhood, favour community over society, and prefer a strong authority, often in conjunction with a strong church. Their value orientations are more particularist than universalist. They have an inclination to “love the rural” even if they are urban. Radical traditionalists are anti-modern, anti-Western, racist, while moderates look for an “organic” national path of modernisation. Westernisers are outward-looking, urban, in favour of catch-up modernisation, individualism, and multi-cultural diversity. They stress secularism and human rights.
- ii) *The family of post-communist cleavages* has several dimensions: an ideological dimension of anti-communism which can be based either on national or religious identities or on universalism of individual human rights and rationality; a political dimension expressed in the relationship to the successor party; a power dimension of competing elites; a structural dimension reflecting the dualism of the present society with a sector rooted in late communism and a sector of emerging capitalism; an emotional and biographical dimension with a population split into those who feel their conditions were better in the last years of “real socialism” and those who do not.
- iii) *The family of socio-economic cleavages* has two poles. At one end, radical liberalism, fast deregulation and extension of the logic of self-regulated markets, privatisation, a market-led distribution of wealth and incomes with significant inequalities. At the other end, the limitation of markets, with an extended welfare state, an active and strong interventionist state helping the poor, enhancing mobility and broadening the middle classes.

During the last 20 years the two first divisions were dominant. The socio-economic cleavage did not play a decisive role. That is why political appeals (based on the socio-economic cleavage) of the radical Left were left unanswered by society.

The post-communist social democrats effectively petitioned for supporting the post-communist (post-communist cleavage), modernisationist and pro-European (cultural cleavage) electorates. The populist Right garnered the votes of anti-communist and traditionalist voters.

It is a typically Polish phenomenon that after the year 1989 only one party declaring itself as radically leftist was able to run for Parliament (attaining less than 1% of support) – the Polska Partia Pracy (Polish Labour Party), which at its inception was a populist right-wing party, forming a coalition with the neo-fascist faction and cooperating with the French National Front. It later changed its strategy, attracted a group of Trotskyist and adopted a radical leftist orientation (the organisation is currently fading due to internal conflicts).

4. The traditions of the Left in Poland.

All leftist movements in Poland (from those that are radical to those which are social democratic) are related to the tradition of the Polska Partia Socjalistyczna (Polish Socialist Party), which was the first mass labour party. Its policy incorporated social postulates and actions towards an independent Poland. The communist party before World War II had little political influence:

- its members originated from the intelligentsia – the party did not have a lot of influence among the working class,
- it was persecuted by the authorities
- it was bound to become isolated in Polish society by defying the idea of an independent Poland.

The so-called real socialism period of 1944-1989 (especially 1948-1956 Stalinism) led to a further delegitimisation of the term “communism” in Polish society.

Additionally, since the seventies, the ruling communist party underwent the process of “deideologisation” and became an eclectic party with some of its members expressing conservative and pro-capitalist views.

A large number of people with leftist (also radical leftist) views were engaged in the democratic opposition. They were active participants of the “Solidarność”, creating leftist movements in its midst.

Radical left circles no longer refer to the communist tradition due to the term “communism” being tainted with connotations of a totalitarian past and the anti-labour policy of 1944-1989.

The Młodzi Socjaliści (Young Socialists) association, which is an observer member Party of the European Left, is an example of an organisation related to the tradition of the Polska Partia Socjalistyczna.

5. The perspectives of the Left in Poland.

The weakness of the Left in the parliamentary arena is accompanied by its expansion in academic circles and social movements (unions, feminist and local circles etc.) which is the achievement of the young generation of activists. Sociologists and politologists agree that the socio-economic cleavage will become increasingly important, which will help formulate leftist postulates in public debate.

Due to the cartelisation of the Polish party system it is unlikely for a radical party to become part of Parliament in the near future. Forming alliances of social movements and radical leftist circles seems to be the most realistic option. Some of these circles closely follow the processes taking place in the post-communist social democratic party, which is undergoing a generational shift: politicians responsible for taking the neoliberal course are being replaced with younger members. There is increasing talk of potential cooperation between the social democratic party and various circles of the independent Left in the local (Fall 2010) and parliamentary (2011) elections.