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Między populistycznym a liberalnym

Style polityczne w Polsce po roku 1989

Warszawa 2013

BETWEEN POPULISM AND LIBERALISM — POLITICAL STYLES IN POLAND AFTER 1989

Summary

The democratic politics of European states, since at least the end of the 20th century, have been subject to rapid transformation under the pressure of world affairs. The formerly legible ideological divisions are being eroded and party platforms are failing to keep their clarity and becoming increasingly alike. Moreover, political parties are losing their earlier role as mediators between the state and society; they have ceased to fulfil much of their original function of articulating interests and mobilizing society. Political scientists are not always able to keep up with and explain the changes. Frequently they still seek a certain canon, a model of contemporary democratic politics: an immutable set of characteristics determining the idea of the democratic system. Research is conducted, of course, on the variations appearing within such a model: that is, on the national style of politics, which has preset conditions resulting usually from specific systemic solutions contained in the national constitution and reflected in the realm of political institutions. The differences are also connected with the social and cultural traits of individual nation states — the characteristics of their cultural background.

A high degree of variability is also observable here, due largely to the personal colouring given to political actions by the mental and character traits of high state functionaries. A progressing personalization of democratic politics and even the emergence of a 'leadership democracy' are being noted. It should not thus be forgotten that political styles emerge under the influence of key political actors — ministers and presidents — as representatives of the elite at the highest state levels. It is they who are the main

creators of the nation's political styles. This point is the chief subject of the author's analysis.

At the beginning, two types of political styles were outlined — the populist and the liberal. This made it possible to show the full variety of styles that appeared in Polish politics after 1989, i.e., from the beginning of the building of the democratic system, and to describe their empirical varieties in detail. None of these truly appeared in pure form, but the intensity with which the ways of thinking and acting of successive national leaders were saturated with their different traits made it comparatively easy to decipher which was dominant in a given instance and to locate the style on an imaginary continuum. The author has also undertaken to read these styles in the broader, national, regional, and systemic contexts.

The analysis was based on official speeches and interviews given by the foremost figures in Polish politics — prime ministers and presidents — at important moments: that is, during the formation of a government, in departing from office, and at key times during an officeholder's term. Supplementary material came from other sources, mainly statements made during interviews or public appearances by prime ministers and presidents before taking office or upon leaving it, and from the position of opposition leader in parliament or independent political commentator. Doubtless the passage of time and the acquisition of new information facilitates rationalization and biographical cohesiveness, along with attempts to improve one's image or justify earlier activities in a high position, but for the analysis what was more important in the quoted statements was the exhibition of certain permanent, unchanging, basic traits of thinking and tendencies in decision-making situations: traits that recognizably distinguished the political style of a given politician.

The analysis showed a significant variation in political styles within the compass of the national political style. Relatively often (in the case of four out of thirteen prime ministers and one out of four presidents) the style was identifiable as being mixed, or intermediate, with both liberal and populist traits occurring in similar proportions, or with only a slight preponderance of one or the other. A style most nearly identifiable as populist appeared in the case of two prime ministers and one president. The style with the largest frequency of liberal traits was decidedly more often represented than a populist style and this, it should be emphasized, was in spite of the relative weakness of the liberal tradition in Polish political culture. This is doubtless related to the strength of the influence of the liberal model of democracy adopted during the Polish transformation. In sum, this

style could be ascribed to as many as six prime ministers and one president.

Relations between politicians with populist and liberal styles developed in accordance with a pattern of rivalry and struggle rather than as part of a pragmatic accommodation, but it should be noted that this struggle rarely took on revolutionary characteristics. Populist-style politicians most often contested the legal application of a system of rules and not the rules themselves. Although they thought and spoke about democracy in populist and majority terms more often than their rivals, they did not try very hard to promote such mechanisms of direct democracy as the referendum or various forms of deliberative democracy. Most often they limited themselves to a controlled mobilization of social demonstrations and opposition movements against the ruling party in order to increase the strength, pressure, and competitiveness of their political platform within the system and to legitimize their own plans for governing.

Politicians, both presidents and prime ministers, who embodied the style with the greatest saturation of populist elements, made use in their thinking and speaking of myths and symbols more often than did politicians of clearly liberal styles, although they did not have a monopoly on this mode of expression. Most often they referred to myths evoking archetypes of good and evil, order and chaos, or truth and falsehood. They also referred to such cardinal ideas as freedom and justice. In the case of the populist mythology, motifs of enemies, plots, treason, unity, glorious heroes, the lost paradise, the Promised Land, and new beginnings appeared. These politicians fortified themselves with historical myths based, on the one hand, on national motifs — and thus on salvation myths (Poland the Christ of Nations), the Pole-Catholic, two enemies, Russia, the strength of the Polish people — and on the other hand, on such Solidarity myths as unity (organic unity and unity against the enemy), majority, the inner enemy, and glorious heroes. Politicians of a more liberal style made use of the same pool of Solidarity myths, but more often referred to a rather differently understood unity, a consensual unity, and also too to imaginings patterned on former ideas of the patriotic unity of the people and the elite (the *szlachta* or the intelligentsia) and the model of the individual hero. In these imaginings two politically articulated images of the state struggled for monopoly: the historically grounded model of the nation state and the model of the state as belonging to the people, the non-elite, fixed in certain former ideals of the post-partition elite, of communist times, and of Solidarity narratives. The state has not left much room in this sphere for civic displays.

The question arises of what holds each style together internally; can they be presented other than descriptively? Can a guiding principal or leading trait be found for each of them? This would seem quite difficult, particularly in regard to the populist style. However, the hypothesis could be advanced that a certain institutionalized educational model has an influence here. The education of the individual to a maturity understood as independence and civic responsibility is not one of the main premises of Polish culture, which aims rather for subordination and the habit of obedience. One consequence is that Poles seek responsibility for failure outside of themselves, in the exterior world. And this tendency is easily transformed into disobedience and rebellion when the level of fear decreases or a reward is regarded as unsatisfactory. Such a hypothesis elucidates the continuing lack in Polish politics, and its basic thinking about family and community, of a liberal model based on individual freedom and responsibility.

The question arises of the influence of local, historical, cultural, and also regional, causes for specific traits and general political styles. The populist style contains ethnic and nationalist components in most of the states in the region emerging from communism; it is a matter of identity. Thus there are distinct motifs of victimhood, retribution, and revenge, and the burden of national resentments. The populist style also has a social element, stemming from the decline of the communist mentality, but it is specifically Polish too: a local heritage of the Solidarity movement and the course of transformation, which deepened the material differences in society. The style's anti-state roots are local as well. The 'people' are, on the one hand, the ethnic historical nation, which can survive without a state, and on the other, a non-elite, as the rejected elite is identified with the state, whose legitimacy is questioned on the basis of this understanding of the nation. The liberal style is technocratic in nature and bears traits of an initial proto-liberalism. Finally, the anti-political colouring of both styles is also native.

The populist style in Poland, as in all the states of the region, is visibly marked by the recent heritage of the transformation period, but this element also reveals the style's supra-local and supra-regional traits. Populism in the region is associated, naturally, with the course of economic changes and the appearance of the losers — the newly excluded, as they are often called. Yet a similar social category has been created in West European societies under the impact of rapid globalization and the economic crisis. This division is everywhere beginning to dominate others, constituting a new challenge for politicians of varying camps. Furthermore, a growing disenchantment of citizens with the system would seem to be common to all

European democracies: in West European countries because of the crisis and the abandonment of welfare policies, and in post-communist countries because reality has proven disappointing, unable to ensure ideal democracy or fulfil collective dreams and imaginings about its redemptive power. In the populist logic, though, the state is always rejected for the same reasons: because it does not, in the minds of its citizens, satisfactorily ensure their defence and wellbeing; it does not guarantee their sense of security in changing circumstances. Expectations toward the state have not decreased, but have even expanded. The disappointment with inefficient authorities is also growing and with it politically articulated attempts to find and punish the guilty parties are increasing as well. Thus in local, regional, and simultaneously global circumstances of change, the democratic system's previously hidden genetic tension between its constitutional and popular, pragmatic and ideal, liberal and populist pillars is becoming increasingly visible. Therefore, in spite of its varying contexts, populism has everywhere the same traits and significance. It is the incarnation of a struggle over the best model of democracy and a questioning of the state's earlier solutions.

The effects of the pragmatic democracy built by the elites of the transformation, who principally adhere to a specific liberal and technocratic style, are colliding with a more idealistic way of thinking about democracy and with its salvation imagery, which requires that democracy be seen as the cure for all Poles' ills and failures. Nevertheless, this liberal style has become quite clearly established in native democratic politics, although it still lacks, among its elite, a common position on the subject of minimum standards of mutual responsibility for the security and stability of the democratic state it has built. No locally applicable policy has yet been worked out for coexistence and cooperation between the two political styles and for ameliorating the tension between democracy's mutually contradictory components. Certain opportunities for overcoming the tension might be sought, in the author's opinion, in the inclusive, consensual, liberal vision of democratic politics corresponding largely to the trend of thinking described as integral liberalism, which was rejected at the beginning of the Polish transformation, and in the vision of broad civic participation in problem solving dear to populist-minded politicians. However, the introduction of such thinking is still an open challenge, chiefly for the political elites occupying the nation's highest positions.