

Elites' absence without leave.
Consolidation of the political system
in postcommunist Poland

The book is a collection of essays. Most of them have been published in various scholarly journals and edited volumes since 1990. Some appeared as op-eds in daily newspapers. There are, however, two essays that have not been published earlier. These are: *The public and the particular interests: hierarchy, self-regulation, and the ethos of public life*; and *Elites' absence without leave: the institutionalization of irresponsibility*. The latter reviews major themes discussed in this volume.

The essays focus narrowly on Poland. The author decided not to include papers discussing his research of developments in other post-communist countries. This would only distract a reader from the main message of this book that Poland, having had begun a path-breaking rupture with the mono-party rule and the economic regime of central planning, has not been as innovative in the political dimension of institutional design. It goes without saying that Poland, after the collapse of communism, has fared quite well. Economic growth has been decent and political stability has been sustained. In a marked contrast to a communist period marked by several upheavals, there was not a single social turmoil as democratic institutions have allowed for effective management of conflicts.

Yet, the argument made in this book is that these institutions suffer from serious deficiencies. These deficiencies are manifest in the low quality of legislation, ineffective and often incompetent state administration, inefficient judiciary, and a fairly high level of incidence of corruption. This institutional weakness of the political system has led to public disillusionment with

political class, low electoral participation, low prestige of political profession, and high level of distrust in state institutions – government, parliament, and the judiciary.

While some of these deficiencies represent phenomena also present in mature Western democracies – for instance, the rising disenchantment with the political class – the transitional period offered opportunities to design institutions that would keep them from emerging. Failure to take advantage of a series of windows of opportunity to devise higher quality institutional arrangements in aftermath of the collapse of communism reveals the “desertion of elites.” Desertion is conceived here as “the abandonment of a duty”, i.e., the lack of professional and public responsibility of officials. Weak sense of public responsibility at the individual level is not a major problem in political systems with effective mechanisms of horizontal and vertical accountability. However, the latter were weak in all post-communist democracies; especially so during transition periods, when a new institutional system would be designed and implemented. Under these circumstances, unfettered commitment to public values among the new political and intellectual elite was of particular importance. This is the moment when some crucial path dependencies were put in place. Errors committed at this time are very difficult to correct later because of vested interests created by them.

As some of the contributions in this volume testify, the author took a critical stand on some key public issues very early in the process of the post-communist transformations. Probably the most important public issue under critique was the “lost constitutional moment,” that is, the combination of the lack of a serious constitutional debate combined with the total disregard for the major institutions of the state, namely, the judiciary and the public administration. The lost constitutional moment has been highly consequential for further development of political institutions for it gave an opportunity to major particular interest to embed themselves within the power structure of the state. This is the topic of the chapter on the *Lost constitutional moment*.

Thus, the massive redistribution of political power and material wealth, associated with dismantling of communism, took place in void exacerbated by the absence of effective institutional safeguards. To a large extent, the privatization of state assets and filling of administrative and of political positions was open for grabs. Furthermore, during the first decade of transition reforms were captured by narrow interest groups. This is the focus

of two chapters; *Corruption as a symptom of low institutional capacity of the state* and *The syndrome of the weak state: Poland's state capacity in the 21st century* (the latter co-authored with Jan A. Stefanowicz). Both chapters point to a low institutional capacity of the state.

To some extent this was unavoidable. Yet, it is odd that the former “idealistic” critics of “undeserved privileges of the red bourgeoisie” made no effort to develop and implement rules that would limit the spontaneity of the redistribution processes that resulted again in “undeserved privileges” to their friends and newly acquired political allies. The rise of the anticommunist opposition milieu in Poland and its transformation into the new political elite is discussed in the chapter *Institutional changes in Poland: The elite of political nomads* co-authored with Joanna Kurczewska.

The last chapter offers a recapitulation of the argument. It addresses one of the key controversies haunting the public debate in Poland, which concerns the absence or the existence in the country of the civil society. To what extent is the end of communism in Poland the product of a single-handed struggle by Lech Wałęsa, or of the brave effort by the group of dissidents under Jacek Kuroń's leadership? Or, perhaps, it has something to do with the relative strength of the freedom yearning of the Polish society? Consecutive anticommunist revolts – resistance to the imposition of the regime in 1940s, revolts of 1956, students' rebellion in 1968, working class protests in 1970 and 1976 as well as the eruption of the Solidarity movement in 1980 – testify that the society, on itself, was able at least to engage in collective actions against the regime.

However, the spontaneous emergence, during the spring 1989, of hundreds of “civic committees” all over Poland to support the Solidarity's electoral campaign, and their subsequent transformation into forums of open debates on local and national problems, where constructive proposals were formulated, and actions at the local and county level undertaken is a proof that cultural underpinnings of a viable civil society, able to constructively engage in solving policy problems had survived in the country. There is no doubt that Lech Wałęsa's role in the events of 1980-81, and throughout the decade that followed was very important, it is also impossible to question the role of the group led by Jacek Kuroń and Adam Michnik in the anticommunist opposition. Nonetheless, without the firm support from major sectors of the civil society, most notably the Catholic Church, the importance of their activities would have been marginal at best.

Yet, once in power, the old opposition – now a new ruling class – made a dramatic turn of face: they deserted without leaving by disarming civil society. The postcommunist political elite, dominated by the loose coalition of former dissidents and the “reformist wing” of the Polish United Workers Party, saw the civil society as a threat to its newly acquired positions of privilege. In a nutshell, the former opposition deserted aspirations of the society that brought them to power fearing that removing the lid would again wipe them from power had significant impact on the strategy of regime change. It resulted in the weakness of institutions whose function would be to assure public accountability of government both within the horizontal and vertical dimensions: as a result, the executive power dominates the legislative and the judiciary, while the public media serve to manipulate public opinion rather than inform and control those in government. Despite Poland’s meeting all requirements for a polyarchy, to use Robert Dahl’s notion, the system of rule is unintelligible to the public, and a sense of alienation and powerlessness dominates the society. The quality of governance and the state capacity are also far below public expectations. All this does not make Poland an exception among postcommunist countries. As mentioned earlier, against this background the Polish transitions has been rather a success. Yet, it seems that the well justified expectations exceed by far the achievements.

Poland is an influential player in the East-Central European region which is an important part of the new EU. Its importance is due not only to its size in terms of territory and population, but most of all to its geographical location boarding on Belarus and Ukraine, and historical and cultural ties with these nations. Whatever happens in Poland is closely followed in these countries, as well as in Russia. Poland is a show-window for united Europe and the West. A well-governed state with a viable market economy and a civilized society could influence the public opinion in eastern neighbor countries in favor of following the Western standards. On the other hand, such a state would also serve as a factor in political and military deterrence. The relationship between the state’s internal condition and its ability to influence its external situation is the subject of the chapter on *Poland’s sovereignty*.