

Seminar on Democratic Transition and Consolidation  
2001 - 2002

# The Transition to Democracy in Poland

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# Seminar on Democratic Transition and Consolidation 2001 - 2002

Round table

## The Transition to Democracy in Poland

March 5th, 2002

MAIN SPEAKER:

**Hanna Suchocka**

Prime Minister of Poland (1992-1993).

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# The Double Transition in Poland

Ludolfo Paramio

The founding election in the new Polish democracy was held as a two-leg ballot on June 4<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup>, 1989. The election was the outcome of the so-called Round Table Talks which reserved 65% of the seats in the lower house (Sejm) in advance for the official Polish United Workers' Party (PZPR) and its satellite parties but created a Senate for which all the seats could be freely contested in the ballot. The Solidarity coalition scored an overwhelming victory in the semi-democratic election, winning all of the seats that were fought competitively in the Sejm and 99 of the 100 seats in the Senate. After a deal worked out with Solidarity's leader, Lech Walesa, the National Assembly, formed by the Sejm and the Senate, elected General Wojciech Jaruzelski as president. Some years earlier, in 1981, as Primer Minister and Secretary of the PZPR, the same General Jaruzelski had resorted to martial law to put a stop to Solidarity and avoid the Soviet Union from intervening in Poland as seemed likely at the time. In 1990, Jaruzelski left office and Walesa was elected as the new president in December with the direct votes of the Polish people.

Twelve years after that founding election, on September 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2001, Solidarity's election coalition (AWS), which had been in government since 1997, obtained less than 6% of the total votes and was left without a single seat in the Parliament. The same thing happened (this time with 3% of the votes polled) to the liberal Freedom Union (UW), led by Bronislaw Geremek, Tadeusz Mazowiecki and Hanna Suchocka, a party made up of a significant portion of Solidarity's former intellectual hard-core which had governed in coalition with the AWS. It could be said, therefore, that the 2001 election brought to a close a cycle during which politics in Poland revolved around Solidarity, the broad social opposition movement that grew up to combat the communist regime during the 1980s and the Alliance of Democratic Left (SLD),

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the coalition arising out of the Social Democratic Party of the Polish Republic (the party formed after the PZPR crisis in 1990) which was born out of the old Communist Party in Poland.

A question mark hangs over the possible electoral extinction of Solidarity. The query has nothing to do with the fact that Solidarity was defeated by the SLD. That party had already gained sufficient credibility in 1993 to beat the AWS for the first time and had propelled its own leader, Aleksander Kwasniewski, to the presidency in 1995 thanks to a real change in its ideas and in its composition with a new, younger generation taking over from what had been the old PZPR. The fact that the successors of the former communist parties could be returned to power was no exception either in the countries that had once belonged to the Soviet area of influence. What is striking in the case of Poland, though, is that in twelve years the centre-right has not been able to consolidate a strong, stable election option. This is especially striking if you recall the tremendous social force Solidarity represented at the time of the transition to democracy in 1989.

The reasons for the political and electoral crisis suffered by the AWS, however, are seemingly quite plain: ideological inconsistency and over-emphasis on personalities. As earlier as 1990, in fact, Solidarity's subsequent downward slide towards complete fragmentation was marked out in advance when the coalition's historic leader, Lech Walesa, stood against the man who had once been his advisor and who had been prime minister until then, Tadeusz Mazowiecki. In addition to a direct clash of personal ambitions, the head-to-head confrontation reflected two views of the future of Poland that coexisted side by side within the Solidarity movement. One was a modernizing, liberal approach to society and the economy in Poland and the other was more populist, and so much closer to nationalism as a result.

One of the greatest sources of support for the opposition movement to the communist regime was the Polish Church, especially after the visit to Poland in 1979 by the former archbishop of Cracow, Karol Wojtyła, who was Pope John Paul II by then. When the strike led by Walesa broke out the following year in the Lenin shipyards in Gdansk, the movement that would give rise to Solidarity —the first case of an independent trade union recognized by a communist regime, with ten million members— owed as much to the importance of the Church in Polish society as to the unique alliance of intellectuals and workers that had put together the Workers' Defense Committee (KOR), after both sides—in 1968 and 1970— had lived through the bitter experience of isolation in their respective confrontations with the regime.

But the strength of the Church also reflected a segmented reality because the rural population, which accounted for one third of the total in Poland, often had a very different approach to their Catholicism than their urban counterparts. Essentially, the Poles living in rural areas held very conservative views on society and the economy and felt highly vulnerable about modernization. The case of the peasantry in Poland was in clear contrast to the other

former Soviet bloc countries where the rule in agriculture was almost total collectivization — 90%, on average. In Poland, however, collective farms or State farms did not account for more than 20% of the total. That fact gave the peasants more political leverage which had already been made plain in the 1989 transition when Walesa personally invited the Unified Peasant Party to join it after it had broken its traditional alliance with the Polish United Workers' Party —present in the transition government with a deputy prime minister and four key ministries. At the same time, the historic Polish Peasant Party, which had neither participated in nor collaborated with the previous regime and had been revived after the regime had disappeared managed to put together a membership of up to 200,000 members and became the chief representative party in this sector.

The ideological and social duality of the Church and the peasants who were its main basis of support added to the different views of what post-communist Poland should be like. There was the liberal or Christian democratic view upheld by the sectors who were in favour of the country's modernization and westernization and the nationalist, populist approach of their adversaries. The heterogeneous nature of that future vision for the country had a particular impact on the other Polish transition: the move towards the market economy. The transitions in Eastern and Central European countries in the 90s had a two-fold dimension —political and economic— to a much greater extent than the transitions of the previous decade in Latin America. The reason for that was because despite the many distortions that might be brought into markets by subsidies or currency issues to finance the public deficit, market mechanisms already existed in Latin American countries but they were not present in the economy of countries shaped along Soviet lines. Putting such mechanisms in place entailed a high social cost for societies undergoing transition.

In the 1990 presidential election, Prime Minister Mazowiecki, as he had been until then, took up a stance that was perfectly consistent with his previous actions and defended a tough pro-market reform plan —the Balcerowicz plan— emphasizing that the costs of the reform was the price Poland would have to pay if it was to become a modern economy, capable of stable growth. Walesa, on the other hand, used populist rhetoric in his campaign which focused on anticommunism, broadening its meaning and scope just enough to cast doubt on the left-wing factions of the original Solidarity coalition themselves and to whip up support in the face of the scanty credibility of promises of immediate economic improvements. Not surprisingly, Mazowiecki came third in the poll —beaten by the independent candidate Stanislaw Tyminski— and Walesa came out on top.

Walesa's inconsistency on the modernization issue had more political than economic consequences. Even after Balcerowicz left the Government in October 1991, the pro-market reform strategy was maintained although it did go through spells when it wavered or came to a temporary standstill. But the confrontation with Mazowiecki based on a left/right split fostered not only the Solidarity coalition's tendency to splinter politically but also an increase

in paranoiac anticommunist rhetoric that led to the clash between Walesa and the Prime Minister in June 1992 when Jan Olszewski's determination to draw up a list of politicians who had worked with the previous regime seemed to disguise an attempt to cast doubt over the past of Walesa himself. (On the eve of the presidential election in 2000, the man who had been Olszewski's Minister of Home Affairs, Macierewicz, actually accused Walesa publicly of having been an informer for the secret police).

Several possible causes can be identified, therefore, to explain the centre-right's inability to become a stable, competitive party option. The first one is the oft-mentioned heterogeneous nature of the Solidarity coalition as an opposition movement and the second one is the decidedly personal slant of the leadership contest. That personality bias not only prevented the heterogeneous, mixed-bag movement from being pulled together behind a common program but also divided the coalition on the basis of a backward-looking anticommunist rhetoric, incapable of adapting to the new economic and social reality of the country and doomed, therefore, to fizzle out eventually not only as the previous regime dwindled into a hazy memory but also as the image of the Democratic Left Alliance took firm hold as a modern social democratic option, far removed from the old United Workers' Party.

Nevertheless, even though these factors may be able to explain the recurring failure of the AWS to turn itself into the core of a stable centre-right formation, they do not necessarily explain why such a formation has never really broken through and become consolidated after more than 12 years of democracy. That absence of a stable centre-right option can only really be understood by taking into account the electoral legislation in Poland. The June 1991 Act regulating the first legislative elections fostered the proliferation of parties because it was based on the principle of proportionality and left the submission of candidates up to electoral committees that were not required to have any particular organizational structure. The sole requirement they had to meet was that they had to get the prior backing of 5,000 signatures. Out of the 117 that were able to comply with that rule, only 29 managed to get parliamentary representation but the outcome was still a highly fragmented Sejm with 18 different parliamentary groups, despite attempts to regroup them.

The other crucial element was the rationale of the economic transition itself. Reforms entail costs, regardless of whether those in government accept those costs or not. In a system without any consolidated party loyalties, those costs are inevitably translated in the next election into votes cast to punish the party that has been in power. That rule has never been broken since 1991: the governing parties have systematically lost the next elections for the Sejm.

The centre and centre-right parties that governed until 1993—including the Democratic Union created by Mazowiecki after he left Solidarity and headed by the Prime Minister Hanna Suchocka—lost the election that year against a coalition of the Democratic Left Alliance and the Polish Peasant Party. In 1997, the AWS got back into power together with the Freedom Union, thanks to a coalition painstakingly put together by Walesa's successor as President of

Solidarity, Marian Krzaklewski, and then disappeared from the Sejm in the 2001 election when the Democratic Left Alliance won again.

If you examine this sequence of events, it seems like the rationale of the economic vote during a costly economic transition means the systematic punishment of those in government, thus making it impossible for them to return to power and consolidate their work in government. But it is not quite as straightforward as that. Quite plainly, the organizational history and background of the social democrats, which initially dragged their credibility down and turned them into an easy target for the anticommunist rhetoric of the right-wing factions of Solidarity, endowed them with ample resources to survive election defeats and not just to successfully contest elections. They had discipline and expert leaders to their credit as well as local networks and access to a broad social base.

The only previous history the centre-right could lay claim to, however, was as a movement, which was certainly very broad in its social scope but which had no proper organizational structure to contest elections. Despite the emphasis that has been placed so often on the mobilization of civil society as the driver and pre-requisite for success in democratization processes, if representative democracy is to work properly it requires a kind of intermediate, united and stable organization like parties and parties do not develop automatically out of movements, especially when those movements have a very broad social base. It was practically impossible to reconcile the contradictions of the worker grass roots and the ambitions of the urban middle classes in electoral rhetoric without the backing of a united political organization. That is why Solidarity—despite its enormous initial strength—started off at a disadvantage compared to the alliance of the left.

In addition, there is another specific feature of the economic vote in situations of double transition, when there is both a political and an economic dimension, that has to be taken into account. There are grounds for thinking that when unemployment rises, voters do more than just punish the government in power at the time. Prompted by a feeling of growing uncertainty about the future, they try to find new options and that works in favour of newly created candidates or parties. This hypothesis has also been wielded in consolidated democracies to explain, for instance, the rise of Ross Perot in USA. Basically, the grounds for the assumption are that if the traditional options more or less agree on economic policy give or take minor nuances, then the only channel people can find through which to express their own dissatisfaction at least is by voting for alternative options.

In the case of Poland, it has been argued that during the first two years of the transition, rising unemployment was the only factor that triggered social opposition to Balcerowicz's reform plan. You could also quite safely venture that this same factor was also the key to the votes cast for Tyminski (an independent candidate) in the 1990 presidential election which were sufficient (23%) to beat Mazowiecki in the first round of voting in November although Walesa eventually won with 74% in the second round one month later. At that time, in the

midst of the transition process, the post-communists were not yet in a position to capitalize on the dissatisfaction vote as it was not infused with any connotations of nostalgia for the recent past. But after their return to government in 1993—in coalition with Waldemar Pawlak's Polish Peasant Party and until 1995 with Pawlak as Prime Minister—a basic consensus between left and right on the need for reform became patent and the protest vote was forced to seek alternative political options.

It can be assumed then that the centre-right was not only up against the dual nature of its potential electorate in terms of interests and ideas but it was also up against a tendency of the dissatisfied voter to support new or eccentric options. Under electoral legislation based on the principle of proportionality such options were freely available. If you add to that the personality clashes that propitiated successive splits in the initial core of leaders of Solidarity, the absence of well-established party organizations—like the one that allowed the post-communists to survive united during their spells in the opposition—the electoral collapse of the AWS in the 2001 election is not so surprising.

But the key to that collapse, of course, was the poor economic performance of the AWS Government from 1997 to 2001. The election was held in September when it was already plain that economic growth would fall far short of the 4% recorded the previous year or the 6.8% in 1997 (the final figure for 2001, according to the OECD, was 1.1%) and with unemployment standing at over 18%, compared to the low of 10.6% in 1998. If the economic prospects had been brighter, it is very likely that the electors would have been more in favour of the outgoing government and also that the divisions within the AWS might have been contained.

The reasons for the downturn in the economy itself were largely outside the Government's control. Russia's financial bankruptcy in 1998 was an initial blow that probably took a point off growth rates in the following years, plus the stagnation in 2001 of the German economy where 30% of all Polish exports go. As if that were not enough, a 5%+ growth in the deficit forced the Central Bank—headed by Leszek Balcerowicz, the man behind the 1989 economic shock plan—to impose high interest rates that not only reduced consumption but also, and above all, investment. But if you accept that growth in unemployment triggered not only a voting backlash aiming at punishing the Government but also a protest vote, it comes as no surprise that the 2001 results favoured eccentric options.

Those options, naturally enough, matched up with the splits amongst voters as a reaction to the proposals for modernization and integration in the European Union. Almost one third of voters cast their vote for nationalist, xenophobic or extreme right-wing candidates like the Self-Defense Party (Samoobrona) headed by Andrzej Lepper, the Law and Justice Party led by the Kaczynski twins or the League of Polish Families, supported by the most conservative sectors of the Catholic Church and by its radio station Radio Maria, extremely popular among the rural population (an estimated 4 million listeners), which often combined moral conservatism with straightforward anti-Semitism.

It is easy to understand why the peasantry should be more receptive to populist messages in view not only of their own poverty compared with urban areas but also of their difficult future if and when Poland became a member of the EU. If the current Common Agricultural Policy is extended to cover Polish farming it will make the EU budget soar when it already seems to take up an excessive share of that budget whichever way you look at it. That raises serious problems for Germany in particular given that it would like to reduce its contribution to that budget. Added to that problem, there is the fear in Western Europe that the free movement of Polish workers may lead to a flood of immigrants —mostly to Germany— and Polish peasants have serious reservations about any liberalization of the land market which they believe will turn into a massive Polish land buying spree by Germans from the regions in Poland that were part of Germany until World War II.

When you add together all of those difficulties and reservations, the sum total not only explains the nationalist bias of the people living in rural areas but also the uncertainties hanging over the referendum scheduled to gain approval for Poland to join the EU. Negotiations between the EU and Poland nowhere near satisfy Polish demands and certainly do not live up to the great expectations that membership raised just a few years ago and the feeling of crisis or lack of direction that the EU has been conveying since the German economy started to stagnate does not leave room for any over-optimism about a swift, satisfactory conclusion to the negotiations. In fact, the temptation to push back the timing of enlargement to the East beyond the date initially scheduled (2004) is ever greater.

In many ways, that delay would be disastrous, but at least it would take away the risk of a negative result in the referendum on membership which is a danger that has grown at a pace with the economic unease —and unemployment— that have gradually made the integration project less attractive and with the tougher negotiating position of the EU that has strengthened the position of nationalist sectors. The opinion polls had been indicating that 55% of all electors intended to vote for membership but this figure may be dropping and, in any event, there is the fear that those opposing the EU may be able to mobilize more people than the votes in favour. The efforts made by the Government to get the Pope to send out a pro-integration message during his recent visit come as no surprise.

Whichever way you look at it, Poland is a consolidated democracy with strong citizen support for democracy as a regime although the people also say they have very little confidence in the representative institutions, especially the parties. The problem is that the weakness of the centre-right, or if you like, the instability of the party system, entails certain risks for governability, especially if the current Government coalition does not come up with some positive results. The economic prospects are definitely not good, with a simultaneous growth in social demands and budget restrictions which is putting a lot of pressure on the Government headed by Prime Minister Leszek Miller. The resignation of the Treasury Minister, Marek Belka, is proof of how difficult it is to maintain political consistency even for a force that is

relatively as disciplined as the Democratic Left Alliance.

It is unlikely that any government could work miracles in the current international economic context but changes could possibly have been made before now to reduce the centrifugal tendencies of the party system and to try to reinforce the continuity and accountability traits of political organizations. When governments turn in poor performances the parties heading them undoubtedly lose credibility but a political environment without accountability, where parties appear and disappear during the life of one parliament as a rule, where they are not bound to carry through their proposals in government or the opposition, certainly takes all credibility away from the system as a whole and quickly brings in a high risk of it becoming ungovernable.

It is true that when things go wrong in a country it is very tempting—for those in government and for political scientists—to think about making institutional changes and quite often those changes only lead to new problems in a simple swing of the pendulum from one extreme to another. But it is also true that if a democracy is to work properly—including the possibility of forming alternative governments with majority support—it requires at least two consolidated parties representing alternative interests and options to exist. The absence of a stable centre-right force in Polish politics is a real problem whose root cause, over and above the heterogeneous nature of the origins of Solidarity and the poor performance of the economy, could lie in the electoral system and institutional design.

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# The Polish Transition\*

Hanna Suchocka

When I am asked to reflect on contemporary Polish political history, I always hesitate because it is very difficult to determine the starting point of that period. Was it the year 1980, when Solidarity was born? Or was it the year 1989, when a great number of political events which were very important for the further development of Polish society and political structure took place? In my opinion, both dates are of great political importance. Without 1980, it would have been impossible for the 1989 events to happen, in spite of the breach in the transition process brought by the martial law.

I think, and this is not just my opinion but one presented by many sociologists, that the year 1980 prepared our society for change. One always hears that the first step was the Pope's visit to Poland in June 1979, a year after which Solidarity was born. However, 1980's Solidarity revolution –I use that term consciously- laid the foundations of the future democratic evolution of Poland. Solidarity prepared our society to accept the so-called Third Way, of moderate capitalism, in a country where the terms capitalism and even free market had never been used before in trade union language. This caused an important ideological controversy within Solidarity.

In 1990 no one considered the privatization and liquidation of the huge and obsolete state-owned enterprises as a future challenge, for they ran contrary to the interests of the workers who were the main actors in Solidarity. According to their point of view, the new economic system should only be the result of a reformed socialism, a system with full participation of the workers in the management of enterprises and better salaries. When we read the *20 Postulates from Gdansk* we see a strong support for democratic reforms, but not for economic ones aiming at liberalization. A dichotomy that defined the two stages of Polish transition and that, even today, is present in parliamentary debates. According to the worker's thinking the State had to protect the individual human being from birth to death. So the only difference was that the liquidation of Communism had to guarantee that the State would do that well.

It was really in a very short time, from February, when the Round Table Talks started,

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**Hanna Suchocka** was Prime Minister of Poland, from July, 1992 to October, 1993. From 1997 to 2000, she was Minister of Justice. At present, Hanna Suchocka is Ambassador of Poland to the Holy See.

\* This text summarizes Mrs. Suchocka's intervention in FRIDE (March 5th, 2002).

to December 1989, when we found ourselves in a completely different State. We started with the Round Table Agreements which tried to reform the country and we ended with a completely new situation: a free market economy. Of course, this created problems for our society because we were completely unprepared for such radical changes. Of course, when we discussed the political situation, and the economic decisions taken initially, I think that the economic situation in Poland could not be remedied by yet another partial reform. The lag behind developed countries caused by impractical solutions and the isolation from the world at large were even more clearly felt. The absence of natural competition, the omnipotence of bureaucracy, the doors shut to the world combined to frustrate development.

The Round Table Agreement was a stimulator of the peaceful revolution in Poland, but a very limited one, because we have to remember that the amendments to the Constitution made in April did not change the general rule coming from the system: the principle of the ruling role of the Communist Party. The imminent part of the unrelated agreement was then that the new President as well as the Prime Minister would belong to a member of the Polish United Workers' Party (PZPR). Several steps were undertaken between June and September which gave a completely new dimension to this agreement and in fact changed the core of the agreement.

At the beginning of August, 1989, after Czesław Kiszczak was unable to form a government, the new coalition created by Solidarity, the Peasant Party and the Democratic Party made possible the election of Tadeusz Mazowiecki as new prime minister. The formation of Mazowiecki's government was an historical event, that can only be understood if we think that Poland was still a member of the COMECON and the Warsaw Pact.

It was not possible to launch a profound political reform without, first, winning political legitimacy and, second, the readiness of those in power to take the highest political risks. Mazowiecki's government fulfilled both premises. The process of reforming the economy and the political system had to be tackled objectively, even though it was reasonable to think that the new State had proved to be mere rhetoric. There was no choice at the time.

In those difficult days the challenge not only for the new government but for the political intelligentsia, was to transform this kind of thinking. We were not only going to reform socialism, we did not build the so-called Third Way, but we were going to build a new economic system. It was much easier for people to accept democracy, political freedom, than capitalism, economic freedom.

One of the most difficult things for the new born Polish transition was the creation of political plurality, something President Walesa was committed to personally. The mistake we made was taking into consideration only the part of Polish society that felt identified with Solidarity, with the new parties and with democracy. We forgot the parties of the former regime thinking that, in the light of the results of the June 1989 elections they had disappeared. We also forgot the part of society that still held on the past.

The political competition between the new political forces was more destructive than constructive. Solidarity-based parties quarrelled incessantly. Newly formed parties were blaming one another constantly. One may get the impression that democratic mechanisms were being misused. In 1993, after the dissolution of Parliament, Solidarity political forces were not able to create an election block and lost the elections. Of these forces, only Freedom Union and Democratic Freedom obtained parliamentary representation.

It was, of course, a very bitter lesson for Solidarity that led to the creation of Action Election Solidarity (AWS). The new coalition won 1997 elections, but the very next day, differences between groups were obvious. The result is well known: in the 2001 elections none of the parties of AWS won parliamentary representation, not even Freedom Union, nor many of the “founding fathers” of solidarity.

It is also a very well known fact that only one former prime minister, Jan Olszewski, is now in the Parliament, because at the last moment he decided to join the League of the Polish Family. Neither Mazowiecki, nor Buzek, nor myself are in Parliament. This should make us reflect on the causes that have made us lose electoral support. Of all the factors that could explain this situation, three are the most important: permanent quarrelling within Solidarity, the lack of the instinct to be the ruling party and, most importantly, the lack of a clear political and social vision. To Polish society it was completely unclear why right-wing parties adopted during 2001 campaign a social democratic program. In the face of this, voters preferred to give their vote to real left-wing parties.

Apart from the mistakes we could have made, there was a circumstance not exclusive for Poland but for many other countries that could explain why personalities like Tadeusz Mazowiecki are not in Parliament today. I am not mistaken in recalling how, after winning the war and defeating Adolf Hitler, British society reached the conclusion that Winston Churchill was no longer needed.



# The Peculiar Traits of the Polish Transition

Carmen González-Enríquez

Together with Hungary, Poland pioneered the transition to democracy in Eastern Europe. The June 1989 elections in Poland, the subsequent formation of a government led by Solidarity and, above all, the fact that the Soviet Union did not intervene in any way, shape or form to avoid change taking place were the clear, categorical signs for the whole area that sovereignty could really be recovered. The pioneering nature of Polish and Hungarian politics and their transitions was possible because as early as the socialist period, at least from the mid-50s onwards in Poland and the early 60s in Hungary, both regimes showed they were different from the rest. They were more liberal in outlook and the relationship between the socialist-communist parties and their societies was much more inclusive, more open to bargaining, agreement and dispute resolution, whereas the other communist parties in that area of Europe either faithfully toed the Moscow line or were reworking their own identity through nationalism.

Poland and Hungary were the only two countries to undertake liberalizing reforms on the economic front before 1989 in that decade although Hungary took a firmer stance than Poland in this case. Moreover, Poland was the only country in the communist bloc that kept agriculture under private ownership from 1956 onwards although being a private sector did not make it a market-regulated economic sector because the State controlled inputs as well as the sale of farm produce. Essentially, agriculture in Poland was under private ownership but the level of State intervention in the sector was extremely high. That meant Poland could maintain an agricultural sector with a much greater size and role in the economy than in the other countries in the area and one that was nearly four times the size of the average agricultural sector in Western Europe. That fact is now hindering its accession to the European Union and delaying that of the other candidates.

The prime hallmark of the Polish transition is that it arose out of a people's opposition

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movement that developed around Solidarity to oppose the socialist system. The movement took to the streets regularly with protest demonstrations, was able to call strikes based on a list of prepared claims and enjoyed strong support from very different layers of the population. Nothing resembling Solidarity existed in any of the other countries in the bloc where the opposition went no further than small groups of intellectuals, normally to be found in the big cities, engaged in extremely restricted political activity. Why did a popular opposition movement to the socialist regimes develop in Poland and solely in Poland? We have no answer to that question although the exceptional political strength of the Catholic Church in Poland may have something to do with this other particular characteristic.

Solidarity is also fundamental as a distinguishing feature of Poland in other ways because its political heritage is very ambiguous. Solidarity blended pro-democratic or liberal elements opposed to the regime who made demands for political freedoms with a very strong religious facet that was plainly anti-liberal, just as its attitude was as regards the economy. Solidarity never considered bringing market reforms to the socialist economy in the 1980s. On the contrary, the reformist measures implemented by governments of the sole party, the Polish United Workers' Party (PZPR), were at times brought to a standstill by protests from Solidarity, acting in its capacity as a trade union defending the immediate interests of the workers it represented. That explains why Hungary was able to go ahead with the reforms to make the economy work on the basis of market criteria from the mid-80s whilst Poland took a step in the opposite direction.

When Solidarity took on the responsibility of government, a task the movement was neither prepared for nor had ever expected, a huge rift opened up between the different political lines within the movement. Most of all, that rift was caused by an issue that, more than any other, cried out for clear definition: economic policy. There was a general agreement in Solidarity about "the return to Europe", i.e. that Poland had to move away from the sphere of Soviet influence and move closer to the EU, whose social model was likened to a great charitable State, but it went no further than that. It simply lacked a political program to steer the transformation process. That is why Solidarity immediately splintered in the face of problems that it had never given any thought to and in the face of others with seemingly very different answers. It was a movement born to be in the opposition but not in government.

Another particular political trait of Poland is the importance of religion and the Catholic Church. Poland is the most Catholic society in Europe, even more so than Ireland (Poland comes out ahead of any other European country in surveys on the subject of attendance at Sunday Mass) and the Catholic Church played a major role in politics not only in the late 1980s when it became Solidarity's champion, defending it and trying to mediate between it and the Government, but also afterwards when it has managed to bring political reforms to a halt on occasions. In any event, it is still a force to be reckoned with in politics and definitely has an influence on the way the Polish people vote. This political role of Catholicism is quite

unique in Eastern Europe. Despite the theory spread by the Vatican that the Catholic Church has been one of the champions and promoters of democratization in Eastern Europe, Poland is really the only country where it has played an important role. In all of the other cases, Catholicism, just like the Churches overall, had a marginal influence on transitions or none at all.

Another particular feature of Poland has been the role played by the army. In all the other countries in the group, armies have been passive politically in the communist phase and in the transition. They were forces that lacked any real motivation because the States and societies were aware that their national security did not depend on the army. It depended on the Warsaw pact forces instead, and the Warsaw Pact forces essentially meant the Soviet Union forces. During those years, the armies were badly paid and had very little social prestige, largely because, as said before, the people realized that they were not responsible for defending national security and independence. In Poland, however, the army did play a crucial part in political life, not only during the period of Martial Law between December 1981 and July 1983, but also after that, during the second half of the 1980s, when it acted as a driver of reform, pushing the PZPR forward on the reform track.

Both elements –the exceptional role of the army and that of the Church– can be traced back to the peculiarity of Poland and its construction into a nation. Throughout its history, Poland has been divided up between neighboring powers several times. First Prussia then Germany, Russia and then the Soviet Union, with the occasional participation of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. In that sad story of the Polish nation as a victim of the territorial ambitions of its neighbors, religion moved center stage in the building up of its national identity. Catholicism clearly differentiated the Poles from both the orthodox Russians in the East and the Protestant Germans and Prussians in the West. For the same reason, the army is much more of a cause for national pride in Poland than in any other surrounding country because of its crucial role in defending the nation's territorial integrity. In fact, it is an army that has been ready to intervene even against a much superior force like the Soviet Union. After World War II, Soviet control over Poland was only imposed after two years of war against local militias and the 1956 crisis ended with the Soviet Union making the concession that Poland could keep agriculture under private ownership because the Polish army threatened to stage another uprising. No other army in any other country in the area has displayed similar willingness to defend national interests. In fact, Jaruzelski's version of the 1981 coup in which he basically says that the coup was necessary to avoid a Soviet invasion seems to be widely accepted by Polish society. Moreover, the army is the institution that the people trust most, much more than the Church.

In the post-1989 period, Polish society has been the most wracked of all countries in Eastern Europe by disputes revolving around the interpretation of its communist past. Two major versions of events during the period from 1945 to 1989 have been at loggerheads in Poland. The prevailing version in Solidarity is that those 40 years were a huge vacuum or hole

in the history of Poland. It was a time when the Polish nation lost its sovereignty to the USSR again. In other words, they were “non-Polish years”. Poland existed but it had no control over the way it developed. There is another version of events that is upheld by people at the end of the political spectrum once occupied by the PZPR. According to that other version, despite the country’s subordination to the USSR and despite all of the restrictions that situation imposed on Polish national life, during the course of those 40 years, Poland witnessed positive development in terms of industrialization, education, health, social services, infrastructure, equality and justice.

Indeed, the reason why Poland has not been able to do what Germany or the Czech Republic did and pass legislation to drastically purge the old communist leaders or those people who collaborated with the secret police from public administration office and the highest levels of political institutions is because of the strength of the voters who identify with the positive aspects of the socialist period. Despite several attempts by parties on the right that have taken over where Solidarity left off, the electoral strength of the Left Alliance has prevented account-settling policies in the style of Eastern Germany or the Czech Republic from being implemented in Poland. However, accusations about the political past have been poisoning Polish democratic life since the very outset of democracy. Things have reached such an extreme that recently, in 2000, Lech Walesa and the current president Aleksander Kwasniewski were charged (and acquitted) with collaborating with the secret police in the past.

Another idiosyncrasy of Poland has been the failure of its process to consolidate a party system. Obviously, all the countries in the area started their democratic life with very weak party systems. They were weak basically because the parties were thrown together hastily, in an improvised fashion, without any real identity, without any clear proposals and without government programs. In most cases, they were parties put together in just a few short months. But in all or most of the other countries in the area, over the course of these years the party systems have gradually been consolidated. What that means in practice is that the parties that contest an election are basically the same ones that will contest the election held four years later and that their voter support is starting to become relatively stable, i.e. a certain amount of party loyalty is starting to exist. In Poland, things are different. Poland has a very odd party system where the Left Alliance, which is the old PZPR, now completely revamped and turned into a social democratic party, governs practically without any opposition at all because of Solidarity’s electoral and organizational collapse. No other party has appeared to fill that void so that the only opposition the Left Alliance has in the Parliament are small parties with absolutely no chance in the short or medium term of becoming a real alternative to govern the country. The largest of the small parties is the Peasants’ Party which, because its sole interest is agriculture, is destined always to be the party holding the balance of power and never to get more than its 15% share of the votes.

Ballot box volatility together with substantial voting to punish governments has been a

salient feature of the Eastern European countries. During the 90s, any party that governed in any of the countries in Eastern Europe was invariably doomed to lose the next election, not so much because the opposition party or parties had a better program to offer (in fact the programs seemed interchangeable) but rather because the population wanted to punish the party that had been in power and try out another one. This is a “tradition” in the area that is starting to die out.

However, what had never happened in the area in those twelve or thirteen years of democracy was what happened in Poland to Solidarity’s successors in the most recent election held in 2001. The votes cast to punish the governing party did not just leave it to govern with a minority government in the Parliament but actually left it with no seats in the Parliament at all. In other words, the governing party was practically wiped off the political map as a relevant force. There are a whole host of reasons why they were defeated but the one that comes to the fore is their fragmentation and their inability to overcome the legacy of ambiguity inherited from their time in the opposition. It was that blend of nationalism, Catholicism and, more than anything else, that reluctance to accept the market economy which could never be compatible with the implementation of a pro-EU accession policy later. Solidarity’s failure marks the end of a period in which the divisions of the past have been the hallmark of political life in the democracy in Poland. The old PZPR has been able to evolve into a modern social democratic party but Solidarity has not been able to turn itself into a right-wing party. In addition, for years its members lived under the illusion that they and only they represented Polish society. That was a mistake that could largely be traced back to the 1989 election. In that election, only 35% of the seats in the Dieta were freely contested (all the other seats were reserved for the PZPR and its satellite parties) and 100% of the seats in the Senate, which had just been created and had very little political relevance. The outcome was that Solidarity obtained 99 of the 100 seats on offer for senators and all the seats in the Dieta that were freely contested in the election and they interpreted this result as meaning they had 100% electoral backing from the population. That self-deception was a stumbling block to their understanding of election defeats in subsequent years. But there was another interpretation that seems the right one now: the Polish people voted unanimously for Solidarity precisely because the electoral rules condemned them to being in the minority. That first unfair election in 1989 with its misleading results has led to one big error of judgement that has lasted years in Polish political life.

I wanted to end with a question related to that. Intuitively, you tend to think that a new democracy will be stronger and more capable if an opposition movement to the previous dictatorship existed before that. Such an opposition movement could seemingly shape leaders and a political school of thought as well as spread democratic attitudes such as an interest in politics and vigilance to ensure respect for human rights. However, the example of Solidarity raises doubts about that bonus of strength that an opposition movement might contribute to

a young democracy. Perhaps in the cases where the political transition goes hand in hand with far-reaching economic and social changes, the prior existence of a movement of this type may not be of much help. Unfortunately, there is little chance of coming up with the answer to that question because no other communist country has produced a popular opposition movement comparable to Solidarity.

## Comments

by T. Anthony Jones

I first would like to say thank you to FRIDE for organizing this panel and for inviting me to be here. It is an honour and also somewhat frightening to be sitting next to a former Prime Minister talking about her country. There is no way that an outsider can know a country in the same way that a political leader can, so it is with great humility that I offer the comments that I have to offer.

There were many points of special interest in Hanna Suchocka's talk that I would like to come back to later, but I was especially struck by her last comment about Churchill losing office after having led the nation during the Second World War. It is interesting that in the last presidential elections in Poland, Lech Walesa got about 1% of the vote, which is exactly what Gorbachev got when he ran for president the last time. It seems that people who lead nations through historic changes are in a sense not needed afterwards. I guess that in a sense that is a measure of their success, that the system becomes mature enough to move beyond their leadership. Churchill losing office after WWII was the same kind of thing: the battle had been won and people wanted to move to new leaders. This is a very interesting dynamic. But now I'd like to talk about the relationship between political and economic issues, although it is difficult to deal with such a huge topic in such a short time.

Let me with illustrative data try to give a sense of the kind of things that I think we should pay attention to when thinking about Poland, and in fact when thinking about Central European transitions in general. As Hanna Suchocka reminded us, Poland (as did other countries) tried to do two things at once. It was going through an economic revolution and a political revolution at the same time. These, if you like, can be thought of as two quite separate transitions. As we will see a little later Poland has gone through these two transitions, and is about to enter the third one. Certainly, the first two were challenging enough. In the West, if you think of its history, the economic changes came first. In fact, capitalism took centuries to

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develop, it was not something that was done in a shock plan or as shock therapy, it happened over a very long period and the political changes came as a result of the economic change. It was the economic opportunities that led the new economic strata that had been created to push for economic power and a transformed politics. The post-Communist transition countries don't have the luxury, however, of waiting for several centuries for their economic transition. They have to get on and do both at the same time. And as Ambassador Hanna Suchocka said, it isn't really a question of choosing anyway, because there is no alternative: you have to do both at the same time. So this is an historical imperative, if you like, from which there is no escaping.

As everyone knows, economic and political life are closely related and that it is very difficult to separate them; and in fact that's why we have a discipline called Political Economy, which tries to look at the way in which economies and political systems interact. But it is clear that in a sense they are both mutually supportive and also mutually disruptive. Economic development requires at least some degree of political stability, openness and accountability for it to continue. You can't have real economic growth in the absence of at least some degree of political stability for reasons that I'm not going to go into now. A prerequisite for economic development is political stability and political development. At the same time, political development is closely related to economic performance, not just in transition countries but in all countries. Regardless of how the population may feel about individual leaders or parties, it is economic performance during their time of tenure which causes governments to rise and fall. This is true in most developed countries, as well as in transitional democracies and economies. In a sense there is a dilemma here which most transitional societies fail to resolve: how to get the economic growth necessary to create political stability while at the same time having enough political stability so that you can get the economic growth to create political stability. So the whole thing is just constantly in interaction. What I'd like to do is to spend ten minutes or so just looking at some of these interactions and then leaving you with some thoughts on the challenges facing Leszek Miller's government after its first one hundred days in office.

Firstly let me look at this question of volatility. It's been mentioned several times here and elsewhere that politics in Poland are noted for being rather unpredictable: that parties come to and go from power, governments rise and fall, and that this is in a sense a form of volatility and instability. Poland has had, in a quick counting, something like eight prime ministers since 1989 which makes it more like Italy than anywhere else, but nevertheless it is a reality. Why might there be this kind of volatility? Let me humbly suggest a few possibilities. I think that there are too many parties in Poland. When the reforms began there were a hundred recognizable parties; some of them had only two or three members but nevertheless there were enough of them to create confusion in the minds of many voters. There are still 10 or so parties or movements which compete for votes. This means that it is fragmenting the electorate's choices considerably. Add to this the fact that there is proportional representation

in the Sejm, so that if you receive a certain number of votes you get a certain number of seats. What you get if you add these two things, a lot of parties and proportional representation, is what you find in Poland, mainly minority governments formed without the majority of the votes, and then they have to look around for other parties that they can form a coalition with. So what you end up with is weak coalition governments, which is not a recipe for bold, innovative political change or policies. In addition to this I think that there are some cultural aspects which make for some volatility: first, the issue of Polish national identity which has been, at least until recently, very closely related to the vision of Solidarnosc as a party and as a movement, which as the ambassador pointed out, was seen from within the party as a mandate to speak in the name of the entire population. But nevertheless, there is a sense that Solidarity should be supporting Polish national identity. Second, there was in Polish society strong support for egalitarian values during the Socialist period, and this is still true today. Poland is not unique in this respect but nevertheless it is a factor which is still in operation. That means that when inequality or rising poverty, or divisions of the population between rich and poor, become public issues then there is a movement away from the government of the day and from what may be seen as harmful economic and fiscal policies.

As a result, what you get is a mixture of weak governments, a confusion between issues of politics and national identity on the one hand, and social egalitarianism and the desire to move forward on the other. Both of these create very uncertain situations and it is difficult for any party or government to set its sights clearly on one of these goals at the expense of the other. What you get therefore is voters that elect economic reformers when things are stagnating, and then when the consequences of economic actions become clear (particularly if they are socially divisive) they move back to those who promise some kind of social security. When that doesn't lead to economic growth then they move back again to those who promise some kind of pragmatic, growth-oriented policies. What you get then is this back and forth movement. This is not specifically a Polish pattern, in fact you can find it in all of the transitional democracies and economies, but in Poland I think it's a little easier to see, more transparent if you like, than it is in some places. Now does this moving back and forth mean that commitments to a democracy and to a market in Poland are weak or uncertain? If they are weak or uncertain, then does this mean that the changes, both political and economic, that have been achieved in the last decade are reversible?

It's an issue which some people have raised. Let's look at some of the data to see if this is a possibility or if Poland has made the transition in the sense that it is now securely on its new road. Let me look very briefly at the question of attitude towards democracy and politics. First I think that you need to look very closely at attitudes towards democracy and to politics. Are Poles committed to democracy itself, or are they committed to particular political and governmental policies? If you look at the public opinion surveys which have been done over the last ten years or so you can see that there is very strong commitment to democracy and a

commitment which is in fact stronger now than it ever has been. In 1992, surveys typically found that about half to a third of the population would agree that democracy is the best kind of system for Poland. In the last national data that I've seen, which are about a year old, it's about 75%. It is interesting because this is when the Jerzy Buzek government was at its lowest period, and people were very upset about the state of the economy and concerned about Poland's future. Nevertheless, 3 out of 4 were convinced that democracy remained the best system for Poland. When in other questions people are asked to compare the situation with earlier times, you get a very different picture. When asked, for example, "is the present political system preferable to that existing before 1989?" less than half of the population say yes. So while three out of four are in favour of democracy, only about two out of four think that they are better off with the system that they have. So...is this a contradiction? Does this mean that they don't know what they are thinking? No, it means that they are committed to the concept of moving ahead with democracy but they don't like the way that it is actually working out.

When asking even more focused questions you get an even stronger result: e.g., when asked after a decade or so of transition "are you satisfied with democracy in Poland?", a rather general question, only 27% say yes. So it is clear that there is a dissatisfaction with politics as practiced, not dissatisfaction with the way the political system (or at least the idea of democracy) has developed. So people value democracy but they don't value their politicians and governments. You can see this in all kind of surveys, one of which I will mention because it is of particular interest, and which was done just six or eight months ago. The survey asked people who they trust most in Polish society: "Do you trust your president?"; 56% said yes, which is a very pretty good approval rate. "Do you trust the Parliament?"; 20% said yes. "Do you trust the Senate?"; again, 20%. "Do you trust the government?"; 17% said yes. So the president has managed somehow to remove himself from the political arena, which is why he got elected for the second time I think, for he is seen as representative of the population as a whole whereas the government and the politicians are seen as not being worthy of people's trust. Who do they trust...? The courts? The legal system?. No, only 22% said they trusted the courts. Do they trust the local authorities?. Not really, only 26% saying yes. So whom do they trust? The churches, with a score of almost 50%. Clearly, the further you get from politics the more trust people have. Why, then, do they keep their commitment to democracy if their dissatisfaction with politics as practiced is so high? Because they see that there are some benefits, and the benefits that are most often mentioned by the population are that there is accepted and firm tolerance for differences of political opinion (which is certainly an improvement over earlier systems), and secondly that civil liberties are observed and protected, not completely but nevertheless these are seen as valuable benefits of democracy.

But what they do feel is alienation and isolation, and in a sense a lack of influence in the way their country is developing. Asked if they think citizens have any political influence on

the country other than voting, only 22% thought that was possible, and when asked “Do you think people actually obey the laws that are passed, including politicians?”, the answer is only 20% yes. In other words they don’t think they have any influence and they don’t think people are playing by the rules, which is not surprising given the concern in the last election about levels of corruption among politicians and administrators in Poland. Nevertheless there is a sense that people cannot have any influence on things and are in a sense alienated.

These attitudes and feelings are important, I think, because they can affect attitudes to democracy itself over time. You can see this in all kind of surveys -- I will just mention one which was done last year, and which is rather indicative of how they can affect people’s commitments to democracy. In questions about freedom and various other things people were asked if they thought there was enough freedom in Polish society: 39% thought that there was too much freedom, 43% thought there was just enough, and only 12% thought that there needed to be more. When people have these feelings about obeying the laws and having influence on political life and so forth, it is not surprising that many think that someone needs to take control, that there is a need for restrictions on liberty, and so forth.

Attitudes towards politics are strongly affected by the economy, and particularly in transitional countries by marketization, by selling off government property (privatization) and by moving to market relations in those areas of life which previously were taken care of by the government, particularly health and education. These are two very inflammatory, sensitive areas in all of these countries, in Poland as well, particularly the health system which has become a major political issue in the last couple of years. People are concerned not only about economic development in general but also about the social consequences of it. So in a survey that was done just a few months ago people were asked what they thought about equality in Polish life, whether there was enough social and economic equality. Only 3% this time thought that there was too much equality and 73% said not enough. Again, while there is a commitment to change, the sense that it’s not to the advantage of everyone is very clearly expressed. The sense that some of them are being left behind, and that the size of this group being left behind is increasing, is very strong. What also concerns many Poles is that while in principle equality of opportunity is enshrined in the new order, in reality is not, given the increasing need to pay for health care, education, and various other services. The old political barriers to achievement and to rising through the system have been replaced by financial ones, and given the state of the economy and the low wages of many workers this is seen as a major problem, and one which political parties can easily manipulate.

What this leads to is a mood amongst the population which is fairly pessimistic. At the end of the year 2000, about ten months or so before the last elections, a poll asked people whether they thought that they were better off or worse than prior to 1989. “Were you better off under Communism or are you better off under a democratic market system?” About a third of the population, 36%, said that they were better off and 39% said worse off. Now

the interesting thing about these numbers is that they are absolutely wrong when you look at the economic statistics. Poland is about (and it depends how you measure this) 20% to 40% better off economically than it was in 1989, and yet 39% think that the economy is worse off as a whole, which is interesting. So again, it is not reality but perception, and this clearly has political implications. It has already eroded the considerable Polish support for privatization. For example, when you look at studies done in 1990 (when privatization was beginning) 60% of the population were fully in support of it. By 2001 it had dropped to 40%, so privatization is not as popular as it once was because it is perceived to be a give-away to the friends and relatives of the rich and powerful. Another interesting but somewhat scary finding is that support for foreign investment has also declined. In 1995 about 65% of the population thought that foreign investment was a good thing for Poland in general, but now it is down to 40%. And concerns are being expressed in certain parts of the population about foreign intervention in political and foreign affairs, that foreign companies should not have the right to own companies but should be kept as minority shareholders and so forth. So it's a kind of economic xenophobia, not dominating but nevertheless beginning to take hold. All of this I think is because the economy is seen as in deep trouble and the expectation that things will improve soon are very, very low. This is mainly because many people are experiencing a downturn in their standard of living and it's this that drives public opinion more than anything else.

When asked how they arrive at their opinions, about the factors influence their views, three out of four people answer "my own financial situation more than anything else". So they judge political and economic situations mainly according to what is happening to them. A second factor in their opinion formation is what's happening to the work place, to their company, to those they work with; about half of the population sees this as a major factor. And then there is television, the main influence, if you like, on public opinion. When asked if they thought politicians and political statements and government had any effect on their views only one in four gave any credence whatsoever to this source of information. So it is very much the sense of "what's happening to me" that is driving economic and political opinion, not to say that they are the only things but they are certainly the strongest factors. What is surprising to me as an outsider is that, in spite of this, the commitment to democratic values remains as strong as it is.

When asked recently in a survey if they had to choose between more freedom and more social and political equality, which one would they choose, 57% chose freedom over equality and only 35% chose equality over freedom. That seems to me a very promising and optimistic predictor of the future, because although things are difficult in Poland (and there are certainly challenges) I think that this commitment will carry them through. And certainly -- and this is my concluding comment -- they need all the commitment they can get, because the economy is certainly in a challenging situation. The unemployment figures for January (this is the

January just passed) are now up to 18% which compared to a year ago is worsening, because it was only 15% a year before. The problem is, not only are there now three and a quarter million people officially unemployed, but four out of five are not even eligible for benefits for one reason or another. So they are unemployed but have no government support, they are not officially eligible for benefits. In addition to this, the January numbers showed a 5% decline in production, which is not quite as bad as it seems because January is not a good year for production anyway in Poland, but nevertheless it's a decline of about 1.5% over the year earlier. The big scary news, however, is that in construction, which is really a key element of transitional economies, since this is where a lot of the growth is driven from, was down 64% over December. You might say well, this is a seasonal problem but nevertheless if you look at the previous January (2001) it's a decline of 21%. So you are seeing the economy grinding to a halt. Why is this happening? Partly it's a natural result of the rapid growth that occurred during the mid to late 1990s. This happened in Czechoslovakia which had a similar kind of situation, and it happened to a lesser extent in Hungary. This can be seen as a result of too rapid growth, but it is also partly due to the global economic down-turn, although since most of the economy in Poland is not tied into the international economy this is not a strong influence, but nevertheless it is there.

The main reasons for decline, I think, are domestic and these are of two kinds: firstly, weak governments (because of the structural conditions of the political system) have not been able to push through the kind of changes, the kinds of laws, that are needed to move the economy forward. And secondly, there are structural problems which (because of the political situation) have proven very difficult for Poland to deal with. There are the very high labour costs relative to other countries in Europe; the weak business laws which make it very difficult for new companies, particularly medium size and small businesses to get off the ground and to operate without being shaken down for bribes by officials; high levels of corruption which are still to be dealt with; and lastly all kinds of barriers to businesses which prevent them from operating efficiently. Do the Poles think that change in the political and economic system in the last ten years has been worthwhile? Yes they do; two out of three think it's certainly been worth it in spite of all the problems and this puts them ahead of the Czechs -- only half of whom think it's been worthwhile in spite of all their progress -- and the Hungarians who are even less convinced. So all in all, this is a very positive situation and it means that the support for change in Poland is very strong, stronger than its other two main rivals for EU membership.

This year is a particularly key year for Poland and it might prove a key year for Europe First, Poland still has to meet the conditions for EU entry, and it is behind both the Czech Republic and Hungarians. Second, if the Leszek Miller government succeeds in getting the economy started it will not only ease transition into the union but it will also have the potential for long-term political consequences. So this is a key year not only for the Poles but also for the EU, and I leave you with this thought