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Political Apathy in Poland

David Mason and Daniel N. Nelson

Strikes in Poland during April and May 1988 demonstrate once again the stalemate confronting regime and populace. Although Jaruzelski cannot mobilize support for economic reforms, Solidarity also lacks the power to force the regime toward the political reforms it deems necessary for Poland's salvation.

A widespread sense of political apathy, we think, accounts for this stalemate. Poles are tired of politics, tired of Jaruzelski, and tired even of Solidarity. The exhilaration of Solidarity's sixteen months, followed by the depression of martial law, has turned the society even more sharply away from the regime, and away from politics, than was the case before 1980. While a small minority continues to support Solidarity, most people are doubtful that Solidarity can achieve anything at this point, and many fear that a return to power by the trade union would lead to social unrest and further economic collapse. An even smaller minority supports the regime. This leaves a broad middle of the population consisting of people who are uninterested in politics, and who do not participate in politics, either legally or illegally. This broad spectrum of Poles is, in other words, apathetic.

Political apathy is characterized by a lack of psychological involvement in public affairs, emotional detachment from civic obligation, and abstention from political activity. When people cease to care about political life, withdraw from obligations to civil society, and perform entirely nominal or rote acts -- or none at all -- in political institutions or organizations, apathy is indicated.

Low Psychological Involvement

We interpret "psychological involvement" primarily as awareness of politics, interest in politics, attention to the media, and information about politics. Although Leninist party regimes spare little in their attempt to socialize and mobilize the populations, Poles do not evince a substantial awareness of even major political issues and events. During the Gierek years, less than 20 percent of the residents of six cities could name the president, the first party secretary, or a single representative in their electoral district. The official Center for Public Opinion Research (OBOP), found as well that 70 percent of their respondents asserted that they could not understand what was happening in politics. Information about elections is also minimal. While about 75 percent of the nationwide survey Polacy '84 (Polacy '84) correctly identified the councils for which elections were being held in June 1984, only 57 percent were entirely correct in their responses. In a survey among young people, knowledge of concepts associated with ideology was lower than one might expect -- only 44 percent could identify "historical materialism," for example (Radio Free Europe Research [RFER], June 5, 1986).

During the brief period of Solidarity's open activity, and for some months after martial law, the levels of political interest and activity were extraordinarily high. The environment of martial law began, however, to depress both interest and activity. Less than four years after Solidarity was crushed, survey results published in the official weekly Polityka found only 15-17 percent of adult citizens who were "interested in politics," about half of whom were party members. Other research in 1985 saw in public opinion an increasing "disinclination toward efforts to change the political status quo," and attitudes of "discouragement and expectation." More people were unwilling or unable to express political opinions one way or the other, contributing to the growth of a "silent minority" estimated to have reached a third of adults by the mid-1980s (Polacy '84). Solidarity and the political opposition generally have been affected, too. According to Polacy '84, fewer and fewer people identified themselves as having belonged to Solidarity in 1981, from 37 percent in 1981 to 22 percent in the fall of 1985. Since Solidarity was declared illegal, some of the decline may be fear of being linked to such a non-sanctioned organization. Yet, both official and unofficial polls show declining support for, and confidence in the opposition. By 1985, only about 11 percent expressed confidence in the Solidarity underground and only about 20 percent were "sympathetic" to the political opposition (Polityka February 1, 1986). Even among Solidarity activists, "the underground opposition" is rated favorably by a bare majority of the respondents to a survey by Slowo Podziemne (Underground Word) in 1984. These kinds of attitudes led the underground publication Mysti Nieinternowane (Uninterned Thoughts) to observe that "society is not with us, nor is it with the authorities -- it is keeping to itself."

Detachment from Civic Obligations

Low psychological involvement in the system is accompanied by a detachment from civic obligations, reduced concern for ideological and societal goals, a decline in civic pride, and a retreat into private life. While all of these
phenomena were present, and probably on the rise in the 1970s, they are even more evident in the post-Solidarity period. Jarusz Reykowski attempted to explain the problem in Polityka (April 6, 1985):

certain major social groups...consider the social order here to be unjust [and] at the same time inefficient as regards ensuring economic progress. They do not feel any solidarity with the state in its present form. They approach it from detached positions and sympathize with those who actively oppose it.

Although disaffection with the regime is more widespread than support for the opposition, Reykowski accurately notes the roots of alienation in the popular perception that the regime had failed both politically and economically. In 1985, the official Center for Research on Social Opinion (CBOS) reported that fully two-thirds of the population thinks that the government's policies will not help the country emerge from the economic crisis.

Consequently, a mood of futility and detachment has become generalized. The columnist "Kisiel" [Stefan Kisielewski -- Editors] in the Catholic weekly Tygodnik Powszechny (Universal Weekly) (April 22,29, 1984) characterized this sentiment as, "all I want is for them to please leave me in peace." A desire for "...inner peace, enabling one to focus on the most important things, on problems of life and death..." has become commonplace.

Concomitant with the rising sentiments of futility, all institutions, official or not, suffered a decline in trust from 1981 to 1984. The three most trusted institutions in 1981 all showed substantial declines: the Church from 94 to 82 percent, Solidarity from 91 percent to 13 percent and the army from 89 percent to 65 percent (Mason, Public Opinion and Political Change in Poland, 1980-1982, 1985; Polacy '84). Trust in individuals in public life was not much higher. Pope John Paul II was far and away the most trusted, by 97 percent, and Jozef Glemp, the Primate of the Polish Catholic Church, was second with 81 percent. According to this survey, the people were the most trusted official figures, 98-99 percent of eligible citizens trusted the principle "everyone for himself." According to surveys in 1983, however, only 43 percent supported the idea. Other surveys since then have shown even further declines in support for socialism and socialist principles among young people, and a dramatic decline in the number of young people identifying themselves as Marxists. Particularly for the central Marxist value of egalitarianism, until recently accepted widely in Poland, there has been a sharp decline of support since 1980.

As an extension of the diminished affect for the existing institutions and values, there is also a broader disenchantment with Poland's entire post-war history. A political "model" based on centralization and domination by a single party is supported by "not more than a fifth of the adult population" (Polacy '84). And, by 1984, only 56 percent thought Poland's achievements after 1945 could be assessed as positive (Zycie Warszawy [Warsaw Life], December 5, 1984), down from 75-85 percent in the 1970s.

A retreat into private affairs, the family, and religion accounts for much of such detachment from civic affairs. Particularly among young people, there is a sense of helplessness, isolation and apathy manifested in "an overwhelming and increasing passivity on the part of most young people who, tormented by futile anger, turn away from the pressure of schools and organizations and seek refuge in individualism and in the passivity and exclusiveness of small groups of friends" (Tu, Teraz [Here, Now], September 15, 1984). The same phenomenon, noted by official pollsters in the weekly Polityka, is seen as a "...retreat to privacy according to the principle 'everyone for himself.'"

**Political Inactivity**

Low levels of psychological involvement and detachment from the civic culture have also resulted in very low levels of political activity. Communist party regimes have always, of course, sought widespread, but nominal, involvement of the population in public organizations and rituals (such as voting and May Day parades), to produce a stratum of involved citizens one might evocatively call "fillers." In post-martial law Poland, however, citizens do, in fact, boycott officially sanctioned organizations and activities.

The most dramatic changes of this kind have taken place in national parliamentary elections. Before Solidarity, according to official figures, 98-99 percent of eligible citizens voted in the Sejm elections; such results are typical throughout the communist bloc. In March 1980, the last election before Solidarity, 98.87 percent participated. Elections scheduled for 1984 were postponed until the next year. A new electoral law that allows, among other changes, two candidates for most seats failed to attract public interest. The Warsaw daily Zycie Warszawy observed that public debate about the law was marked by "social apathy and an absence of any wide public interest."

The focus of the election campaign became, for both the
regime and the opposition, not the candidates themselves but the number of people that would vote. In the 1984 peoples' council elections, the authorities claimed 75 percent of registered voters had voted, the opposition, which had conducted its own monitoring (by watching polling stations from adjoining apartments, for example) of the elections, claimed a much lower turnout -- 60 percent. For 1985, both sides hoped to improve the participation/boycott figures. The results of the election were a modest victory for the government, with official returns showing a 79 percent turnout and Solidarity claiming 66 percent, but both figures were higher than the corresponding ones for 1984. This "victory" for the government was hollow since the turnout was far lower than ever before in Poland or, for that matter, in any other communist state.

Even smaller proportions of the population exhibit knowledge about, and interest in politics. In 1979, researchers concluded (even then) that "people understand "political life" as a subject of information and commentary, but not as an arena for their own participation." People talk about politics, but they don't participate in it (Ryszka, Zmiany w Swiadomosci Politycznej Polakow, 1985). This tendency became even more widespread after the Solidarity period. At a Warsaw party committee session in 1984, it was revealed that over 70 percent of workers surveyed in the capital were not interested in becoming involved with any official organization inside or outside of the factories (RFER, February 19, 1985).

A steady decline in the Polish United Workers' Party (PZPR) membership from 3.1 million in 1980 to only 2.1 million in 1985 has been parallel to the larger diminution in political interest. It will be difficult to raise party membership in the future; only 11 percent of the members are under 30 years old, the lowest percentage in the party's history. Officially sponsored youth organizations have also lost much of their membership since 1980, and only a fraction of people aged 16-28 belong to any of the regime's youth groups (RFER, October 12, 1984). As a prominent sociologist noted in the September 1, 1987 issue of Odrodzenia (Renewal), students now have "more calm and balanced" views of the events of 1980-81, but "these more balanced judgments are not being accompanied by the desire to actively participate in the country's socio-political life."

New trade unions, constituted in 1982 to succeed Solidarity, have acquired more resources, and now include about six million members. While this is probably better than Jaruzelski expected, it is less than half of the pre-Solidarity branch unions total of 12 million members; Solidarity, itself, attracted about nine million. There is, as well, a noticeable lack of enthusiasm for the new unions. A CBOS survey in 1984 revealed that, even among members of the trade unions, only 37 percent expressed confidence in them.

"Social consultations" -- regime-sponsored grass-roots meetings to discuss forthcoming events or decisions -- have also been tried to elicit controlled participation. Such consultations were held to evoke opinions (and support) for the new Sejm (Parliamentary) electoral law, and there were also "consultations" between Sejm candidates and their constituents as the election approached. But when the Polacy '84 pollsters asked about participation in such consultations, the results were abysmally low: only 5.2 percent participated in the consultations on prices (actually price increases), 8.7 percent on the electoral law, and 6.8 percent on the wage system. In November 1987, only 67 percent of eligible voters participated in a referendum on the government's economic reform. While a majority of those approved the plans, the comparatively low turnout prevented the regime from winning approval from a majority of all voters, as required by law.

Low levels of participation in official activities does not translate into high levels of activity in support of the opposition. While the Solidarity underground continues to operate, probably with several tens of thousands of activists, the opposition can no longer count on the large numbers who were willing to protest and demonstrate in the first year or two of martial law. A combination of rigorous, sometimes brutal, police repression of such demonstrations, and increasing popular fatigue and frustration with them, has led to a considerable drop-off in the numbers who will engage in such activities. This was dramatized during the strikes in April and May of 1988, when even in the enterprises that were Solidarity strongholds in 1980-81, most of the workers abstained from joining the strikers, or drifted away from the strike after a few days.

As noted above, both official and underground polls show that less than half the population provides even vocal or moral support for the opposition. According to the Polacy '84 survey, only 39 percent of the population favors legalizing the activities of groups and organizations of an oppositional character," while an equal number opposed such an idea. Even fewer are willing to actually engage in public protest. A 1984 underground poll on opposition strategy (among Solidarity supporters) showed only 30 percent favoring street demonstrations and 21 percent supporting strike actions (Swowo Podziemne, May 27, 1984). As another underground publication observed, "the emotions and spontaneous protests are now burnt out" (Mysli Nieinternowane, January-February, 1984).

Causes of Apathy in Poland

The wrenching, exhilarating and depressing political experiences of Poland since 1980 undoubtedly explain a good deal of the apathy we have described. But, as we have seen, the roots of these sentiments extend back prior to Solidarity, and seem certain to remain part of the Polish experience for years to come. The popular sense of alienation and apathy are also based on feelings of pessimism and hopelessness, inefficacy, cynicism (especially with the perceived distance...
between ideals and reality), and the continuing day-to-day economic problems.

Pessimism is everywhere in Poland; one is hard pressed to find an optimist in that country, even among officials and party members. This pessimism is revealed in many surveys as well. Most Poles believe that the current “crisis” began in the 1970s, and will continue for many more years. In an official CBOS poll in late 1984, three-quarters of the respondents thought that Poland had not yet “exited” from the crisis. Furthermore, the prognoses for the situation were not very bright. Only about a third of the sample thought that, within the next five years, there would be a lessening of societal distrust toward the authorities or a democratization of political life. The rest thought these situations would not change, or even worsen. Such feelings are even more widespread among young people: only 4-8 percent believe conditions will improve in the near future; a half think they will get worse (RFER, June 5, 1986). Given these extremely pessimistic expectations, it is not surprising that Poles have turned away from public affairs.

This pessimism contributes to, and is in turn compounded by, a sense of political inefficacy. People feel they have little influence on matters either at the national level or in their immediate surroundings. In a late 1983 poll, 72 percent felt that their social group had little or no influence on matters affecting the country. When asked “who currently rules in Poland?” only 5.8 percent answered “the working class.” As the sociologist WsioI Morawski put it, the main reason for the “ineffectiveness of the system” is the “prevalence of top-down mobilization mechanisms over mechanisms of articulation from below” which means that “the interests and values of society are not sufficiently recognized in the political and economic system.” For many Poles, this lack of opportunity for political input is particularly galling given the “ineffectiveness of the system” is the “prevalence of top-down mobilization mechanisms over mechanisms of articulation from below” which means that “the interests and values of society are not sufficiently recognized in the political and economic system.” For many Poles, this lack of opportunity for political input is particularly galling given the very different message conveyed by the official ideology. As Wladyslaw Adamski noted in the introduction to the Polacy '84 survey, “the source of social conflict in Poland is the discrepancy between the aspirations and interests of society and the character of the political system and the effectiveness of the economy.”

The continuing economic problems contributed to the sense of depression and fatigue, and left people with little time or inclination to be involved in politics. By 1988, rationing had been in place for seven years. Meanwhile, prices continued to rise, while wages did not keep up. By 1983, 21 percent of working families lived below the poverty line (defined as two-thirds of average income), compared to 17 percent in 1982 (Tygodnik Powszechny, January 6, 1985). The situation was further worsened by the widespread and steep price increases imposed by the regime in early 1988 as part of its economic reform program.

Public opinion on the economy is as negative as it is regarding the political system, and pessimism is increasing every year. In 1984, 53 percent said the economy was “poor”; in 1985, 38 percent made the same assessment, and by 1986, 51 percent felt that way. Further, only 10 percent believe the economic reform program has much chance of improving the situation (Kwiekowski, Polityka March 21, 1987). As political observers from deTocqueville on have noted, political activism and revolutionary ferment occurs not when economic conditions are at their worst, but after a period of some improvement. In Poland the perception, at least, is that there has been no improvement.

To some extent, the depoliticization of the population has been caused by the regime, either intentionally or unintentionally. In the aftermath of the participatory revolution of Solidarity, the martial law authorities temporarily prohibited all political and organizational activity, and eventually banned a number of organizations that had been born or revitalized during 1980-81. They also attempted to deflect the workers from political activity, promising an improvement in the economy and a more stable environment.

The regime even attempted to buy off certain strategically located groups – coal miners, for example – by offering them large wage increases and expanded fringe benefits. From the regime’s point of view, political apathy was better than political opposition. Ironically, the country’s official institutions have been victimized by the government’s success in moving the population away from political activity. Prohibited from joining the organizations of their choice, the workers now refuse to participate in those the party chooses.

Implications and Conclusions

Several dimensions of political apathy, and conditions that we expect contribute to such a phenomenon, are thus present in Poland. It is apparent that, notwithstanding the PUWP’s strenuous endeavors to ensure high levels of mobilized and manipulated political involvement, Poles are shutting out of their lives as much awareness, feeling and judgement about political life as possible, although their fundamental disaffection remains.

What is left for the ruling party and the people it rules? The PUWP “helped” to generate deep-seated disaffection by its own incompetence and corruption, and then used every means at its disposal to deflect such disaffection from a path leading to dissent. Jaruzelski’s achievement, however, is simultaneously his greatest enemy, for the political apathy he now confronts means that no one any longer cares enough to seek solutions to Poland’s crises. Jaruzelski or his successors will never be able to resuscitate Poland unless they allow, and indeed encourage, individuals to become politically efficacious while removing systemic limits that disrupt pluralism and collective organizations. Jaruzelski’s dilemma, and the dilemma of all rulers in Leninist party states, is that such actions would again open the path towards political dissent even as the cause for disaffection mount.