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The (not always sweet) uses of opportunism: Post-communist political parties in Poland

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Abstract

The author argues that political opportunism, an attitude common among communist party members before 1989, turned into both the blessing and the curse for post-communist parties in Poland. Once hopeful of secure careers in the authoritarian structures of the old regime, after the regime breakdown communists found themselves in a situation where the only chance for such a career could be associated with the party reinventing itself as a player in the field of pluralist democracy. Opportunistic attitudes of communist apparatchiks and *nomenklatura* members were instrumental in transforming them, individually and collectively, into effective actors in market economy and competitive politics. Yet the same attitudes doomed the post-communists once the opportunities associated with access to political power opened up widely. The same people who in the 1990s were so apt in turning the rules of democratic game into their collective advantage, in the 2000s acted with a sense of impunity and lack of any consideration for political accountability that in democracies arrives at the end of any election cycle. Plagued by corruption scandals, they lost their popular base: the economically disadvantaged groups to nationalistic populists, the urbane libertarians to liberal democrats.

Keywords: Poland; Political parties; Elections; Communism; Post-communism

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When in March 1968 – fortieth anniversary of these events has been much celebrated this year – Polish students organized a series of non-violent sit-ins and rallies in defense of basic civil rights (in particular freedom of speech), little did they know that their actions would mark the beginning of the end of the communist system in Poland. The protest was short-lived: the regime restored the "order" at Polish universities within a month. Yet the March '68 events (as this modest protest has been commonly known ever since), along with the much more spectacular developments of the Prague Spring and the subsequent intervention of Warsaw Pact armies in Czechoslovakia, made it clear that communism in its Central-European version had lost its utopian appeal. Before 1968 people could believe – as we today know naively – that participation in the communist movement may contribute to the creation of a more efficient economy and a better society. After 1968 such illusions were no longer possible. Furthermore, the nasty anti-Semitic campaign launched by the Polish communist leadership in connection to the March events as a mean to find a scapegoat to re-direct the popular discontent away from the current leaders and toward the selected group of former dignitaries of the Stalinist (1944–1956) period, indicated an important shift in the way the communist authorities sought legitimization of their rule. From the mechanism tying their legitimacy with a utopian promise (Rigby and Feher, 1982: pp. 1–26; Holmes, 1997: pp. 44–45), they moved, quite consciously, toward exposing the alleged association between their rule and the long-term interests of an ethnically defined nation. Instead of class solidarity, the regime propaganda began to stress its own peculiar interpretation of Polish *raison d'état* as the foundation of foreign policy. Similarly, ethnic solidarity replaced whatever had been left of class struggle as the basis of socio-economic and cultural policies.

Those developments, subtle and unimportant as they might have seemed at the time, changed nevertheless the dynamics of relationships between the party – the rulers – and the people. In particular, they affected the patterns of political recruitment into the party ranks, party apparatus, and *nomenklatura* positions. Ideological motivations have been replaced by a sheer desire to advance one's political and professional career. Sure enough, opportunists of all shapes and shades had been joining the party since the end of World War II. Their numbers were particularly high at the time of the massive recruitment effort that followed the party unification congress in December 1948, when the Polish Workers Party, PPR, merged with the Polish Socialist Party, PPS, to create the Polish United Workers Party, known by its Polish acronym as PZPR (*Polska Zjednoczona Partia Robotnicza*). Yet for most peasants and workers who joined the party in the 1950s and 1960s or simply accepted its leading political role as an unquestionable fact, the economic and social transformation the party presided over had a real potential of bettering their collective lot. Marxism–Leninism, to which the party officially subscribed, still had some appeal as an ideology of social transformation. In contrast, after 1968 not even the pretence of one's yearning to "change the world" was a necessary condition for party membership anymore; the proclaimed loyalty to the (current) party leadership became a sufficient standard. The newly recruited were talking quite openly about their motivations, albeit usually in negative terms: "If I