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Between a poster boy and bogeyman: Three decades of political and economic transition in Poland

To what extent does the contemporary Polish experience of transformation matter? Do the changes in Poland, those in 1989 as well as the more recent ones, associated with the country's drift towards right-wing authoritarianism, have wider significance? A growing number of scholars seem to share this view. Suffice to mention here two recent books, *The Light that Failed: A Reckoning* by Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes (2019) and Anne Appelbaum's *Twilight of Democracy: The Failure of Politics and the Parting of Friends* (2020). They both treat Poland as exemplary cases in their analyses of the current crisis of the Western liberal democracy. Another eminent authority on Poland, David Ost, once observed "I have been dealing with Poland for so long […] because what is happening in the sphere of politics in this country has always had a global meaning. We can learn from Poland a lot – yes, the West learns a lot from her, although few Poles believe it. Sometimes these are wonderful lessons […] sometimes Poland is a negative model." I treat my invitation to take part in the conference on Changing North Korean Society as a vindication of Ost's claim. For better or worse, Poland's fortunes again attract interest among those searching for global paradigms and trends. Polish experience may also be specifically interesting to Koreans. Despite the distance and obvious differences between the two countries, there are many striking parallels. Both Poland and South Korea have been strongly affected by interference of bigger and more

powerful neighbors. They both were forced to go through brutal foreign occupation, vicious war, mass emigration, dictatorship, democratization as well as rapid industrialization.

Not so long ago, talking about the contemporary Polish history seemed like a relatively easy task. The dominant narrative pattern was fixed, ostensibly leaving room only for the selection of minor detail or choices in emphasis. Until 2015, Poland served as a poster boy for successful transition from socialism to capitalism and from authoritarianism to democracy. It was even more than that, a bridgehead of the Western liberal elites and a vindication that their world view and economic formulas could actually deliver positive outcomes. The free-market experiments in Russia (in the early 1990s) and Iraq (after the invasion in 2003) ended in spectacular disasters. China, despite decades of unprecedented economic growth and against all reasonable expectations, has stubbornly refused to democratize. Viewed from this angle, Poland represented an encouraging counterpoint. What is more, the evidence of successful transformation of Poland along Western, liberal lines was abundant and varied. Polish cities, and Warsaw in particular, quickly shed their post-communist drabness and emerged as vibrant cosmopolitan hubs and tourist hotspots. Visible infrastructural improvements went hand in hand with solid political achievements. In 1999, together with Hungary and the Czech Republic, Poland joined NATO. In 2004, it became member of the European Union and four years later (in 2008) joined the Schengen Area of borderless travel.

Equally buoyant image emerged from the long-term economic analyses. In *Breakout Nation*s (2012), an international bestseller examining the roots of economic success in the contemporary global economy, Ruchir Sharma was pretty unequivocal in his verdict: “Poland and the Czech Republic […] are in that rare class of nations poised to break through and join the ranks of the rich elite”. In July 2014, in a special ten-page report, *The Economist* lavished praise on Polish achievements and announced the coming of Poland’s Golden Age. Just a year

later almost nothing remained of that mood. In the fall of 2015, a conservative and nationalistic Law and Justice Party won parliamentary elections and formed a new government.

Although the majority by which the Law and Justice won was slim, it did not inhibit Jarosław Kaczyński, the party's leader to finally "have Budapest in Warsaw." By that he meant introduction of measures employed by Victor Orban in Hungary a few years earlier. The newly appointed Polish government waster very little time and duly put forward a series of bills aimed at either eroding or destroying democratic checks and balances. The Constitutional Court and the Supreme Court were neutered by appointments of the government-friendly judges. Public broadcasters were taken over and subsequently turned into crude propaganda machines. The new administration filled the civil service and various cultural institutions with party loyalists at the same time dismissing experienced specialists. Moreover, all these measures were unfolding against the backdrop of an escalating culture war. Government-friendly media and state officials started to instigate campaigns against immigrants, gays and people of Jewish descent. Manipulation of history and astounding tolerance for the exploits of the extreme-right became standard. All those developments put Polish government on the collision course with various European Union bodies and tarnished positive international image.

The triumph of the populist right in Poland came as a nasty surprise to many, not only in the West, but also in Poland. What seemed particularly disturbing was the fact that the illiberal turn was led by people involved in the former anti-communist opposition. The hitherto dominant whiggish account of a successful and straightforward transformation of the Eastern European states into stable democracies lost validity. The debate today gets further complicated by a dynamic political reality. The populist right in Poland marches from victory to victory, consolidates power and has a loyal electoral base. But unlike in Hungary, their victories are always narrow. As it was demonstrated in the recent Polish presidential elections, society

remains dramatically split, almost 50-50, into the supporters of the current course and those vehemently opposed to it.

In the present atmosphere it has become easy to forget many undeniable achievements of the last thirty years. By any standards, it is one of the best periods in Polish history. We have enjoyed peaceful coexistence with our neighbors and steady economic advance. All popular indicators show clear improvement for Poles throughout the period. Compared to 1990, in 2020 Polish people live longer,[1] seem much better educated[2] and earn more. Polish GDP increased two and a half times between 1989 and 2019 and the value of exports rose almost fourteen times. Household incomes doubled in thirty years, while Polish homes became larger and better equipped. There have been other crucial and measurable changes as well. While the crime rate went steadily down, the number of tourists and foreign students visiting Poland moved spectacularly up. Economic transformation has been accompanied by many noteworthy cultural achievements. In the last three decades Poles received two Nobel Prizes in literature (a poet Wisława Szymborska in 1996 and novelist Olga Tokarczuk in 2019) and managed to rebuilt its film industry. Poland has even proven capable of producing internationally appealing cultural trash, as demonstrated by a recent surprising popularity on Netflix of a Polish erotic drama *365 Days* (2020, dir. Barbara Białowąs).

The above-mentioned numbers and facts are conventionally recounted in various reports, summaries, academic studies and promotional materials about modern Poland. They stand in sharp contrast to the entire Polish experience of the 20th century. The Second World War marks a particularly low point. Apart from the enormous material losses, it is estimated that more than 6 million Poles died as a result of the conflict, including 3,2 million Polish Jews. Poland not only had its ethnic composition significantly altered, but even its geographical location shifted.

[1] Polish women live on average almost six years longer while Polish men almost eight years longer. Currently, the life expectancy in Poland for men is 74 and for women 82.
[2] In 1990, only 7% of the population had a university degree, today this number is above 30%.

In the wake of the Yalta Conference (1945) Polish borders were literally moved 250 kilometers to the West.

The positive data used to describe the last three decades of Polish history obviously conveys only a partial image. Many important nuances get obliterated or completely escape attention, making the recent illiberal turn in Polish politics almost impossible to understand. In fact, a more earnest debate on this issue has just begun. Its participants usually point towards psychological and emotional factors, including *ressentiment*, personal gripes or complexes. For example, the already mentioned Ann Applebaum in *Twilight of Democracy* blames the presumably less talented but ambitious right-wingers for the breakdown of Polish democracy. Unable to succeed in the inherently competitive and uncertain conditions of liberal democracy they turned to authoritarianism as the only way to wrench power from their former colleagues. Holmes and Krastev in *The Light that Failed* identify the humiliation inscribed in the "copycat Westernization," adopted by many Eastern European countries after the collapse of the Berlin wall. This model of modernization condemns them to the permanently subservient position. After all, a copy will forever remain a copy and by definition will never transcend to the status of the "original".

Appelbaum as well as Krastev and Holmes were primarily interested in specific mechanisms. However, there are more general causes for the present disillusionment with liberal democracy. They are quite predictable and boringly familiar. While in the last three decades in Poland many people have become visibly rich, significant sections of the population, especially those living in the countryside and in small towns, were condemned to life in poverty and curtailed horizons. Despite a steady rise of the average incomes, wages in Poland have remained low. Welfare provisions, health and education were often regarded by the successive governments as luxuries, therefore subject to permanent austerity measures and cost-cutting. In the end, while the economic indicators grew, the great dream that united Poles in their fight

against communism, catching up with the West, remained elusive for too many. Today, a worker in the neighboring Germany still earns at least three times more doing the same job than his or her counterpart in Poland. Those glaring and persistent discrepancies fueled mass emigration and explain why, despite the economic growth, Poland simultaneously experienced the biggest exodus of its citizens in history. Emigration became a particularly vivid hindrance after Poland's accession to the EU in 2004. When the borders opened, more than a million Poles moved to the West (to Britain, Ireland, Sweden and later France and Germany). Low wages and poor working conditions pushed millions out of the ostensibly thriving economy.

The contemporary Polish experience clearly emphasizes the dire consequences of tolerating inequality and income polarization. The failure to help the most disadvantaged eventually returned to haunt the ruling elites with a vengeance. The Polish case also confirms the role of dignity in politics today. The aspirations expressed by the majority of the Polish population could be purely material. However, they soon generated potent psychological reactions. The most toxic aspect of the neoliberal project was that apart from disproportionally rewarding and glorifying the winners, it indicated losers as solely responsible for their fate.

The decisive factor in the enduring electoral success of the present administration have been their social welfare initiatives. The "500+" program is the flagship policy of monthly cash handouts of 500 zloty (roughly 110 Euros) to families for each child below 18, with no conditions or questions asked. Similar financial benefits in the form of payments are offered to pensioners who additionally can enjoy subsidized medication and medical services. Those large income redistribution project, the first of that kind in 25 years since the transformation, proved predictably popular. They also created a new formidable voting bloc. Poorer and less educated Poles, especially living in the eastern provinces, were usually reluctant to vote. Today, even a vague hint that in the case of their victory the opposition would take back social provisions brings millions to the polling stations in support of the Law and Justice Party. And no amount

of denials and assurances from the opposition that it would not happen seems reassuring enough. Years of commitment to neoliberal policies, the cult of austerity and free-market solutions made the liberal opposition completely untrustworthy in the eyes of many Poles. In the reality of material exclusion such notions as the rule of law, checks and balances or even free speech sound meaningless.

Some of the problems of transformation have been related to the revolutionary zeal and strong anti-communist sentiments of the reformers. For a long time, admission of any positive achievements during the communist era in Poland was a taboo in public discourse. To a large extent, this is still the case. Although the war and then the communist rule eliminated many divisions, made society more urban and egalitarian, the Polish middle class, the chief beneficiary of those changes, finds it extremely hard to even acknowledge what happened. Andrzej Leder calls this phenomenon the "sleepwalked revolution". As he argues, the radical postwar shifts have been so effectively repressed in public consciousness because the Polish middle class had no agency it. The chief architects were Hitler and Stalin, and Poles merely inherited the landscape made by the two foreign despots. The new, post-war generation took over social positions and physical spaces vacated by the old Polish intelligentsia, landowning gentry and Jews who were either annihilated or forced into exile by the Nazis and Soviets.

A good illustration of this reluctance to acknowledge the earlier influences, particularly interesting in regard to the topic of our conference, is the contemporary condition of Polish women. Poland is distinguished in Europe as one of the most religious societies, with significant sections of the population declaring strong attachment to the Catholic Church and its teaching. Thus, one should expect that patriarchy in Poland is particularly strong and that the country should score rather low in comparative studies assessing gender equality, participation of women in politics or their involvement in business. But that is not the case. Although Poland is rarely a leader in those categories, it is usually closer to the top than the bottom. Thus, for

example, at 29,13% Poland is still far away from the leaders, Spain and Sweden (47,43% and 47,28% respectively) in the share of women serving in the national parliament. But at the same time Poland scores above Canada (26,95%), USA (23,56%) and Ireland (22,15%) and only slightly below Holland (31,33%), Great Britain (32%), Australia (30,46%) or Germany (30,89%). Out of the seventeen Polish prime ministers so far, three were women. There is a growing proportion of women ministers in almost each successfie cabinet. The two literary Nobel Prize winners for Poland are women.

Naturally, the numbers quoted above should not fool anyone into believing that Polish women enjoy a trouble-free existence. In fact, they still have to struggle with numerous barriers and prejudices. However, their problems are not significantly different than the problems faced by women in other European countries. At least part of the credit for the current condition should be granted to the communist period and communist women. Instead, most of the feminists prefer to think that feminism came to Poland from the West in 1989. Such a stance aptly illustrates the simplifications often involved in thinking about the transformation. Of course, many phenomena shaping contemporary Poland started in 1989, but at the same time other significant processes have much deeper roots and less agreeable genealogies.

Returning to the issue of women in Poland, it would be also disingenuous to claim there are no uniquely regional circumstances that shape the fate of women in Poland. Sociological data from the last decade show growing political engagement among women. Polish women participate in elections (both actively and passively) with increasing eagerness, and the growing number of them openly declares interest in politics. One of the most important recent phenomena responsible for drawing scores of women into political activism is the issue of abortion. Largely because of the political influence of the Catholic Church, Poland has one most restrictive abortion laws in Europe. Legal abortion is available only in three cases: when the fetus is afflicted by some serious genetic disorder or deformation, when pregnancy can

threaten the life of the mother, and when the pregnancy results from the rape. When in the fall of 2016, Polish parliament started to proceed on the law further curbing the already restrictive abortion legislation, hundreds of thousands of demonstrators all over Poland went to the streets to show their disapproval. This is how the so-called black marches started. They led to the abandonment of the notorious anti-abortion legislation. To this day, black marches remain the only instance when the current regime's plans were effectively blocked by a social movement. It should also be noted that not all Polish women are pro-choice. Many of them stand on the opposite side of the barricade. One of the main figures behind the restrictive proposal was a woman, Kaja Godek. She had solid support from almost all female members of parliament from the Law and Justice party, including the prime minister at that time (of course, also a woman), Beata Szydło.

Controversies connected with the attempts to restrict the reproductive rights in Poland became a catalyst for many women, particularly young, to get more politically active and sociological studies from recent years have revealed an intriguing polarization. While young men in Poland are more frequently attracted to nationalist and authoritarian agendas, young women turn increasingly in the opposite direction. They have become one of the most progressive and anti-authoritarian constituencies in Poland today.

After more than thirty years since the political transition, Poland has entered a critical period. It is difficult to say if the anti-populist, progressive forces will be able to halt the current drift towards illiberal democracy. We cannot be even sure if the next elections will be fair and free. However, several matters have become quite clear by now. The Polish example demonstrates that neoliberal policies, without larger consideration of their impact, hinder rather than fosters democracy. Poland also shows that when the large sections of the population are systematically marginalized and excluded, the backlash may be postponed for a long time, but

is inevitable. Looking at the contemporary Polish political landscape, we can see the significance of emotions, especially connected with humiliation and pride. They may derive from frustrated material aspirations but quickly crystalize into sturdy identities. Poland also shows that a concrete positive program, not just opposition to authoritarianism and xenophobia, is vital for the liberal forces if they think about returning to power. These are hardly new or particularly revealing insights. Politicians who founded what is today the European Union and who worked on the post-war reconstruction in Europe, knew them very well. We must now return to those roots.