

Negotiating Model of Democratic Transition: The Case of Poland

Zoran Jovović*

Faculty of Philosophy, University of Montenegro, Montenegro

Abstract

The paper examines the complex process of transition from a non-democratic communist regime to a democratic regime, and the consolidation of the government system in Poland. The specificity of the democratic transition in Poland, in relation to other transitions in Central and Eastern Europe, as it will be argued is reflected in the nature of the non-democratic regime, which was more authoritarian than (post)totalitarian. Hence, while the communist regime was in force in Poland (1945-1989), social pluralism managed to be preserved to the highest possible extent. Preserved social and political pluralism played a pivotal role in the successful transition process. Following Mikhail Gorbachev's ascent to power in the Soviet Union in 1985, the military-party regime in Poland opted for a negotiation-based approach known as the Round Table talks. This compromise marked the conclusion of the negotiations and led to the introduction of semi-free elections and a controlled democratic transition in Poland. The momentum of the process gained traction when the popular Solidarity movement emerged victorious over the ruling communist group during the semi-free elections of 1989. The provisions of the Agreement were upheld by both parties, ultimately making Poland the first country, since the Second World War, to initiate a peaceful overthrow through regular elections. Significantly, the Round Table Agreement introduced the concept of a robust president elected directly by the people, an observation affirmed and advocated in this study. It was Solidarity leader Lech Wałęsa who first assumed this influential position, marking a historic milestone in Poland's political landscape. The agreement's establishment of a directly elected strong president enhances the analytical structure and aligns with the study's conclusions.

Keywords: Catholic Church, Authoritarianism, Democratic Transition, Democratic Consolidation, Semi-Presidential System, Poland.

* Corresponding Author's Email: jovoviczoran70@gmail.com

Introduction

The concept of democratic transition means a transition from one to another, better state, that is, a transition (a transitional period) from a non-democratic to a democratic political regime. The complex process of democratic transition¹ begins when individuals who belong to the ruling structure of a non-democratic political regime – authoritarian, totalitarian, post-totalitarian, and sultanistic – begin to correct their rules of behavior and act in the direction of the development of all individual and collective rights and freedoms in the social system (Milardović, 2006; Darmanović, 2002). The process of transition commences with the gradual weakening or eventual collapse of a non-democratic political regime. Its fundamental objective is the establishment of a political system that prioritizes pluralism. Two distinct directions can be observed within the transition process: the forward direction, representing the shift from a non-democratic political regime to a democratic one, and the backward direction, characterized by the movement from a democratic political regime back to a non-democratic one. This latter direction is commonly referred to as a unidirectional or reverse transition (Vidojević, 1997). In the transitional period – the transition – new political and overall social relations are formed to expand and become necessary conditions for the functioning of the new political and, overall, new social system (Jovović, 2019; Jovović, 2018). The construction of the entire fabric of society, which strives for democracy, abandoning the undemocratic system, in the words of political strategist S. Andrijić (1996: 5) “must be done through the transition. In this process, starting from the existing system, the specific solutions found in each state community and the development level should be achieved, and the transition to a completely new system should be reached. This

1. According to Z. Vidojević (1997, pp. 10-11), the juxtaposition of the terms 'transformation' and 'transition' can be seen as artificial when considering that a system cannot transition into another unless all its essential elements undergo transformation. Furthermore, transformation itself implies the evolution into something different. Thus, both terms encompass the comprehensive and multidimensional nature of changes. When understood in this context, they essentially carry the same meaning. Nevertheless, while not being synonymous, the words 'transformation' (from something into something) and 'transition' (from something into something) share a similar significance.

requires the transition of the political, state [...] and social system, and, well, let us freely say, that first of all this requires the transition in the 'heads' of the nation” .

The primary objective of this paper is to examine the transition from a non-democratic regime to a democratic one, with a specific focus on the distinctive features of both political systems within the context of Poland. The investigation encompasses various factors that contribute to or hinder a successful transition from one state to another. Firstly, it is argued that the origins of the democratic transition stem from a more authoritarian environment, even though there were underlying totalitarian tendencies. Secondly, the preservation of a certain degree of social and political pluralism during the communist era (1945-1989) played a pivotal role in facilitating the democratic transition within Polish society. This pertains primarily to the autonomy of the Catholic Church and the intelligentsia comprising the scientific community. Thirdly, the significance of the Solidarity movement in initiating the transition process cannot be overlooked, with prominent figures such as Lech Wałęsa and other leaders and groups playing crucial roles. Moreover, the authoritarian regime was characterized by a predominant presence of party loyalists, leading to a transition primarily driven by negotiated agreements. Furthermore, it is posited that the establishment of a semi-presidential system, under the leadership of a charismatic figure, engendered a sense of ambivalence within the political landscape. Overcoming this ambivalence was essential for Poland to embark on the process of consolidating democracy. In the pursuit of comprehending the transition from an undemocratic, authoritarian regime to a democratic one in Poland, as well as the consolidation of the government system, this study employs the comparative method and utilizes content analysis as a research methodology.

Democratic Transition and Consolidation in Poland

Poland, unlike other post-communist countries, witnessed a unique scenario during its democratic transition. Instead of a post-totalitarian regime, it was an authoritarian regime that embarked on this intricate journey towards democracy. The process itself included the active involvement of various political entities, shaping its course through negotiations conducted at the renowned Round Table. As the

democratic transition took root, Poland experienced simultaneous economic growth, sparking a wave of excitement among its citizens. Tackling the challenges associated with embracing a market economy became a pressing matter, prompting careful consideration and fueling the enthusiasm permeating throughout the nation (Jovović, 2018). This exceptional aspect of Poland's transformation sets it apart from its post-communist counterparts, serving as a testament to the country's distinctive path towards democracy and economic prosperity.

The leadership in post-communist Poland, including the radical finance minister Leszek Balcerowicz, wholeheartedly embraced the swift implementation of a market economy upon assuming power. This enthusiastic acceptance of economic reforms immediately after the transfer of authority set the tone for the country's transformation. In a study conducted in 2003, the authors go so far as to suggest that Poland, under the leadership of the radical Finance Minister Leszek Balcerowicz, quickly gained a reputation within Central and Eastern Europe as a country undergoing economic "shock therapy" (Drajzek and Holms, 2003:218). The authors continue by stating that Balcerowicz accepted a vivid – albeit harsh – metaphor, "although a cat's tail should be cut off anyway, it hurts less if it is done at once and not a little every day." Initially, this therapy resulted in a sharp increase in inflation and unemployment, with negative economic growth, making shock therapy appear to be a risky bet. However, Poland experienced a turnaround in economic performance earlier than any other country in Central and Eastern Europe, prompting supporters of shock therapy to defend its merits by the late 1990s (Drajzek and Holms, 2003:218).

Similarly, the Catholic Church in Poland played a significant role in the transition from an undemocratic to a democratic regime. It managed to maintain its autonomy, a key indicator of social pluralism, and successfully distanced itself from the existing communist government. In fact, it is believed that even the communist government itself was afraid of the church (Linc and Stepan, 1998). The existence of social pluralism was evident in a crucial realm of society: Polish agriculture. The process of nationalization in agriculture, carried out through labor cooperatives or groupings, was notably slow, even during the Stalinist era. The well-established

tradition of the village cooperative allowed for the relatively easy preservation of independent and private farms, despite the collectivization of agricultural goods—a fundamental aspect of communist rule. In Polish society, "private and independent farms never accounted for less than 70 percent of total property. This serves as both an indication of limited penetration and a testament to the social strength and independence beyond the grasp of a totalitarian state" (Linc and Stepan, 1998: 310). Furthermore, the significance of the Catholic Church in Polish society extended beyond its role in preventing the establishment of complete undemocratic communist rule. It continued to hold great importance in the introduction of democracy not only in Poland, but also in other societies of Central and Eastern Europe.

According to Ivan Berend (2001), Polish society is predominantly Catholic, with approximately 96 percent of the population identifying as Catholics. The Catholic Church is closely associated with the Polish nation and holds significant integrity, prestige, and recognition. Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński was the head of the Catholic Church in Poland, and his role became crucial when Władysław Gomułka came to power, as Wyszyński became an important partner in the stabilization process. The political autonomy of the Catholic Church served as a potent counterbalance to the ideological and political activities of the party-state and ultimately prevailed. Despite the significant concessions made by Gomułka to gain popularity, Polish state socialism never achieved even temporary legitimacy (Berend, 2001: 145- 146). In Poland, Catholic organizations played a more prominent role compared to other societies in Central and Eastern Europe. The compromise reached by Gomułka in 1956 led to the establishment of the magazine *Znak*, which became a vital Catholic publication. The Catholic Church had numerous publishing ventures, producing nearly one and a half million printed copies of eighty-nine different newspapers and magazines. These organizations and publications played a significant role in shaping the Catholic opposition. Notably, until 1976, the "Znak movement also had five representatives in the *Sejm*., which was almost akin to an opposition party in all of Eastern Europe (Bugajski and Pollack, 1989, 146, as cited in Berend, 2001: 285- 286). The pivotal position and role of the Catholic Church in the transition are evident.

Particularly noteworthy are its contributions to freedom of expression, freedom of the press (reflected in its extensive publishing efforts), and the fostering of civil society with elements of political opposition. These factors distinguish Polish society from other societies in Central and Eastern Europe. Furthermore, the Catholic Church played a major role in the gradual “disintegration,, of the undemocratic communist regime (Berend, 2001).

The communist regime in Poland was imposed coercively. However, certain sectors managed to maintain their independence. Despite its imposition, the communist regime in Poland failed to establish complete dominance, unlike in other societies in Central and Eastern Europe. In addition to the previously mentioned independence of the Catholic Church and the attention turned to agriculture, the Polish army as an organization had a pronounced patriotic line. Also, higher education’s intelligence – science – was anti-systemic “or emigrated after establishing the pro-Soviet regime” (Darmanović, 2002: 139). The mentioned elements, which indicate the presence of social pluralism, encompassing the church's autonomy and the intelligentsia, played a significant role in Poland's extraordinary path to existence by effectively "assembling civil society from opposition elements." In the face of the authoritative communist regime, the essence of resistance relied heavily on civil society, since opposition parties, a crucial aspect of political culture, were never officially allowed or even informally tolerated (Linc and Stepan, 1998: 315-316). The existence of civil society stands as a pivotal factor in the transition's completion and the consolidation of democracy. Polish society in Central and Eastern Europe is recognizable by numerous and, at the same time, mass strikes (first in 1956, then in 1968, 1970, 1971, 1976, and 1980). Thus, in 1970, there were an incredible thousand strikes in Poland, all due to the dissatisfaction of the working population. Although massive and at the same time recognizable outside the borders of Poland, the strikes failed to cause major upheavals on the socio-political stage. This was the case until 1980 when the trade union movement 'Solidarity' was officially formed, which caused the desired upheavals on the socio-political stage in Poland. At the very beginning, it had ten million members. Lech Wałęsa was at the head of this trade union movement. He was an

electrician by profession and was 37 years old when he took office. He had a great charisma that was simply a “magnet” for attracting the masses. Solidarity in Polish politics, as Ivan Berend (2001: 303) acknowledges, was essentially a collection of diverse anti-regime elements, but it also served as a united front in those circumstances.

With the strengthening of the popular trade union movement Solidarity, the communist government subsequently weakened by controlling only specific segments of Polish society, both formally and informally. However, significant changes took place in 1981. Completely distanced from the Communist Party, General Wojciech Witold Jaruzelski said that a state of emergency had been imposed in the society and that a new body of the Military Council of National Salvation had been constituted throughout Poland.¹ Given the fact that Jaruzelski was a soldier and that the ministers, those “most important” individuals, were the party’s soldiers, the Communist Party (all the individuals who made it) realized that it had lost the critical position and role in society. From 1981 to 1989, Polish society was run by the army as an organization – Wojciech Witold Jaruzelski was the Prime Minister and served as Minister of the Army (Linc and Stepan, 1998). Jaruzelski’s leadership was focused on reforms in the system and was very close to the new Kremlin leader. According to Berend (2001), in addition to Jaruzelski’s leadership, “the opening of the system by Gorbachev dealt a final blow to the Polish regime, which could no longer justify remaining in power, not even to its elite. All this led to the last phase of complete disintegration and apathy.” During that period, the process of liberalization was initiated by Wojciech Witold Jaruzelski, and Solidarity emerged as an influential political player. Alongside the military and Solidarity, the security service and the Soviet-affiliated party, as well as the powerful Catholic Church, both in Poland and in other European societies, actively participated in the political landscape (Jovović, 2018).

During the liberalization process, political prisoners were released, creating more space for independent action by individuals and social groups. Guarantees were made for individual and group freedoms,

1. Wojciech Witold Jaruzelski, general, never mentioned the Communist Party, nor did he label it as a “separate” party, but defined himself as “a soldier and head of the Polish government” (Linc and Stepan, 1998: 318).

including freedom of expression and association. Civil society experienced a renewal, with increased activism from political opposition. Public censorship in Poland was also reduced, as mentioned by Samuel Huntington (2004). The autonomous Catholic Church similarly played a crucial role in Poland's liberalization, distributing newspapers and magazines and actively supporting civil society's development. This development encouraged active citizenship and participation in politics, as described by G. Almond and S. Verba (2000), where citizens were urged to engage, discuss, and support democratic values. Moreover, the Catholic Church played a significant role in spreading the ideas of the Solidarity movement. There were touching scenes of workers protesting, kneeling, and praying to God Jesus Christ. Pope John Paul II's inspiring statement, "Do not be afraid, our nation is waking up, and other nations are waking up", resonated not only within Poland but also beyond its borders. According to Berend (2001), the Pope's contribution to overthrowing communism and establishing democracy was estimated to be 50 percent.

In contrast to countries like Yugoslavia and Romania, Poland did not have a dominant figure like Josip Broz Tito or Nicolae Ceausescu prior to the transition period. This can be attributed to the frequent changes in general secretaries within the Communist Party in Poland. The significance of this is evident in its direct influence on the course of the round-table negotiations. The presence of a strong political opposition in Polish society provided a serious counterpart for the ruling party to engage in meaningful discussions during the Round Table talks.

When Wojciech Witold Jaruzelski was the prime minister, together with his government, he managed to achieve certain successes, especially in the system of economy and agriculture (Berend, 2001). Inflation was significantly reduced (16-17 percent). In 1986, Poland faced a severe economic crisis, and despite being under a mild military dictatorship, the government did not resort to using force to maintain its hold on power. Interestingly, despite facing persistent financial challenges, a majority of the citizens shared a common belief: the assumption of power by Wojciech Witold Jaruzelski and other groups of soldiers was the sole and most effective measure to

safeguard the society against a potential Soviet invasion. The declaration of a state of emergency was primarily regarded as a patriotic act of self-defense. .

From 1987 to 1988, the opposition became more active, so the existing authoritarian regime faced several problems. In addition, the economic system at the time was not stable and did not work very well (frequent crises) and that it was necessary to make certain changes. Thus, Jaruzelski and his associates drafted a proposal of economic changes and submitted it to a referendum in mid-1987. However, it was not accepted. This unexpected defeat in the elections was a prominent political and social event that resonated outside Poland and meant nothing more than a drastic decline in the power of the authoritarian regime. In May 1988, “Solidarity strikes were initiated by a new generation of younger and more militant trade unionists. In a sense, Jaruzelski, as a moderate figure of the regime and Walesa, as the figure in the opposition, faced their radical elements. Later, there was a classic game with four players in the process of transition (regime radicals, moderate currents in the regime, moderates in the opposition, and radical elements in the opposition)” (Linc and Stepan, 1998: 321). Lech Walesa begins to use stronger rhetoric, looking back to an earlier period. Tolerance started spreading in society towards those who were thinking differently, criticism was not stifled, and Walesa was gaining the masses with his memorable speeches, which emphasized that Central and Eastern Europe, and Poland with them, are moving fast towards democracy.

At the beginning of the summer of 1988, general Kiszczak, acting Minister of the Interior, proposed to Lech Walesa initial talks, which Walesa agreed to on July 21, while on August 26, during the second wave of strikes, Jaruzelski proposed a Politburo meeting negotiation with Solidarity” (Linc and Stepan, 1998: 321). The talks among the key factors that participated in the government took place at the Round Table. The talks lasted from February 6 to April 5, 1989, and in addition to the roundtable talks, most of those more sensitive discussions took place in the Magdalen Palace. The results of the Round Table negotiations were (Darmanović, 2002) as follows: to legalize Solidarity, the government sought the participation of the political opposition in the elections; the opposition accepted the

proposal, which means that Solidarity became legalized. The current government submitted an agreement on the legalization of Solidarity; Solidarity leaders were to participate in the elections, which was to take place in peace, without any obstacles; the polls were to provide a majority of seats in the parliament for the Liberal Party and the Peasants' Party, and a minority for Solidarity; the hunger strikes were to be stopped; the office of president was to be introduced. The political opposition accepted almost all the proposals, but the proposal related to the function of the president. Following the initial rejection of the proposal, the government persisted and submitted a revised version, which focused on the reintroduction of the second house, known as the Senate, in the parliament, called the *Sejm*. Crucially, the government also emphasized that elections for the lower house would now be conducted freely. This time, the proposal managed to gain acceptance from the opposition, marking a significant development in terms of compromise and cooperation. The fluidity of the situation allowed for a more inclusive and democratic parliamentary structure to take shape, fostering a sense of progress and responsiveness to the concerns of different political factions(*Sejm*).

The famous Polish Round Table concluded with a final agreement, encompassing key elements such as the legalization of Solidarity and its associated structures, including peasant and youth organizations. The agreement aimed to enable these structures to operate freely within the newly established democratic order (Linz and Stepan, 1998; Berend, 2001; Darmanović, 2002; Dreisek and Holmes, 2003: 217; Jovović, 2018). It emphasized the importance of securing free action and expression while operating within the prescribed framework of the democratic system. Additionally, measures were proposed to swiftly address the prevailing economic crisis. The agreement also paved the way for the organization and conduct of "semi-free" parliamentary elections on June 4 and 18, 1989. However, the division of seats in the Parliament (*Sejm*), where decisions were made, was proposed to be uncompetitive. This meant that out of the total 460 seats in the *Sejm*, the Communists and their allies would hold the majority (approximately 65 percent), while the opposition would represent the minority (around 35 percent). Crucially, the agreement ensured that the elections for the Senate, the second house of the

Parliament, would be absolutely free and feature a competitive division of seats. Moreover, the division of seats in the overall assembly, including both parliamentary houses, was carefully structured to support the eventual introduction and verification of the institution of the president. In summary, the final agreement reached at the Polish Round Table brought forth the legalization of Solidarity, guaranteed fundamental freedoms, addressed economic challenges, and provided a roadmap for parliamentary and presidential developments.

The time interval in which all the previously mentioned elements of the agreement were to be realized was also determined: semi-free elections were to be held in June 1989; with no organization and holding of hunger strikes (two years in total); four (4) years were to elapse after the parliamentary elections to allow for new elections to be held; the presidential term was to last six (6) years (Darmanović, 2002).

During the Round Table discussions, extensive deliberations centered around defining the role and powers of the president in Polish society. Initially, there were disagreements, but eventually, through amendments to the constitution, these powers were verified at the assembly session. As a result, the president assumed the position as both the president of Polish society and the president of the Committee of National Salvation, representing Poland abroad. The president was bestowed with significant powers, including the authority to propose the candidate for the Prime Minister of Polish society and request their removal. The president also had the ability to declare a state of emergency, which would initially last for three months and could be renewed if necessary (Linz and Stepan, 1998). Furthermore, the president's responsibilities extended to nominating the President of the National Bank of Poland. Additionally, the president possessed the ability to convene sessions of the executive branch, specifically the government, particularly for critical matters. In matters of foreign policy, the president's powers included ratifying international agreements, regularly publishing them, appointing Polish representatives (diplomats) abroad, and receiving foreign diplomats in Poland (Boban, 2007). The significance of the Round Table talks in Polish history cannot be overstated. The name itself signifies the equal standing of the opposing factions and the spirit of goodwill in

reaching compromises. These negotiations between the communist apparatus and the unprecedented workers marked the initiation of the transformation of Poland's political and economic order. The ensuing reforms served as the foundation for the restoration of democracy in the country (Szafraniec, 2008: 67).

Parliamentary elections were held (as foreseen by the final agreement reached at the Round Table) in June 1989. "Opposition candidates for the minority part (35 percent) of the seats in the *Sejm* received about 16.5 million votes, while only about 9.1 million voters voted for the communist candidates for the majority part (65 percent) of the seats. *Sejm* And, where free elections for the Senate were held, Solidarity won 99 out of 100 seats!" (Darmanović, 2002: 145). The June results of the parliamentary elections were a surprise for everyone, both for the position and the opposition and society. The Communists did not get the thirty-three seats that belonged to them based on the initialed Agreement because Solidarity, although at first willing to abide by the Agreement, later withdrew from it. However, Solidarity's victory in the elections was convincing; it was historic. Thanks to the opposition in the parliament, Wojciech Witold Jaruzelski became the President of Poland (Darmanović, 2002: 145). He had to accept Tadeusz Mazowiecki (Solidarity candidate), who was to perform the function of the Prime Minister. He was the first prime minister who was not a communist. "Although the Agreement specifically mentions a coalition government, with a communist president and a communist majority in the *Sejm*, it was only a matter of time before Solidarity took full power" (Berend, 2001: 312).

The assertion put forth by Linz and Stepan (1998) that Solidarity, a movement that garnered substantial popularity and the support of the Polish populace, and which received endorsement from Pope John Paul II, emphasizes the active embrace of democratic transition based on mutual agreement. In parallel, the Polish communist regime peacefully relinquished its authority through negotiations conducted with Solidarity's leaders. The peaceful transfer of power and the negotiation process between the communist regime and Solidarity leaders played a pivotal role in shaping the course of Poland's political landscape. This historical event exemplifies a notable instance in which two divergent factions, with divergent interests and ideological

perspectives, reached a consensus on the principles and mechanisms of democratic transition. The recognition of the need for compromise and mutual understanding was a fundamental aspect of this transformative process. Moreover, the involvement and support of Pope John Paul II added significant moral and religious weight to the movement and its objectives. The endorsement of the Pope served as a unifying force and contributed to the legitimacy and credibility of Solidarity's aspirations for democratic governance. The peaceful negotiations and mutual agreements between Solidarity and the communist regime not only facilitated the transfer of political power but also symbolized a departure from the authoritarian era and marked the initiation of a new chapter in Poland's political and social history. This pivotal event ultimately laid the groundwork for the subsequent establishment and consolidation of democratic principles and institutions in the country. Thus, the observations made by Linz and Stepan (1998) resonate with the historical significance and transformative nature of the peaceful negotiations and mutual agreements between Solidarity and the Polish communist regime, leading to a successful transition towards democracy in Poland.

The democratic transition in Poland, in addition to being amicable, indeed ended peacefully—and thus launched a wave of freedom that shook the whole of Eastern Europe and led to the collapse of the Berlin Wall, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the end of more than forty years of communist rule in this part of the world” (Szafraniec, 2008: 67). In 1990, the constitution was amended at a parliamentary session, and it clearly defined that the president of Poland would be elected exclusively in elections for a full five years. This ended a transitional phase in which the president was not elected through elections and held office for six years. This phase has lasted since 1989. The period from 1989 to 1990 was marked by both “parliamentarism and semi-presidentialism: there was a dual structure of executive power and a fixed term for the president who was not politically accountable to parliament, but he was not elected in general elections but parliament. In addition, after the defeat of the Communists in the June 1989 parliamentary elections and the formation of the first non-communist government in Eastern Europe, President Jaruzelski refrained from fully exercising his constitutional

powers, and Prime Minister Tadeusz Mazowiecki became the leader of the executive branch” (Boban, 2007: 67).

During the transitional phase in Poland, as outlined in the previous constitution, the country operated under a hybrid system that blended elements of both semi-presidential and parliamentary systems. However, in practice, it leaned more towards a parliamentary system. In the 1990 presidential election, Lech Walesa emerged victorious, succeeding Wojciech Witold Jaruzelski, who had resigned from office. Notably, Walesa fully exercised the powers vested in him by the Constitution, as noted by D. Boban (2007).

After winning the parliamentary elections in June 1989, Solidarity began to weaken. The weakening was contributed to by divisions within Solidarity and by the reckless, non-political decisions of its leader Lech Walesa. These divisions created many political parties, which wanted to participate in the following elections as independent political entities. The extent to which Solidarity weakened was shown by the convincing victory in the 1993 parliamentary elections of the coalition of the Democratic Left (former communists and allies) and in 1995 when Alexander Kwasniewski, a former communist, ran and won the presidential election. Lech Walesa, despite not prioritizing the enrichment of his political role or the strengthening of Solidarity, made a significant apolitical choice. He chose to distance himself from the political society, which represents the interests of individuals and social groups, and instead assumed the role of a people's tribune within Polish civil society (Linc and Stepan, 1998). In Solidarity, as a whole, the relationship between Lech Walesa and Tadeusz Mazowiecki by the early 1990s gradually began to deteriorate. An indicator was when Tadeusz Mazowiecki decided to form a government without consulting Lech Walesa. Concurrently, Lech Walesa made another wrong step in the key political institutions of Polish society – the legislature and the executive- which is the illusion of striving for new parliamentary elections, which would be free. This is his second apolitical decision. The Communist Party, a partner at the Round Table, was dissolved in January 1990, while Lech Walesa expressed his desire to run for president of Poland, which he did. There was a possibility that both the presidential and parliamentary elections could be held simultaneously (in fall 1990), but this did not

happen. Members of Solidarity in the *Sejm* and the government sought to prolong the parliamentary elections. This aspiration provoked even bigger divisions in Solidarity. Both leaders, Walesa and Mazowiecki, ran in the presidential election. Walesa represented civil society (Solidarity as a movement), while Mazowiecki stood for political society (Solidarity in parliament, government, and around the government) defeating Lech Walesa in 1990 (Linz and Stepan, 1998).

Lech Walesa made decisions that simultaneously threatened Solidarity and democracy in Polish society (in 2017 he was even accused of collaborating with the secret police during the communist regime). His behavior, his strategy, his ambitions, and above all, how he saw himself (whether as an inviolable charismatic leader or something else) stemmed from the “very nature of Solidarity, as a political movement. Solidarity, in a decade-long struggle with the ruling communist regime, had developed a culture and methods of action, called ‘*anti-political policy*.’ It is, in fact, about rejecting the state and government as an instrument of change and developing an alternative culture of resistance and civic autonomy about the state. ‘The policy of anti-politics’ is a symbol of the magnificent resistance of various enclaves of Polish civil society in the fight against the communist regime and, following Michnik’s slogan ‘we live as if we were free,’ was perhaps the only possible pacifist way of fighting in Poland” (Darmanović, 2002: 147) that could have been effective.

Although Lech Walesa won the 1990 presidential election, it is important to note that the percentage of votes he received was not at the appropriate level, while in the second round, he received 74.3 percent with a turnout of 53.4 percent. Despite these results, which clearly show what individuals and groups in Polish society think of Lech Walesa’s “politics” or “non-politics,” he continued to act as if nothing had happened – he continued to view himself as an influential, charismatic leader who, as such, was above political institutions – political parties and parliament. Differentiated conflicts between Lech Walesa (non-partisan president) and the prime minister, which concerned differentiated political and social issues, influenced Lech Walesa’s decision to announce ‘that he would address the *Sejm* with a demand for greater rights for the president, as the Prime Minister would become subordinate to him, as in the French system ... ’He

further stated that after the experience that Poland had gone through, there was probably a consensus that it was best for the country to get a government above the parties, a government that will bring together experts” (Linz and Stepan, 1998: 338). Such actions by Lech Walesa, the differentiated conflicts between Walesa and his former close colleagues, and the essential divisions in Solidarity significantly affected the process of democratic consolidation in terms of whether democratic consolidation in Poland was to be slowed down or accelerated.

Poland’s social and political situation has changed significantly since the 1993 parliamentary elections and the 1995 presidential elections. The Communist Party was transformed into a coalition of the democratic left, filled with democratic content, absolutely accepted the rules of the democratic competition and democratic functioning, and, as such, overcame other political parties in the Polish party and political system, i.e., won the most votes in parliamentary elections (20, 41 percent). The Coalition of the Democratic Left became the best organized political party in Poland, with “150,000 members” (Dreisek and Holmes, 2003: 219). However, their victory did not have much of an impact, as it was thought, on political and even economic reform. In the next elections, in 1997, they lost, “and the coalition of electoral action of conservative nationalist Solidarity and the Liberal Union of Freedom” (Dreisek and Holmes, 2003: 219) came to power in 2001 (new parliamentary elections), when the coalition of the Democratic Left and the Workers’ Alliance joined and managed to win. Together, they received 42 percent of the vote (Milardović, 2006). Alexander Kwasniewski won the 1995 presidential election. Although a consolidated majority government was created at that time, and a “period of presidentialism” was to begin, Aleksandar Kwasniewski had a different style of government than Lech Walesa (Boban, 2007: 72). Until the 1995 elections, Aleksandar Kwasniewski served as the president of the Constitutional Commission, advocating for a reduction in presidential powers. However, upon assuming office, he underwent a change in his stance, advocating for an increase in presidential powers, albeit only partially. He displayed a greater

willingness to seek consensus with other authorities compared to his predecessor (Boban, 2007: 72).

In the subsequent 2001 presidential election, Aleksandar Kwasniewski emerged victorious with a convincing mandate. During his tenure in Poland until December 23, 2005, both left and right-wing governments alternated in power. Despite the challenges encountered, especially by countries situated in the center or semi-periphery of the global system, Poland successfully achieved the consolidation of democracy. A key aspect of this consolidation was the adherence of both state and non-state entities throughout the country to established legal frameworks, procedures, and institutions for conflict resolution, as shaped by the new democratic process (Linz and Stepan, 1998). This was exemplified by the victory of Lech Alexander Kaczynski, the Mayor of Warsaw, in the presidential elections held in October 2005. Following the adoption of a new constitution, Poland maintains a semi-presidential system. However, significant changes have occurred in the internal dynamics and relationships among the branches of the government. Notably, there are now four key elements shaping the dual structure of executive power: two distinct poles of executive authority, one vested in the head of state and the other in the prime minister. Additionally, the president possesses substantial constitutional powers (Boban, 2007: 72). Furthermore, both the government and the prime minister now bear responsibility to the assembly, signifying an important shift in their accountability.

Conclusion

The well-known strategy of drawing in negotiations between the position and the opposition at the famous Round Table was also valid for the Polish transition. It was also a pioneering endeavor in the transition societies of Central and Eastern Europe. Along with the negotiations and the drawing strategy, the idea of elections to be semi-free was verified. Thus, the transition process is rigidly controlled by political groups in the system of government (Jovović, 2018). The powerful Solidarity movement, recognizable beyond the borders of Poland, contributed to the defeat of the communist party in the semi-free elections of 1989.

The democratic transition in Polish society, as in other societies in Central and Eastern Europe, had its specifics. They refer to the nature of an undemocratic regime, more authoritarian than post-totalitarian. As discussed in the study the first political regime had its shortcomings, hence the need to start the transition. The initiation implied the modification of the old and the adoption of the new constitution, as well as the transformation of political institutions into new, democratic political institutions. It was particularly important in the network between political institutions to regulate their relations, i.e., among those who make them up. More precisely, it was necessary to regulate the relations between state authorities, i.e., political institutions – executive, legislative and judicial authorities. All this required the constitution of an appropriate type of government system. The popularity of the democratic transition in Poland, among other transitions in Central and Eastern Europe, was contributed by the agreements, the Catholic Church, the Solidarity movement, and the charismatic persona of its leader Lech Walesa, who, among other political leaders and political groups, was the initiator of the opening issue, thus closing the already complex transition process. The constituted semi-presidential system also contributed to the stability of the political system in the post-transition period. It refers to democratic consolidation, which implies strengthening political institutions and systems as a whole and relations in the network of social relations and positions.

The democratic transition in Poland has been a prolonged and complex process, characterized by a retention of certain powers by the ruling regime. The delay in consolidation can be attributed to the pivotal role played by a strong, directly elected president, as outlined in the Round Table Agreements. Interestingly, this function was not assumed by any member of the former regime but rather by Lech Walesa, the leader of Solidarity, when he assumed the position of head of state (Darmanović, 2002: 150). During his tenure, strained relations emerged between the prime minister and the assembly, primarily due to the apolitical decisions made by President Walesa on two specific occasions. These decisions caused tensions and further complicated the dynamics within the political landscape.

The rise of Solidarity, along with the influence of the Catholic Church, and the later participation of various political parties in elections, played a significant role in bringing about a successful transition and establishing a stable party system in Poland. This party system now functions as an integral part of the overall political structure. The attainment of social and political consensus among diverse actors, along with the establishment of democratic institutions, has led to the consolidation of democracy. This can be observed through the well-known democratic equation, which emphasizes the importance of free, fair, and secret ballots, as well as the separation of powers among the legislative, executive, and judicial branches. Hence, Poland has arguably achieved a solid foundation for its electoral democracy.

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