

FROM OPEN DOORS TO A CLOSED SOCIETY

by *Włodzimierz Cimoszewicz*

On June 4, 1989 – on the same day that students died in Tiananmen Square – parliamentary elections were held in Poland. For the first time, real opposition candidates were allowed to participate. The resulting opposition-led government opened the door to historical changes in the country and beyond. The 2004 accession to the European Union caused waves of optimism and faith in a good future. Today however, a deeply divided Poland is struggling to cope with the social challenges and changes of the past decades. The current government presents a real threat to democracy.

After several waves of strikes, the government had negotiated the organisation of the 1989 elections with the trade union *Solidarność* (Solidarity) that had led the protests. For the first time in the Soviet camp, a government negotiated with the opposition and agreed on the possibility of its representatives joining the parliament. The trade union participated in the elections and received 35% of the votes. The Solidarity-led coalition government emanating from these elections opened the door to historical changes in Poland – and beyond.

The country decided on radical political and economic changes. The economic situation was dire, and people were willing to accept anything. Expectations were high and naive. Almost nobody realised the inevitable social costs that were to come.

Politically, the system was democratised without any troubles. The economic therapy, however, quickly began to bring painful

results in the form of a decreased GDP and hugely increased unemployment. The privatisation of the state sector took people by surprise, but at the same time, in a very short time, two million small private companies were established. Poland turned decisively to the West and consistently strived to join NATO and the EU in following years.

In 2019, we have been a member of the military alliance for 20 years and a member of the European Union for 15. In both cases, membership is supported by a majority of the population. The economy has not been in recession for 30 years, the unemployment rate of roughly 6% is very low, and people's prosperity has grown significantly. For the longest time, the Polish transformation seemed an undisputed success story.

Suddenly, however, in recent years, the situation has changed dramatically. Four years ago, a large part of voters believed in the slogan "Poland in Ruins" and handed political power to the radical right-wing 'Law

and Justice' party (PiS). Ever since, election after election, the PiS remains strong and the democratic opposition is in trouble.

The reformers of previous governments failed to notice at the right time that the state had become rich enough to intensify help for the poorer citizens. Populism, demagoguery, intolerance and xenophobia have found their place. The undoubted error of the previous pro-European governments was the lack of any noticeable and credible programme for the country, and especially for the young and well-educated generation, leading to an alienation of these groups of voters. Poland is today an internally crippled country, deeply divided between the city and the countryside, between the higher and lower educated, the more and less religious, the rich and poor.

Polls indicate that democracy, the rule of law and individual freedoms, are important to about 30-40% of the population, but they seem not to matter much to another, equally



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| June 4th 2016, Demonstration in Cracow to celebrate the anniversary of the first free election in 1989 in Poland.

large part of society. At the same time, politics has lost its importance in the eyes of half of society that is doing well, oblivious to the danger of political regression. Politicians from the centre and the left, who ruled most of the time after 1989, either left or ceased to be convincing for the majority. They also lost their previous enthusiasm and strong motivation to act. The conservative right on the other side, has managed to activate a previously silent part of society.

In the European elections, participation has doubled – but voters provided another victory to the ruling party. This new victory is largely the consequences of costly social transfers, the use of public television for unprecedented government propaganda – defending the Catholic Church, however embattled in paedophilia scandals it might be – and an aggressive anti-LGBT rhetoric. The numerous scandals undermining the credibility of the rulers however, and their evident lack of professionalism in creating laws and conducting foreign policy, have not affected in any noticeable way voters' support for the 'Law and Justice' party.

In Poland – as elsewhere – the wider context of deep global geopolitical, technological and cultural changes matters too. The pace,

complexity and scale of these changes have created a sense of uncertainty and confusion. The psychological effect of long-term changes seems to have pushed many citizens to mythologise the past, instead of embracing a future that seems increasingly uncertain.

Many have problems with adapting to the new way of life and end up seeking security in the identification with a sense of community. And that's what the demagogues happily provide – but it's a community of the crowd, rather than the community of a democratic society. Added to the attempts to manipulate democratic societies from the outside – with money and internet activity – the risk of for democracy and European integration appears to be very high.

30 years after the first free elections and 15 years after the historic enlargement of the European Union, causing waves of optimism and faith in a good future, we now face the necessity of a much more active defence of the European Union itself, but even more of the values and principles upon which it was built.

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> **AUTHOR**

Włodzimierz Cimoszewicz was the Prime Minister of Poland from 1996 to late 1997, the Foreign Minister (2001–2005) and the speaker of the lower chamber of the Polish parliament from January to October 2005.