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THE BITTER-SWEET TASTE OF VICTORY PAULINA CODOGNI

WYBORY CZERWCOWE 1989 ROKU.
U PROGU PRZEMIANY
USTROJOWEJ.

Warsaw: Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, 2012

Abstract

This paper outlines Paulina Codogni's book on the process and political occurrences of the parliamentary elections in 1989 in Poland, that led to decomposition of the Communist political order, and democratic transition.

Keywords: The 1989 elections in Poland, the June elections, political transformation, political change in Poland, opposition in the Polish People's Republic

As a result of the agreements reached at the Round Table, the authorities of the Polish People's Republic agreed to re-legalise the Independent Self-Governing Trade Union "Solidarity" (NSZZ Solidarność), which took place on 17 April 1989. Three days later, on 20 April, the activities of the Independent Self-Governing Trade Union "Solidarity" of Individual Farmers were also formally legalised. At the same time, the Communist authorities agreed to limit their dominance in the media. This led to the emergence of new opposition-related information initiatives in the public sphere: on 28 April, Polish Radio began broadcasting "Studio Wyborcze Solidarność" (Solidarity Election Studio), and on 9 May, a similar initiative was launched on Polish Television. The day before, the first issue of *Gazeta Wyborcza*, the press organ of the opposition, was published, and on 2 June, *Tygodnik Solidarność* reappeared (the first issue appeared on 3 April 1981, published by NSZZ Solidarność; between 13 December 1981 and 1 June 1989, the publication of the magazine was suspended by the authorities of the Polish People's Republic).

The most groundbreaking and indeed the most important achievement of the Round Table was the communist authorities' agreement to hold partially free parliamentary elections. The communists were motivated by a desire to share political responsibility for the upcoming economic reforms and the country's deteriorating economic situation. At the same time, the electoral system was secured by a number of mechanisms protecting the interests of the ruling camp: a limit was set on the number of seats available to opposition candidates, which ensured that the PZPR (Polish United Workers' Party) and its allies would retain control over the formation of the government. A presidency with broad powers was also created, and the party retained influence over the security apparatus, including the military and the Ministry of Internal Affairs. In the following weeks, an intense election campaign began. In April, opposition candidates for the Sejm and Senate were announced, many of whom used photos with Lech Wałęsa as a symbol of their involvement in the Solidarity movement. Volunteers associated with Citizens' Committees played a huge role here, organising meetings and events throughout Poland to promote the candidates. It is worth mentioning, however, that not all of the opposition supported the Round Table agreements – groups such as the Confederation of Independent Poland (KPN), led by Leszek Moczulski, put forward their own candidates, criticising the compromise with the communists. Organisations such as Fighting Solidarity and the Fighting Youth Federation called for a boycott of

the elections, considering them not fully democratic. The first round of voting took place on 4 June 1989. The turnout was approximately 62%. Candidates associated with the “Solidarity” movement won 160 of the 161 seats available in the Sejm, and in completely free elections to the Senate, they won as many as 99 seats out of 100. Although this was a devastating blow to the communist authorities, it should be noted that out of 18 million voters, as many as 7 million voted for candidates from the ruling camp.

Several important publications have already been written about the 1989 elections to the Sejm and Senate in Poland, including works by Antoni Dudek (Dudek 2009), Andrzej Friszke (Friszke 2024), Paweł Kowal (Kowal 2012), Sebastian Ligarski and Grzegorz Majchrzak (Ligarski and Majchrzak 2019), Andrzej Małkiewicz (Małkiewicz 1994), Jan Skórzyński (Skórzyński 1995), and edited by Konrad Białecki, Stanisław Jankowiak and Rafał Reczek (*Krok ku wolności. Wybory czerwcowe 1989 i ich konsekwencje* [A Step towards Freedom. The June 1989 elections and their consequences] 2015). Particular attention was paid to the functioning of Citizens’ Committees, as exemplified by the work of Inka Słodkowska (Słodkowska 2006; Słodkowska 2014), Tadeusz Borkowski and Andrzej Bukowski (Borkowski and Bukowski 1993). Works analysing the 1989 elections from a regional perspective have also been published (for example, *Olsztyński czerwiec ’89* [Olsztyn June ’89], edited by B. Burniewicz, R. Gieszczyńska, et al., Olsztyn 2009; *Koniec pewnej epoki. Wybory parlamentarne 1989 roku w województwie szczecińskim w dokumentach* [The end of an era. The 1989 parliamentary elections in the Szczecin Voivodeship in documents], introduction, selection and compilation by A. Kubaj, Warsaw–Szczecin 2010; *Upadek systemu komunistycznego na Górnym Śląsku. Wokół przemian 1989 roku w województwach katowickim i opolskim* [The collapse of the communist system in Upper Silesia. The changes of 1989 in the Katowice and Opole Voivodeships], eds. A. Dziuba and Sebastian Rosenbaum, Katowice 2010; *Wybory parlamentarne w 1989 r. w Polsce południowo-wschodniej* [Parliamentary elections in south-eastern Poland in 1989], eds. M. Gliwa and M. Krzysztofński, Rzeszów 2011; *Wybory czerwcowe 1989 r. w województwie poznańskim. Wybór dokumentów* [The June 1989 elections in the Poznań Voivodeship. Selected documents], introduction and editing by Ł. Komorowski, selection and compilation by H. Budzyńska et al., Poznań–Warsaw 2021). There have also been publications devoted to the activities of the apparatus of repression, which monitored and attempted

to control the political transformation process during that period (including: *Służba Bezpieczeństwa wobec przemian politycznych w latach 1988–1990. Region łódzki* [The Security Service in the face of political changes in 1988–1990. The Łódź region], introduction, selection and compilation by S. Pilarski, Warsaw–Łódź 2009; *Wybory '89 w Polsce południowo-wschodniej w dokumentach SB* [The 1989 elections in south-eastern Poland in the documents of the Security Service], introduction by J. Borowiec and D. Iwaneczko, selection and compilation by J. Borowiec, Warsaw-Rzeszów 2009).

Despite the passage of time and the growing number of publications on the June 1989 elections, Paulina Codogni's book *Wybory czerwcowe 1989 roku. U progu przemiany ustrojowej* [The June Elections of 1989: On the Eve of Political Transformation], published in 2012 by the Institute of National Remembrance, remains a fundamental work on the subject. To date, it has been reviewed only once. Shortly after its publication, Łukasz Garbal reviewed it in the magazine *Nowe Książki* (Garbal 2012). On the occasion of the 35th anniversary of the June elections, which took place in 2024, it is worth reaching for this important book again. It should be noted that it was awarded the Władysław Pobóg-Malinowski Prize for the Best Historical Debut of 2010 in the doctoral thesis category.

In her monograph, Paulina Codogni presents a detailed analysis of one of the most important events in the process of Poland's political transformation. Her book not only reminds us of the significance of the parliamentary elections of 4 June 1989, but also sheds new light on their context, course and consequences. The publication enriches the existing debate by presenting a multidimensional view of this groundbreaking event.

The author has meticulously examined the process of political transformation that began during the Round Table negotiations and culminated in the formation of Tadeusz Mazowiecki's government. The crucial point of this watershed were the June 1989 elections which showed both the strength of the Solidarity opposition and the weakness of the ruling camp. For some, the result was a great triumph, for others it was a painful collision with reality. The unexpected defeat of the authorities and the decisive victory of the opposition surprised both sides of the political dispute, forcing solutions that no one had previously anticipated. These elections significantly accelerated the transition from a one-party system of "people's democracy" to a pluralistic parliamentary democracy based on free political competition. Codogni accurately captured the key turning points

in this process that had a decisive impact on its further course, and objectively presented the difficulties involved in building consensus between former political enemies.

As the author mentions in the introduction, the book does not exhaust the subject and does not cover it comprehensively. Some issues, such as the international context of the elections or their repercussions, were treated marginally. Economic issues were also touched upon only to a limited extent.

The publication is based on archival documents, contemporary press articles, accounts of participants in the events described, diaries, memoirs, and numerous studies related to the subject matter that were available at the time. In terms of source materials, the author drew on archival collections held in six archives: the New Records Archive, the Institute of National Remembrance Archive, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Archive, the Karta Centre Archive, the Archive of the President of the Republic of Poland, and the Senate Archive.

The book is divided into six chapters that logically guide the reader through the complex process of the June elections. Codogni presented the political and social situation in Poland in the second half of the 1980s, emphasising the events leading up to the Round Table talks. She paid particular attention to the dynamics of negotiations between the authorities of the Polish People's Republic and the Solidarity opposition, showing how compromises were gradually worked out, which became the basis for subsequent elections. In the following chapters, the author moves on to a detailed description of the electoral process. She analyses the method of selecting candidates by the Citizens' Committee and the mechanisms for determining the electoral lists of the Polish United Workers' Party. She reveals not only logistical and organisational challenges, but also numerous internal conflicts in both political camps. Codogni does not shy away from difficult topics, such as tensions within the Citizens' Committee regarding candidate selection procedures, which in her analysis becomes one of the key elements changing the perception of the myth of a "national agreement against the Polish United Workers' Party."

One of the most important contributions of the book is the demythologisation of the June elections. The author reminds us that they were not fully free, but partially regulated, which was a result of the Round Table agreements. These were plebiscite-style elections, in which the moderate opposition feared that it might find itself in a minority regarding the freely contested seats. Codogni shows

how the authorities of the Polish People's Republic also feared this scenario, seeing in it the possibility of a rise in the importance of radical opposition fractions that questioned the agreements of the Round Table.

The author rightly points out that although the elections brought victory to the opposition, it was neither clear-cut nor lasting. Codogni draws attention to the rapidly dwindling support for the moderate opposition and the fact that its assumption of joint responsibility for governing drew it into the political system, relieving the PZPR of some of its responsibility for the situation in the country. At the same time, activists associated with the Communist Party retained real influence, which distinguishes Poland's transformation from the experiences of some other post-Communist countries.

Paulina Codogni's monograph has several significant advantages. Firstly, the author draws on a wide range of sources, including archival documents, eyewitness accounts and press analyses, which gives her work a sound research foundation. Secondly, Codogni avoids simplifications and unambiguous judgements – her approach is balanced and her conclusions are based on facts, which gives the book an academic character, but at the same time makes it accessible to a wider audience. The structural clarity of the work is also worth highlighting. The chapters are logically structured, allowing the reader to easily follow both the chronology of events and the analysis of political phenomena. An additional advantage are the appendices containing a list of names of parliamentarians elected in the June 1989 elections and photographs. This makes the book not only a valuable source of knowledge, but also a research tool for other historians.

Although the book *The June Elections of 1989* is very valuable, it is not without certain weaknesses. One of the main criticisms could be that the long-term effects of the elections on the Polish political scene are discussed too briefly. Codogni signals a problem of erosion of support for the moderate opposition, but does not fully develop this point. Furthermore, there is no in-depth comparison of Poland's transformation with other Central and Eastern European countries. Although the author mentions the specific nature of the Polish case, further discussion of this topic could enrich the analysis and present the Polish experience in a broader international context.

Paulina Codogni's book makes an important contribution to the literature on political transformation in Poland. This publication encourages readers to reflect once again on the June elections and their significance. This work may serve as a basis for further

research, especially in the field of comparative analyses of political transformations in the region.

Paulina Codogni's *The June Elections of 1989* is a book that deserves attention from historians, political scientists, and anyone interested in Poland's recent history. The author avoids simplifications and presents the complexity of the electoral process and its consequences. This publication reminds us that June 1989 marked the beginning of a convoluted process of transformation that needs to be understood in all its complexity. This is a work that should be in the library of every historian, political scientist and anyone interested in political change in Central and Eastern Europe. Codogni's book is one of the most important studies on the June 1989 elections and, at the same time, opens up space for further research and discussion.

Years later, it has become clear that what was not sufficiently emphasised in Codogni's monograph is that the elections of June 1989 were of fundamental importance for the fall of the communist regime not only in Poland, but also accelerated the course of events in Central and Eastern Europe. The Polish people, exercising their right to vote, rejected communism, which became a turning point in the country's history. The result of the vote came as a surprise both to the communist authorities, who – in accordance with the Round Table agreements – intended to maintain control over the state, and to the opposition, which did not expect such strong public support. Importantly, divisions and discrepancies were visible both within the power structures – in the Polish United Workers' Party and the Security Service – and within the opposition itself. Among communist decision-makers, hardliners clashed with groups leaning towards reform. Similarly, there were differences within the opposition – alongside supporters of moderate dialogue with the authorities, there were groups that were distrustful of compromise and called for complete decommunisation. The parliamentary elections, although held under the so-called “contract,” unexpectedly became the beginning of a profound political transformation, opening the way for Poles to achieve full sovereignty.

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