

# Party system and media in Poland after 1989



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**ABSTRACT:** The importance of the media for the party system formation in Poland in the transformation is unarguable. This significance resulted from the lack of developed party structures that could be involved in process of communication between party elites and electorate. Hence, media became the only possible instrument that might have been used in arousing electorate's interest. However, the interdependence between party system and media means also that the parties had their influence on the legal framework of the media and sometimes ideological profile as well.

**KEYWORDS:** Poland, political parties, party system, media, cartelization



## **INTRODUCTION**

The phase of the democratic transformation provides political parties with particularly attractive yet at the same time intricate environment for their performance. Political parties or, in the broader dimension, all the actors on the political scene are to some extent obliged to partake in establishing the institutional framework for the newly created political regime. Concurrently such a role generates the chances of acquiring the access to the majority of assets perceived by political organisations as indispensable. Among these components of the transformational legacy there could be mentioned the guarantee for parties to be subsidised in their political performance by the State budget as well as the admission to the mass media. As far as the role of the mass media in communicating with voters is scrutinised, the distinctive function of the public television is worth noticing. This broadcaster had the most to offer to political parties, explicitly, the free broadcasting time during electoral campaigns and further posts to be taken.

## **THE BIRTH OF PARTY SYSTEMS IN THE COUNTRIES OF EAST-CENTRAL EUROPE**

The debate on the political systems of East-Central Europe should be accompanied by the greater than in other cases caution in adducing the 'sociological' interpretations of the structure of the political systems. Rephrasing, the political systems in

East-Central Europe are characterised by a far bigger autonomy from the society when compared to the political systems in Western Europe.

This condition results from the fact that Western European models of the party systems were formed at the point where both social demands and aspirations and the performance of political subjects converged. This intersection marked also the birth of the socio-political cleavages which determined the character of the political rivalry in Western Europe throughout several years. As M. Lipset and S. Rokkan concluded, the political systems in Western Europe in the 1960s reflected, with some exceptions, the structure of the socio-political cleavages of the 1920s (Lipset, Rokkan, 1967, p. 134). At the same time, the parties were deeply rooted in the social structure. There is nothing to be surprised of as representing particular groups' concerns constituted *raison d'être* of the parties that were established in the times of proliferating the electoral law. Successful at that time mass parties managed to 'subordinate' the whole social segments, contributing to the stabilisation of particular groups (Herbut 1997a, s. 153).

The electoral parties and the cartel ones started focusing on the search of the indispensable to function resources within the State institutions. Accordingly, in this context one can virtually draw on the emergence of the symbiotic design with the political parties and the State governed institutions as its components.

Yet, the political, social and economic perspectives in which the party systems of East-Central Europe happened to have shaped were virtually dissimilar. In both cases the process of the democratisation implied imposing divergent screenplays. In Western Europe the democratisation in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was merely connected with attributing next social groups with the right to the political participation whereas in East-Central Europe the democratic transformation denoted the reconstruction of the whole political system. It is worth noticing that the imposed changes did not gain, or gained at a very low level, the support of the society. Directly speaking, at the beginning of the transformation there was no civil society in East-Central Europe (Mair, 1997, p. 178), even though the rudiments were born in Poland just in the early 1980s along with the establishment of the NSZZ 'Solidarność' (Solidarity) (Weigle, Butterfield 1992, p. 11).

The above remark concerning the wide range of autonomy of the political systems from the society in East-Central Europe does not imply the total freedom from the social determinants. Nevertheless, there is no simple reason-outcome connection which could reflect the structure of the society in the political system. One of the factors here is the fact that societies of the region of interest do not have the structure organised around the collective affairs, which make their condition resemble 'the flattened landscape' (Linz, Stepan, Gunther, 1995, p. 82).

Some researchers claim there are dissections of the axiological nature in the countries of East-Central Europe, which in the context of the discussed area leads to advocating traditional values associated with, for example, Catholic Church teachings (Herbut, 1997a, p. 134). These type of divergences were not, however,

powerful enough to shape strong ties so particular to the relations between the electorate and the parties in Western Europe.

In the discussion on the social structure quite an interesting interpretation of social and political dissections is put forward by G. Márkus who analyses the situation in Hungary. He asserts that programmatic differences in Hungary in 1990s contribute to distinguishing two divergent camps, namely, the traditional and the pro-Western ones. The traditionalists highlight the role of authorities and the Church in the social life and their attitude towards any international initiatives may be characterised as reserved. In their programmes they articulate the collective values. An utterly diverse nature of attitudes can be attributed to the advocates of the pro-Western option. They promote the separation of the Church and the State, individualistic values and regard all the forms of international cooperation as welcome (Márkus, 1999, pp. 142–143).

Also other political scientists (see Herbut, 1997b, p. 144 ff.; Migalski, 2006, p. 32 ff.) see reducing the problem of the inter-party rivalry in East-Central Europe to the mere socio-economic dimension as deprived of any foundation. Therefore, there appear suggestions of defining the field of rivalry by such terms as either traditionalism versus liberalism (see Herbut, 1997b, p. 145) or religious fundamentalism versus permissivism (Migalski, 2006, p. 35).

At this point also the influence of international factors on the process of emerging party systems in East-Central Europe is worth noticing. Among the international conditions there could be enumerated these concerning the flanking background of the political systems (the regional integration) and these which could be identified as the world trends.

The first of these trends is labelled as the modernisation. This process is associated with the urbanisation, the rising level of education, the vertical and horizontal mobility and being constantly widespread in new countries. Hence, it can be presumed that the effective solutions find followers, which happens with the approval of political elites. Contrastingly, the other trend, the globalisation, focuses on the world trade liberalisation, the disappearance of national markets and the development of means of communication, virtually, the elements undermining the importance of the borders between countries. The third trend is unanimous with the fact of ascribing the primacy to the democratic order which as the form of exercising the governing control is the most effective and the least prone to get involved into exterior conflicts. Thus, it is not difficult to explain ambitions of some countries to accept the tension connected with establishing the new democratic systems. Within this context we could talk about the erosion of the national sovereignty (the fourth national trend), the superiority of which loses its meaning in situations of breaking human rights and disobeying the rights of minorities. The fifth and the last element of 'the exterior pressure' implemented on the political systems is the process of the European integration. The role of this factor is to tighten the bonds between particular members of the European Union and for the countries aspiring to

enter it, this feature constitutes the stimulus for introducing further reforms. Applying similar solutions to these from the countries of the European Union occurs both on the level of structural and procedural solutions as well as in the performance of the political elites (Day et al., 2000, pp. 15–18).

The international factors have the impact not only on the political systems but also on the political parties in East-Central Europe, which parties consciously undergo this influence, and even more, they treat their corresponding parties from Western Europe as their model to follow. It can be said that exterior actors gain the influence on the national political scenes granting, in exchange, the support for particular political parties. This foreign influence was, however, constrained to pointing that the only accepted political system is the liberal democracy based on the ideas of the rivalry within the multi-party system and the free market. Only the full approval of these rules could provide the new democracies with the foreign support which was at the same time iconic as standing for the external source of legitimisation. So it turns out that the international cooperation between parties determines the dispersal of the democratic ideals (Pridham, 1996, pp. 188–191; Pridham, 2000, pp. 55–57).

From the above line of reasoning it is easy to draw a conclusion that initially the foreign support was directed only to the former opponents of the communist regime. The cooperation in this sphere started in 1989 when the social-democratic parties from France, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and Italy granted their support to the Solidarity. Apparently, in the early phase getting into the trans-national cooperation was not connected with choosing a particular partner representing the specific party family; the aim was to start the cooperation with any of the exterior actors. A more conscious search for partners, which was leading to establishing bounds with the particular party family in Western Europe, started after the decomposition of the Solidarity camp. It is worth noting that the SdRP (Social-Democracy of the Republic of Poland) was forced to accept a different strategy. At the beginning of the transformation the alliance of the post-communists and the foreign cooperates was the only source of legitimisation. Partially consciously, yet as having at the same time no other choice, the SdRP instigated the attempt to settle the cooperation grounds with the family of social democratic parties. The difficulties post-communists met when building the affiliation with the social democratic parties from Western Europe arose from the negative opinion on the Polish membership in NATO expressed till 1993 and on neglecting the notion of the European integration as the distant problem (Gortat, 2000, pp. 157–159).

The influence of Western European parties on their Polish corresponding groups was seen, for instance, in the organisational models of indigenous political parties. It means that Polish political parties, or in a broader sense, Central European parties, inscribed into common nowadays trend of expanding the electoral support rather than enlarging the membership base (Waller, 2000, p. 243), although the

performance of the *Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe* (Polish Peasant Party) in their early phase emasculates this thesis.

The next area in which Polish political parties, similarly to other political groups functioning in East-Central Europe, took inspiration from the Western patterns were the works on the constitutional frames of the political systems. Considering the relation between parties based in both parts of the European continent, one cannot omit the issue of the financial support received by parties in the new democracies. Such help was especially vital for newly created parties which did not own sufficient resources. The fact of taking the advantage of verified models took place also in the area of the programmatic issues, which in some cases were entirely borrowed, from exterior allies (Gortat, 2000, pp. 158–159; Waller, 2000, pp. 245–246).

Above I have also mentioned the focus of the contemporary parties on enlarging the electoral support. Hence, it can be taken for granted that the main emphasis is put on the effective, so, undoubtedly, professional as well, preparation of the electoral campaign using the modern means of communication. Also in this matter parties from East-Central Europe could count on the help from abroad (Farrell, Webb, 2000, p. 105; Waller, 2000, pp. 244–245).

### **CARTELISATION OF THE POLISH PARTY SYSTEM?**

The process of political, social, economic, and cultural transformations was largely based on building the welfare state, the disappearance of group ties, shrinking of the labour class, and the increase of importance of single-issue organisations. Such course contributed to lowering the attractiveness of the mass parties on the one hand and the appearance of the catch-all parties on the other. Of no trifling role in the parties model transformation in Western Europe were the electronic mass media, especially television which allowed parties to direct their political appeal to all voters. Voters, in turn, felt like consumers, since soon the presentations of political programmes started to resemble TV commercials (Katz, Mair, 1995, p. 7; Koole, 1996, pp. 512, 513).

It can be assumed that the general features of the electoral party model are currently present, or even domineering, in the contemporary parties. Yet some scientists (for instance, R. Katz and P. Mair) point to new strategy elements applied by parties, which elements indicate instituting the next party model – the cartel (Katz, Mair, 1995, p. 5 ff.; Daalder, 2001, p. 49). Nevertheless, the cartelisation firstly concerns the party system (see Katz, 2001, p. 286). The fundamental nature of this process is based on the political cooperation that aims at controlling the direction of the State politics as well as controlling the assignment for particular posts. The effect of such cooperation, although it cannot be taken as the pure aim of the parties creating the cartel, is making it difficult, or virtually impossible, for other parties to take part in ‘booty sharing’ (Herbut, 2002, p. 99).

Thus initially there appeared the party system organised within the frames of the cartel and respectively the parties operating within this frame started to apply similar strategies. Among common characteristics of cartel members the foreground position is occupied by playing the function of the agent (representative) of the State. When it comes to the performance of individuals within the cartel party it is not treated as the way to accomplish some ideological goals but as a profession. Hence, the leadership of these organisations belongs to professionals who got their functions by being promoted and 'who make a living of politics' and are not 'amateurs who live for politics' (Katz, 2001, pp. 287, 288; Daalder, 2001, p. 49).

It seems that drawing on the cartelisation phenomenon observed in Western Europe has a deep sense in the context of the discussion on the party system, particularly when talking about political parties in East-Central Europe. It can be therefore assumed that because of the quantity parameters (the membership base, the structure of parties' income) as well as because of the character of the applied political strategies (the use of mass media) the political parties of East-Central Europe resemble their corresponding parties from Western Europe. Obviously, this resemblance does not result from the corresponding processes of the socio-political changes. The question, hence, arises how to interpret this convergence. At the same time it should be mentioned that although the political parties adopted the cartel model, the party system in Poland did not take this form.

The difficulties with shaping the stable party system in Poland, but also in other countries in East-Central Europe, may be explained by the openness of the electorate and the lack of socio-political cleavages. Yet it does not indicate that the region societies still bear a resemblance to the flattened landscape suggested by J. Linz. The problem stems from the fact that distinguished (let us add, not without any effort) social groups are not permanently bound with any of the parties. Therefore, it can be confirmed that the party loyalties occur at the very germ form (Mair, 1997, pp. 181–183), whereas existing divergences are only of the social character and do not deserve the term socio-political.

Generally, in East-Central Europe the low interest in taking the active part in the performance of political parties can be observed. This tendency is proven by the data concerning party membership collected between 1997 and 2000 in 20 European countries (EU countries, the Czech Republic, Norway, Poland, Slovakia and Hungary). The average result illustrating the percentage of parties' members in relation to the entire electorate reached in these 20 countries 4.99%, whereas in Poland it was below this level – 1.15% in 2000 (Mair, van Biezen, 2001, p. 9; Sula, 2008).

Nonetheless, the whole responsibility for the instability of the party systems cannot be blamed only on the electorate. Since it appears that political parties did not do much in order to organize voters. Yet it was difficult to expect effects in this area as the vast majority of parties established after 1989 in East-Central Europe were of the internally created character, which term was coined by M. Duverger (1965, pp. XXIV–XXX). Among these few externally created parties there could be enumer-

ated ones inspired by the NSZZ 'Solidarność.' Adducing to the conclusions concerning the manner of institutionalising the parties in Western Europe, the thesis can be put forward that it was impossible for the political parties in East-Central Europe to employ the electorate. The internally created parties formed on the both parts of the continent, which were developing out of the inspiration of a small group acting within the Parliament or, as frequently happens at present, acting within the election committee of the candidate for the office of the president, could not count on 'finding' the supportive group. The huge social groups in Western Europe contributed to establishing the externally created parties that, in turn, were monopolized by such groups. This meant the mere lack of possibility for the internally created parties to expand their members' base to the extent comparable with this of the externally created parties.

The limited membership base is also a feature of the internally created political parties in East-Central Europe, even though there are different reasons for this state of affairs. The internally created cadre parties in East-Central Europe could not subordinate so many social groups as these simply did not appear. Nevertheless, the question whether resigning from the mass strategies stemmed from the conscious choice or simply there was no alternative for the cadre strategy is still not without the point. Regardless the answer which could be given here, it is worth pointing out that the political parties of East-Central Europe did not undergo the process of 'detaching' from the society as, in contrast to Western European parties, they were never entrenched in it. Against such a background the post-communist parties, which inherited an extensive membership base from their predecessors, remain exceptional (Sula, 2008).

The performance of Polish political parties is hugely determined by the low membership and the lack of permanent ties between the parties and particular electoral groups. Therefore, the indigenous parties decided to apply the strategy based on the mass media and the strategy of patronage with the patron-client relation as its cornerstone. Not including D. Perkins' suggestions on the lack of other alternatives (Perkins, 1996, p. 363), the choice in favour of this first option was triggered by the prospective of reaching with the programmatic offer the biggest number of observers, which fact acquires the special dimension when taking into account the chance of gaining each individual voter in the context of no structured electorate.

Compared with the performance particular to the mass parties, the attractiveness of this strategy is based on being financed by the State budget. Consequently, it is pointless to maintain an extensive membership base since the parties gain more from the budget when getting new votes in elections than they could gain in the consequence of extending their members base.

There is one more benefit of using the mass media. The mutual correspondence of presented programmatic offers leads to the situation that the decisive factor in voting for particular parties is, namely, the leader's silhouette that may constitute the point of reference for voters. Thus, the leader may turn out to be the 'element'

of the identification of the electorate with the particular party (compare Herbut, 1998, pp. 121–122).

The access to the mass media was principally essential for the parties originating from the opposition against the communist regime as these parties suffered the lack of the extended members base the most. In this situation, the media were the only opportunity to communicate with the electorate. It is worth mentioning at this point that the power of the mass media emerged just in 1990 during the presidential campaign. Then, Stanisław Tymiński, the candidate who had come back from emigration and did not have any political background, came to the second round of the election beating the first non-communist Prime Minister, Tadeusz Mazowiecki (Lewis, 2000, p. 113).

Talking about the role of television in the early 1990s I largely mean the public TV. In the second half of 1990s the private media gained the importance. At that time there prevailed the opinion that Zygmunt Solorz, the owner of Polsat TV, was supported by the group of approximately 30 Parliament members. That was also the time of growing importance of the Catholic broadcasting radio station Radio Maryja (Lewis, 2000, p. 116) which since 1994 has had the licence to broadcast the nation-wide programme. For a long time Radio Maryja and its listeners were supporting the League of Polish Families (Liga Polskich Rodzin). However, before the Parliamentary election of 2005 those centred around Tadeusz Rydzyk, who was in charge of the station, gave their support to the Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość – PiS). At that moment Tadeusz Rydzyk had a new instrument to use since in 2003 Telewizja Trwam, a new TV station, gained the broadcasting licence. Till today the environment of Tadeusz Rydzyk backs up the PiS and the government with Jarosław Kaczyński as the Prime Minister.

In the discussion on the media participation in politics, it is also worth tackling the issue of financing the promotion of the political image in the media. The records comprising all the expenses connected with campaigns are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Items of political parties spending during election campaign in 2001

Item	SLD	PO	PiS	PSL
Administration	186 009	336 998	162 180	747 486
Travel costs	377 059	149 553	0	10 303
Mass media	7 953 195	6 919 990	1 574 455	3 300 651
Printing materials	13 908 556	3 687 112	1 342 441	4 026 449
Meetings	3 375 014	195 840	1 167 236	1 038 207
Other	1 179 824	4 805 025	1 056 530	286 855

Abbreviations: SLD – Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej (Democratic Left Alliance); PO – Platforma Obywatelska (Civic Platform); PiS – Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (Law and Justice); PSL – Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe (Polish Peasant Party)

Source: Walecki, (2005)

The data collected in the above table demonstrate how big importance do political parties ascribe to the issue of promoting *via* the mass media. Of course, in particular cases there are differences as far as the share of specific positions in the total expenses is concerned. Yet, the costs connected with the media services constitute the major part of all the budgets.

## CONCLUSION

As Walter Lippmann claimed media 'are no substitute for institutions' (cited after Gross, 2004, p. 120). In Poland, as well as in other East-Central Europe countries, the mass media had to fill in the niche that they should share with the institutions of the civil society. However, the process of institutionalisation of the political parties in East-Central Europe did not involve the society in the way it took place earlier in West Europe. It implies there did not appear the interest groups which would spur establishing new parties. Not only were the societies not interested in ensuring themselves the political representation but they also did not show any enthusiasm towards acting in the functioning parties, which fact is highlighted by the above mentioned factors.

In this context the media turned out to be a requisite tool of communication with the electorate. Unfortunately, it also appeared that being the subject of political pressure in the communist times they were not able to undo the shackles of this corset in the times of the democratic transformations as well (Dobek-Ostrowska, 2006, p. 29). After 1989 each change in the governing group was followed by the change in management boards of the public media.

The idea of colonizing posts in the public media is inscribed into the thesis on the cartelisation of the party system, which can be also proven by basing the political strategy on the mass communication means. Thus, it is not difficult to explain why the income of the parties has the structure (see Sula, 2008) in which the biggest part is derived from the budget subventions whereas relatively low percentage comes from the membership fees.

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