

## On the Attitudes Towards the Regionalisation of Poland

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The subject of this volume — regionalisation of Polish politics in the 1990s is one of the most important and, at the same time, one of the most successful aspects of the Polish post-Communist transformation. With the 1998 reorganisation of the administrative and regional organisation of the state the Polish regional reform became one of the most courageous and revolutionary in post-Communist Central and Eastern Europe. Among its numerous fascinating aspects, it seems to be an intriguing illustration of the depth of evolution of the nature of Polish society and politics in the second part of the twentieth century. Let me remind readers that Communist Poland — the People's Republic of Poland or "PRL", as it is widely recognised, could be considered a relatively successful attempt at the construction of a first Polish modern nation state. Despite its dependence on the Soviet Union and the dominant role of the Communist rhetoric, a specific version of Polish culture was imposed on the whole population of the country. At the same time, most dimensions of the social and political life of the country become centrally designed and controlled. Earlier, the war and post-war movements of people on an unprecedented scale, contributed to the ethnic homogenisation of the country. This process had a very clear regional dimension. Regional cultures, dialects, histories and other aspects of sub-national identities were successfully marginalised and, in many cases, annihilated. The former German "Western and Northern Territories" of Poland are the best example of the construction of the new culturally homogenised communities which could only be theoretically called "regional". Although distant from Warsaw, they had almost no specific regional identity. In addition, the totalitarian nature of the political system of the country prevented the possibility of existence of any form of regional and local self-government.

It appears that the construction of the first Polish nation state in the form of PRL could be considered a result of the trade-off between the

non-Communist Poles resisting Soviet domination and Moscow. Although in 1945 the country was losing its independence, it was offered help in the construction of the modern nation-state project long dreamed of by many Poles, particularly those of the national-democratic orientation, symbolised by the figure of Dmowski. Thus, while Communists were offering the Polish left the programme of social reforms – construction of the “socialist society” at the same time they were challenging the right to construct the homogenous Polish nation state. Both of the projects could not be achieved by any means by the pre-war Second Polish Republic and could be seen as “compensation” for Soviet domination of Poland. In addition, the movement of the Western border and the taking over of a considerable amount of territory from pre-war Germany, were also among the long-time unrealistic dreams of the National-Democrats. These “achievements” of Communist Poland were undoubtedly important arguments in the hands of the Soviet leaders, who helped to incorporate successfully Poland into their empire and retain control over Polish society for several decades. Communist propaganda reminded the Poles of this directly or indirectly until the last days of its existence.

Consequently, the collapse of the Communist system could be seen as a blow for the Polish nation state project. The fact that its weakening was not widely deplored in 1990 seems to be a result of several factors. They include both the strength of the Polish anti-Soviet (Russian) and anti-Communist sentiments, the post-modern crisis of the nation-state project and deep evolution of the Polish political elites and political scene. In fact, the discontinuity between pre-war and post-Communist politics in Poland was even greater than in Czechoslovakia or Hungary.

Although the post-Communist regional reforms in Poland, including the self-government reform of 1990 and the regional reform of the 1998 were widely criticised both for their restricted character, timing and implementation, I would argue that their importance is in fact most often underestimated, especially given the above mentioned historical context. One of the examples of the political and cultural shocks accompanying the decomposition of the Communist nation-state was the “emergence” of the German minority in the Opole region. The discovery of the importance of the heritage of the nineteenth century partitions for the electoral geography of the country and development of several regional movements was among other “regional” surprises of the early 1990s. None of them however, was seen as an argument for restricting the policy of decentralisation of the state. This seems to be one of the greatest successes of the Polish transformation. The ideas of restoration of the self-government, revival of regional and local identities and regionalisation of politics are

still considered as essential elements of the programme of democratisation and modernisation of the country and are shared by most of the political parties. As I would argue, the reasons for such developments are not entirely obvious. Besides the general enthusiasm for a democratic project and support for the civil society idea seen as integral requirements of the programme of “catching up” with the West, one can point out to the dominating conviction that Poland is strong enough culturally to resist regional centrifugal political and social forces which do not have to be restricted institutionally. This argument may be supported by the observation that the regionalisation of Polish political life is, in practice, rather slow and politics on all levels remains dominated by national political cleavages. This may testify to the fact that the homogenisation of Polish society, including its regional dimension, has the lasting effect of the Communist state and is not perceived as being a danger. On the other hand, the very idea of nation-state may have lost its attractiveness for many Poles as has happened in many Western societies. These are only some of the many possible factors behind the dominating attitudes towards the regionalisation in contemporary Poland. It seems however, that much is still to be done to reveal the full complexity and historical context of the support for this process. The papers presented in this volume bring a closer understanding of the development and roots of the dismantling of the Communist nation state in the regional dimension. Nevertheless, the future of regionalisation of the Polish politics is still not determined and, I would argue, positive attitudes towards decentralisation among Poles should not be taken for granted. Already the 1998 reform had its strong critics, accusing the reformers of the dismantling of the Polish unitary state infrastructure. The future, especially in the context of the integration with the Western political and economic structures, may bring further changes in attitudes towards this historical process.