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GENDERED SOCIAL POLICIES IN (POST-)COMMUNIST COUNTRIES: THE CASE OF POLAND

Abstract

The conservative “backlash” of the 1980s did not only apply to women’s rights but also to social policies. It was often perceived as a phenomenon of the so-called “first world”. However, current historical research on state-socialist countries shows that it could also be observed in these particular countries, for example in social policies in communist Poland. There, a new government under the leadership of Edward Gierek came into power in 1970 and tried, on the one hand, to modernize the economy in an effort to improve its international competitiveness. On the other hand, the new leadership also tried to build a “second Poland” by raising the standard of living. Social policies became an important tool to ensure communist preservation of power at that time. However, this, in the end failed, attempt to modernize Poland led to a (re-)traditionalization of family life and gender relations. Ultimately, this meant that the government tried to remove women from the labour market. This was closely connected to a discourse on a “crisis of demography” that became prominent during the 1970s and influenced subsequent governments regarding their social policies. The article analyses these developments in social policies in Communist Poland and situates them in a wider context by looking at the first years of transformation in the 1990s. It will therefore highlight continuities and fractions in this particular political field between late- and post-communism.

Keywords: Communism; Social Policy; Demography; Catholic Church; Poland

INTRODUCTION

“We will build a second Poland.” This slogan characterized the ascent of a new administration that came into power in Communist Poland in 1970. Unlike its predecessor under the leadership of First Secretary Władysław Gomułka, the new administration, run by Edward Gierek as First Secretary of the Polish United Workers’ Party, used social policies to maintain and legitimise its rule. Polish society witnessed massive investments and a large-scale expansion

of different allowances, maternity leave, as well as attempts to include rural areas into a widespread, fully state-financed, health care system. These efforts and the regime's turning away from obvious methods of repression and persecution of political enemies lay the ground for the (retrospective) perception of the early 1970s as Communist Poland's "belle époque". However, these years also saw a turn to conservative models in respect of gender relations. Thus, Polish scholar Piotr Perkowski calls this decade the "dusk of emancipation policies" (Stańczak-Wiślicz et al., 2020, pp. 76–85) that also influenced social policies. This article deals with two entangled phenomena of Communist reign in Poland: On the one hand, the developments in social policies; on the other hand, its interplay with "demography". Lastly, I will look at continuities and fractions between Communism and democratic Poland after 1989.

Some remarks on sources and literature

Social policies after 1945 have rarely been at the centre of scholars' interests in recent decades. One exception is the work of Radosław Domke (2016) who provides a comprehensive account of the changes that Polish society experienced during the 1970s. The authors of the collective monograph "Women in Communist Poland" (Stańczak-Wiślicz et al., 2020) argue in a similar way and highlight changes and developments regarding gender relations and women's everyday lives in Communist Poland.

Apart from these exceptions, Polish scholars have concentrated on questions of economic history and development in the 1970s and the ultimately unsuccessful plans of the Gierek administration to stimulate a rise in economic growth and industrial production. The rising GNP and production should, in the eyes of the regime's propagandists, transform Poland into the "tenth most important global economic power" (Kaliński, 2012). Other studies also underline the exceptional growth of the Polish economy in the first half of the 1970s (Jezierski & Leszczyńska, 1998). The anthology "Poland under the reign of the PUWP" (Rakowski, 2000) does offer some insights, especially with regard to the economic policies in the 1970s (Bożyk, 2000) and the reforms of the 1980s (Baka, 2000). However, this publication edited by Mieczysław Rakowski is highly problematic, since its authors are ex-members of the Polish United Workers Party (PUWP) and had been responsible for the policies during Communist times.

Studies that exclusively analyse social policies can be found in the Communist period. Looking through the literature that was written in the different decades of Communist rule it is observable that the very theme of social policies became prominent when Gierek was in power (Kopczyński et al., 1978; Pietrucha, 1972; Rajkiewicz, 1973). The 1980s also saw an interest in social policies (Ostrowski, 1988), although the decade was characterised by economic turbulence, political crisis, and social

unrest finally leading to the collapse of the Communist system. Since Ostrowski's publication was written during the Communist rule, it is highly biased, but it gives some insights into how Communists and Party[1] officials looked back at the development of "socialist social policies" and how they evaluated them.

This article will take official as well as unpublished documents into account in order to reconstruct debates on social policies and trace the influence of social policies on Polish society. The materials I refer to originate mostly from official political bodies, such as the Central Committee of the PUWP and its different branches. However, because this article deals also with gender relations during the Communist period, I also rely on documents produced by the different state-financed women's organisations, such as the Women's League, or the National Council of Polish Women. Furthermore, I also take the documents of alternative elites into account. They are characterised by their position in public discourse; however, they were not in a position to influence social policy *directly*, but were important critiques of the then state and had indirect political power. The term "alternative elites" refers to Catholic intellectuals and their organisation (the Clubs of Catholic Intelligentsia), scholars and propagandists, and the clergy. Other materials used were produced and collected by the Office for Confessional Affairs, a body that was founded to observe the activities of the clergy and report to the PUWP. All these source materials are located in the Archive of Modern Records in Warsaw. I begin by providing an insight into the 1970s, a decade that is remembered by parts of today's Polish society as its "best years" (Domke, 2016, p. 358).

The 1970s: Communist Poland's "belle époque" and its end

After the end of the Second World War, Polish society witnessed economic hardships that dominated almost until the end of Communism in the late 1980s. In the above-mentioned publication by Lech Ostrowski, one of the authors, Bolesław Przywara, highlights that the installation of a social welfare state was not possible in the early decades of People's Poland, because all means were necessary for the reconstruction of Poland and its "rapid industrialisation" (Przywara, 1988, p. 12). This concentration of economic planning on heavy industry while marginalising products for consumption led to moments of social unrest (e.g. 1956 and 1970) that erupted from time to time.

To overcome this, a new Party leadership and government, formed at the end of 1970, put an emphasis on social policies. It was led by Edward Gierek, whom Communist propaganda portrayed as a "man of the people" and a "successful manager" from Upper Silesia, the booming region in the south of Poland. While ideological reasons were important to the previous govern-

[1] I will use 'Party' with a capital letter when referring to the Communist PUWP.

ments, the new one legitimised its call for power by claiming to improve the living standard of every Polish citizen (Wasiak, 2019, p. 99). This also affected the official propaganda: "nation", "fatherland", "state", and "society" took the prominent place that had been, until then, reserved for "class", "the dictatorship of the proletariat", and "socialism", especially in the second half of the decade (Zaremba, 2011, p. 384). In retrospective, one Polish sociologist from the 1990s, Wojciech Sokół, was convinced that the "resurrection of the Marxist-Leninist ideology of the state" had no chance to legitimise the new regime (Zaremba, 2011, p. 361). Hence, the Gierek administration had to search for another solution to this problem. It found it in a more nationalist rhetoric and in an expansion of social policies, combining them with its, felt, ideological obligation to improve living conditions and "build socialism", as Communist doctrine foresaw.

In December 1971, one year after it came to power, the new Party leadership declared, during the Sixth Party Convention, that its aim was that "Poland will grow in its strength and the citizens will live more prosperously" (Bukała & Iwaneczko, 2019, p. 12) becoming another central propagandist slogan of that time. Already during his first television speech in December 1970, Edward Gierek underlined that "justice, social dialogue and the improvement of the material well-being" of the citizens would be key for the new government (Borodziej, 2010, p. 318; Wasiak, 2019, p. 102). Major investments were to be applied to house building, because Polish society had suffered from a shortage of living space since the end of the Second World War. Besides that, the new administration planned to introduce a comprehensive free health care system (Borodziej, 2010, p. 320).

Another shift that occurred in Polish Communist politics related to foreign policy. Until the 1970s, the Cold War dominated. With Gierek – he had, of course, first to assure the Soviet comrades that this would not mean a turning away from "the first worker state" – the Western states became new partners, especially in economic aspects. This "opening of Poland" towards the "West" had major implications for Polish society. It allowed more people to travel to Western countries, a privilege no longer limited to officials and representatives. Now, the average Polish citizen could take this opportunity (Domke, 2016, Ch. 2). This led to rising expectations, since Polish citizens experienced the social welfare state as leading to standards of living experienced in Western countries. After only a few years, the Party leadership had to react to these raising expectations and instructed the propaganda apparatus to criticise "consumer-oriented views" (Zaremba, 2011, p. 362). Nevertheless, the opening of Poland was necessary for the Gierek government's plan of economic development.

The plan was twofold: Credits granted by Western countries and the International Monetary Fund were to be

partly invested in new industries and necessary licences to produce Western goods in Poland (such as Coca-Cola or Italian Fiat cars, both becoming icons of the decade of Polish prosperity (Zaremba, 2011, pp. 362, 373)). In order to pay back the cost of the mentioned licenses, the products were then to be sold to Western countries, but for a lower price. The other part of the credits and the profits from trading with the licensed goods were supposed to enable the government to invest into the expansion of socio-political means.

These means included, for example, the introduction of free Saturdays and more vacation time in the 1970s (Domke, 2016, p. 303) as well as the freezing of prices for basic everyday goods that the central body of the PUWP, the Political Bureau, decided upon in October 1972. Another important part of social policies was income: wages seemed to rise during the first years of the Gierek administration. However, Radosław Domke demonstrates that, although they rose, the growing expenses for basic needs curtailed the gain; a factor that was obfuscated by the statistics imprecise reporting of the cost of living. Altogether, wages were approximately 20 percent higher in the middle of the decade than in 1970 (Domke, 2016, pp. 64–65). At that time, almost one quarter of all employees earned between 3,001 and 4,000 złoty (Domke, 2016, p. 69, Tab. 16). Dariusz Jarosz gives an insight in the development of real earnings in the decade: his study shows that after high rises in 1973 and 1975 of more than five percent, the yearly change of real earnings oscillated between 2 and 3 percent. In 1978, they even declined by almost 3 percent (Jarosz, 2017, p. 225, Tab. 1).

Pensions for retirees also rose because of newly introduced regulations and the pension system for peasants was unified (Jarosz, 2017, pp. 234–235). These groups, as well as families with many children (during the 1970s defined as more than three), and single parents were the ones who profited from the introduction of a "social minimum income". In total, approximately four million citizens received this support (peasants not included) (Jarosz, 2017, p. 226). Another way of supporting single parent families was the establishment of a state-financed alimentation fund in the case that the former spouse was deceased or unwilling to pay for the children (Tarańska 1980: fols. 184–240). This was also one of the main issues the newly introduced Family Courts had to deal with (Rada do Spraw Rodziny 1979).

One very severe problem which every Post-war government in Poland had to face was housing. The decades since the end of the Second World War did not ease the housing shortage, because Polish society witnessed a high birth-rate in the 1940s and 1950s. Now, in the 1970s, the "baby-boomers" entered adulthood. Consequently, the new administration put an emphasis on this issue generating ambivalent results. On the one hand, a million flats were built in the first years of Gierek's rule, constituting the great-

est expansion the housing industry saw during Communist times. On the other hand, this was only a drop in the ocean, since the number of young newly-weds waiting for a flat rose to two million in the 1970s (Borodziej, 2010, p. 345) and, in total, more than five million couples were waiting for a flat at the end of the decade (Wydział Organizacji Społecznych, Sportu i Turystyki n.d.: n.p.). The ratio between available flats and registered marriages had dropped since 1965: then, 853 were available for 1,000 married couples. After a low of 654 in 1971, it slowly recovered, but was at 706 to 1,000 couples in 1980 again (Jarosz, 2017, pp. 232–233, Tab. 8).

Furthermore, the flats in the newly built blocks often did not meet quality standards and were rather unfinished. This also applied to Upper Silesia, the booming region Gierek came from. There, people had to wait between five and ten years for a flat at the end of the 1970s. And the new settlements lacked kindergartens, schools, or even grocery stores to supply the local population (Tracz, 2017, pp. 423–424). Summing up the situation in the housing industry, Dariusz Jarosz shows that its efficiency was already declining in the years between 1976 and 1978. In the following years until 1982, productivity fell by more than 10 per cent (Jarosz, 2017, p. 227, Tab. 2).

In the end, the plan of the Gierek administration did not work. The reasons for this are manifold. First, the economic crisis in the early 1970s originating from the first, and even more from the second, oil crisis led to economic disturbances. Second, the idea of exporting low priced products based on Western licenses did not work because the Polish companies could not reach the quality standards consumers wanted. The administration therefore tried to export more "home-grown" products, such as ham. However, there were also problems with quality standards here, as one example shows: it occurred that exported meat was rotten and the customers in the Western countries did not pay, but, rather, returned it (Jarosz, 2017, p. 223). In these cases, the state-owned companies did not make a profit, but incurred losses. Nonetheless, the obligation to export goods to pay back debts had to be met and these exported goods were then lacking in Poland. Furthermore, the consumerist culture that had been imposed by the Party leadership at the beginning of the decade to stimulate economic growth showed its negative effects. For example, the consumption of meat rose between 1971 and 1975 on average 33 percent per year. Altogether, every Polish citizen consumed almost 3.5 kg per year (Domke, 2016, p. 74).

This imbalance between the growing needs and aspirations of their own population and the necessity to export led to frustration and economic problems. In the middle of the decade, the government tried to overcome these economic problems by introducing higher prices for some food products, such as ham and sugar, causing social unrest leading to strikes in the industrial towns of Radom and Ursus (Sasanka, 2006). An-

other problem was massive absenteeism among employees. According to official figures, almost 690,000 people did not come to their working place in 1976. A year later, this number climbed to more than 728,000. This meant that between 6 and 7 percent of all employees working in the socialised economy were absent *every day* (Jarosz, 2017, p. 229). These problems were intensified because of the dependence on Western credits to achieve the rising standards of living. This and the growing expectation of the citizens influenced by official propaganda as well as by citizens' stays in Western countries (Domke, 2016, p. 359) led to an imbalance that finally erupted in 1980.

Gender, Demography, and Social Policies in the 1970s

In his article in the 1988 collection "Social Policies", Bolesław Przywara underlines that "social policies also take social aspects of population policies into account" and had therefore also to look at "demography" (Przywara, 1988, p. 17). In the following section, I take a closer look at the connection between social policies, gender, and demographic developments in the 1970s. Female employment rose during this decade. While in 1970, 16,400 working places for women were registered, more than 70,000 women were looking for a job. Until the end of the decade, approximately 5.2 million women were working. Since the middle of the decade, the percentage of married women rose to more than 50 percent of all women working in the socialist economy (1976: 3.2 m.). However, despite the rising percentage of women in the labour market and, despite the fact that more and more had a university degree, they could only rarely be found in leading positions (Domke, 2016, pp. 44, 47–48).

Women's employment was read by conservative clergymen and politicians as one of the main reasons for a perceived "crisis of the family". The Bishops' Conference saw such a crisis in the rising numbers of divorces and thus children living in "incomplete families", or being "social orphans" in the custody of state institutions, as well as in a high abortion rate. The latter was, in the clergymen's view, responsible for the "low" birth rate of Polish society provoking the "vanishing" of the Polish people (Konferencja Episkopatu Polski 1977: fols. 1-21).

This fear of "depopulation" came at a time when the population was actually still growing: from 32.7 million in 1970 to 35.7 million ten years later (Domke, 2016, p. 33). In this decade alone, more than 6.3 million children were born (Domke, 2016, p. 35). However, statistics showed that the growth of the population was not steady. While climbing to its peak in 1976 (10.7), it slowly decreased until the end of the decade (Domke, 2016, p. 39, Tab. 2). Thus, experts from the Party and state bureaucrats also foresaw problems arising: a prognosis from the 1970s saw the year 1985 as a turning point towards an overaged Polish society (Wydział Nauki i Oświaty n.d.: passim). Different pres-

sure groups such as Catholic MPs in the Parliamentary Circle PAX argued that it was because of women's double burden that Polish society could not achieve its "demographic optimum". They claimed that working women with more than two children were not able to fulfil their diverse obligations. Therefore, the members of PAX favoured an extension of maternity leave and a better "population policy" to overcome these problems, as well as a new, more restrictive, control of abortion (Koło Poselskie PAX 1971, fol. 363). The Bishops' Conference went further and wanted to have a pension for women who had, during their lifetime, brought up their children instead of working in a job. Another demand was to pay mothers with children 75 percent of a full-time equivalent if they worked only part-time, i.e. 50 percent (Konferencja Episkopatu Polski 1977: fol. 17, Konferencja Episkopatu Polski 1978: n.p.). One Catholic NGO had a very extreme view on this problem, since it argued that female jobs would generally lead to the "moral and ethical corruption" of women (Polski Komitet Obrony Życia i Rodziny n.d.: fol. 26).

Demographic arguments also became more important inside the Party at this time. Members from its inner circle, such as Barbara Sidorczuk, declared already during the Seventh Party Convention in 1975 that women became later mothers and had fewer children not because "they were convinced" of this, but because of the pressure they felt to "fulfil their manifold roles" (Komitet Centralny Polskiej Zjednoczonej Partii Robotniczej 1975: n.p.).

Other aspects referred to health issues. A medical study drew the conclusion that the double burden of women was responsible for pre-term births. A survey in the city of Łódź, known for its textile industry and therefore a centre of female employment in Poland, concluded that, in comparison to unemployed women, foetuses from working mothers received less oxygen during pregnancies (Wydział Społeczno-Zawodowy 1983: n.p.).

Thus, the government reacted: First, it established a Council for Family Affairs. Its aims were to analyse and advise the government with regard to demographic issues, and family and social policies (Krajowa Rada Kobiet Polskich 1979: n.p.). Second, it extended maternity leave from 12 to 18 months (Borodziej, 2010, pp. 344–345, 450). Third, it introduced an allowance for every new born child of 2,000 złoty. One effect of this was that, by the end of the decade, more than 350,000 women were on unpaid leave (Białczyński n.d.: n.p.). This was also connected to the emerging economic crisis.

1980s: Social Policies in the Decade of Turmoil

People's Poland' "belle époque" ended in the final years of the 1970s. In 1979, the symptoms of an economic crisis became obvious. In the summer of that year, the government discussed the energy supply situation of Poland that had become "a catastrophe", especially

when looking at Poland's most important resource: coal. Due to inefficient means of production and problems in work organisation, industries' needs had risen. The government saw no possibility to increase the available quantity e.g. by lowering the amount of exported coal, because it depended on the profits from trade to pay back debts. This had dire consequences for the whole economy of People's Poland: In 1979, its GNP was lower than the year before and step by step economic growth came to a standstill – in 1981, there was a decline of 13 percent (Jarosz, 2017, pp. 221–222). The national debt rose rapidly during the 1970s, unknown to the average citizen. At the end of the decade, between 75 and 82 percent of the export volume were devoured by obligations. Inflation rose and real earnings fell (Borodziej, 2010, pp. 352, 359, 372).

In the words of the Polish historian Andrzej Friszke, the crisis of the early 1980s "broke the unwritten social contract, on which social life in states with real existing Socialism is based: The citizens accepted the [Communist] rituals, the Party ruled, and the Party ensured the improvement of the citizens' standard of living" (Domke, 2016, p. 357). Therefore, it is not surprising that these economic turbulences led to a major political crisis and Gierek and his fellows were removed from the Party and state leadership. As has been shown, expectations rose in the 1970s, because of internal as well as external factors, such as the possibility to travel to Western countries and experience the standard of living there. The economic crisis of the 1980s called the government's ability to ensure even the basic needs of the Polish citizens into question (Wasiak, 2019, p. 105).

All these symptoms of crisis led to the emergence of a protest movement that became known as Solidarity (*Solidarność*). It identified itself as an "independent trade union" and through this rivalled the Party's understanding of itself as "advocate (and teacher) of the working masses". However, the political struggle and strikes deepened the economic crisis. And, although the movement was very heterogeneous – PUWP members were also active in Solidarity – its national conferences put the question of gender policies and, especially the question of the permissibility of abortion, on the agenda and showed that there was a conservative majority, at least in terms of the members of these conferences. Although the first strikes erupted because of the expulsion of a female worker (Anna Walentynowicz) and women were more than half of the registered members of the movement, their representation in key processes of decision-making was almost zero. For example, only two female members of the "opposition", i.e. former Solidarity, participated in the Round Table negotiations in 1989 (Kondratowicz and Bikont 2001).

During the crisis at the beginning of the 1980s, the mistrust in the capabilities of the new government, also voiced by members of Solidarity, was intensified by the attempts made by the

administration under the leadership of Wojciech Jaruzelski to overcome it. By favouring "reforms" to rescue "socialist economics" that encouraged women to stay at home and that introduced higher prices for several goods, a vicious circle was created that undermined the already eroded authority of both Party and government. New concepts like "economic measures" and "operating profit" were introduced in state-owned companies and social inequalities became a common phenomenon in this decade. Social policy experts saw this clearly as "a problem" (Wasiak, 2019, pp. 108–109), but their options to find a solution for this within the bounds of "socialist economics" were limited.

Looking at gender relations, the crisis and the reforms had, of course, a major impact on working women. Thus, the women's commission of the PUWP and the National Council of Polish Women were disappointed with the Central Committee and its policies. At the beginning of the 1980s, the Council's members criticised the fact that women were under-represented in higher levels of administration, either in their work places, in political bodies, or even in the Party (Krajowa Rada Kobiet Polskich 1981: n.p.). The members of the Party's women's commission accused the PUWP of tolerating the existence of "a glass ceiling", discriminating against women who had to be "twice as … qualified as men" if applying for a high-level position (Wydział Społeczno-Zawodowy 1984: n.p). The women's commission demanded a "rational use" of female potentials and reminded the Party and the state leadership that, in terms of socialist ideology, it was the state's responsibility to establish gender equality and equal chances for social mobility (Wydział Społeczno-Zawodowy 1984a: n.p.).

Furthermore, the commission had to defend women's rights that were attacked by conservative pressure groups at that time. "Petty bourgeois and clerical propaganda" considered childbirth and childrearing to be the only reason for women's existence. According to the commission members, they became more aggressive and gained influence (Wydział Społeczno-Zawodowy 1986: n.p.). This also applied to PUWP policies. The 1980s showed a convergence between traditional ideas of family articulated by conservative Catholic actors and conservatives inside the PUWP. Generally, a trend towards re-traditionalisation seemed to become more dominant in the Party policies, as Stańczak-Wiślicz et al. (2020) show.

However, other political bodies supported this turning towards traditional models as well. The Movement for National Rebirth that was established after the introduction of martial law in 1981, acted as a body of "national unity" incorporating also Catholic groups. In a statement in the early 1980s the movement argued that:

> The restoration of the standards of living and the development of Polish families is only possible if we analyse correctly the threats to demography and introduce counter-

> measures to ensure an *optimal population policy*. These [measures] must combat depopulation, the over ageing of society and the enormous transition from times of demographic highs and demographic lows. (Komisja spraw rodziny 1989: n.p.)

Implicitly, the Movement took over the narrative of "undesired demographic development" and aimed at a reduction of women's employment. This becomes evident when looking at the very strange reasoning for the lack of childcare given by an expert commission of the Movement: its members stated that women's preference for part-time jobs was because of their wish to "fulfil their educational obligations" (Komisja spraw rodziny n.d., n.p.), not mentioning the reforms in the 1980s that were responsible for the lack of state-financed childcare. For example, only 5 percent of children between three months and three years old could go to a crèche and only 37.4 percent aged between three and six years went to a state-run kindergarten (Kozanowska, 1988, p. 101).

The reasons for this 'conservative backlash' in the 1980s are manifold. First, demographic reasoning, the fear of a low birth rate influenced the debates. Second, the Catholic Church and its supporters had momentum on their side. The Church's increasing authority throughout the 1980s was based upon its role as a mediator between Party and society and on the authority of the Polish pope, John Paul II. Third, closely connected, more and more Catholic-minded experts became members of state-run political bodies. This was one attempt of the government to overcome the gap between (Catholic) 'society' and (communist) 'state' that became obvious during the crisis of the 1980s and led to a decrease in the political authority of the PUWP. This also affected the Council for Family Affairs. There, Włodzimierz Fijałkowki and Wanda Półtawska, a close friend to the aforementioned pope, became members and influenced its politics. Fourth, this convergence with the 'Catholic side' was a characteristic of this decade and the relation between state and Church. The regime's attempt to achieve a "national understanding" with the anti-Communist opposition and the Catholic Church led to the withdraw of the Party from some policy fields. Fifth, the Communist political elites aimed at reducing female jobs to "save the socialist economy", because of the economic crisis and the necessity to reconstruct the economy on the basis of rationalisation and the introduction of mechanisms partly resembling market economics.

Transformation: a new political and economic system and new challenges

Ultimately, the reforms did not save "the socialist economy" and socialism in Poland. The entire system collapsed, first economically, then politically. The political stalemate that emerged after the partly free elections of summer 1989 could only be overcome by electing Tadeusz Mazowiecki, a member of the non-Communist opposition, as Prime

Minister. Rapidly, the last remaining Communist ministers were removed and widespread economic reform introduced. The so-called "Balcerowicz plan" turned the economic system upside down. Former state-owned companies were sold or closed. Unemployment rose rapidly – at the end of 1991 more than two million people were registered as looking for work – and inflation skyrocketed: in 1990, it reached 550 percent, as the new government still tried to reduce to debts to foreign creditors (Chwalba, 2010, pp. 74–77). The subsidy of basic goods, such as food, ended and poverty became a common experience: in 1994, more than 41 percent of the population were considered as being poor (Chwalba, 2010, p. 144).

The transformation hit women hard: Although they were young and had a better education, the unemployment amongst women rose faster than amongst their male colleagues. In 1990, women were 50.9 percent of all persons registered as unemployed. This percentage rose to 57 percent by 1994 (Zespół równego statusu kobiet i mężczyzn 2000, fol. 7). This influenced other aspects of women's occupation: the percentage of female owners of companies did not rise between the beginning and the end of the decade, staying at around 37 percent (ibid., fol. 4).

Regarding the question of gender relations and reproductive behaviour, this development intensified the perception of a "demographic crisis". Because of economic turbulence, the political instability that Polish society experienced since the 1980s, and the transformation process itself, a general atmosphere of uncertainty emerged. Since 1984, the figures of new-born children decreased from year to year: in 1983, more than 723,000 were born; by 2004 this figure was less than half (351,000). Left-wing (post-communist) parties as well as right-wing ones blamed the introduction of an "anti-social liberalism" at the beginning of the 1990s as responsible for this "unfavourable demographic development" (Chwalba, 2010, p. 78), evoking the discourse on social policies and demography in the 1970s. The Polish historian Andrzej Chwalba stresses that children had become "a luxury … item" (Chwalba, 2010, p. 129).

Since then, the falling birth rate has often been discussed in parliament as well as in public debates. The introduction of a children's allowance by the current government in 2015 has, until now, no long-lasting positive effect; only for a moment it seemed that the general trend was about to change when the birth rate rose in 2016. However, this socio-political mechanism has not achieved its aims, since it seems that cultural developments and a trend towards smaller families as well as social uncertainties are more important for family planning than the social policies of the current Polish government.

CONCLUSIONS

As Fiona Williams argues, gender (and race) has been marginalized when analysing social policies (Williams, 1989). This verdict can also be applied

to (post-) communist Poland: The question of gender was not at the centre of the different studies that emerged in the 1970s and 1980s. Only after the system change and during the negotiations prior to EU accession, it was perceived as a problem.

This article emphasises the close connection between social policies and demography, both in the 1970s and in the following decades. At the centre of the interest of demographers, politicians, and intellectuals were women that had to be utilized in an effort either to improve the economic situation and/or the demographic development that had been deemed "disadvantageous" since the 1970s. Furthermore, throughout the period under investigation the Catholic Church and its supporters tried to influence the governments' social policies, e.g. by attacking female employment and the law on abortion to "save" the "Polish nation" from "vanishing".

As I have demonstrated, it is difficult to look at the development of Communist social policies in Poland without looking at the economic context; therefore, it is not surprising that a major focus of recent historical scholarship focuses on the economic history of People's Poland in the 1970s, which I discussed at the beginning of this paper. The early 1970s saw an expansion of social welfare that the Polish society experienced for the first time since the end of the war, and not repeated since, except perhaps at the time of Poland's accession to the European Union in 2004. However, this expansion was built upon Western credits and a risky plan by the Gierek administration creating a new "social contract" that also aimed at the protection of the political leading role of the PUWP. Already by the middle of the decade, problems that arose were not discussed but silenced by the "propaganda of success". Moreover, in the 1970s another threat was perceived that had to be dealt with: "undesired demographic development".

As I have shown, women were the main targets of socio-political measures, especially since the 1970s. They were on the one hand essential for demographic development and thus the Gierek administration tried to stimulate reproductive behaviour with positive impulses (maternity leave, allowances etc.). Furthermore, they were the ones who were expected to raise children. On the other hand, they were seen as "expendable" in times of crisis. In the early 1980s, as well as in the early 1990s, different measures aimed at removing women from the labour market, either for a longer period, or "just" for the time of (late-) pregnancy and maternity leave. However, because the lacking investments did not solve the most pressing problems of Polish society (housing, childcare etc.), women were often forced to stay at home and concentrate on the upbringing of their children.

Regarding the question of social policies in Communist Poland, one must state that it was under-financed at all times. Only during the early Gierek years it seemed that social welfare and a vast array of socio-political measures

and the introduction of a comprehensive social policy could be realised. This attempt has influenced the older generation's perception of this "belle époque" until today. However, because of the risky economic manoeuvres and the dependence on Western credits as well as widespread expectations caused by a growing knowledge of living standards abroad, Gierek's social policies, as well as those of his successors who had to cope with national debt and economic crisis originating from the 1970s, remained more of a mirage than an actual well-thought-out policy. This might be the biggest irony in all of the described developments: the improvements in social policies and the "opening" of Poland that were meant to legitimise Gierek's regime ultimately led to its downfall. Finally, the 1980s showed that the next government could not turn back the clock.

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