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COMMUNIST HERITAGE AS THE WELFARE STATE POINT OF REFERENCE. POLAND'S CASE STUDY

Abstract. This study explores the legacy of the communist welfare state in Poland and its impact on contemporary social democracy. It examines how Polish leftist parties have engaged with the socio-economic achievements of the Polish People's Republic (PRL) while navigating post-communist political cleavages. Through historical and comparative analysis, the paper investigates how Polish social democracy has used its communist heritage in shaping its policy agenda, particularly regarding welfare provisions such as housing, education, and healthcare. The findings suggest that while the Polish left has at times strategically employed the achievements of the PRL in political discourse, recent shifts – marked by a retreat from this historical narrative – have weakened its electoral appeal. The study raises questions about whether Polish social democracy can leverage its historical legacy to advocate for a stronger welfare state in an era of neoliberal dominance.

Keywords: Poland, social democracy, communist heritage, welfare state

Introduction

The history of the communist system in Poland is identical to the advent of the era of Marxism-Leninism in the rest of Central and Eastern Europe.

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The division of Europe between the victorious powers in the war against German Nazism defined ideological, military, and socio-economic spheres of influence for forty-four years. Andrzej Leder points out,

“a social revolution occurred during this time in Poland. Cruel, brutal, imposed from outside, but a revolution. This revolution incredibly deeply plowed through the fabric of Polish society, creating the conditions for today's expansion of the middle class, or bourgeoisie, for perhaps the most profound change in the mentality of Poles in centuries: a departure from the mentality defined by the countryside and the manor to that determined by the city and the urban way of life.”²

Part of the revolution mentioned above was implementing the Stalinist social and economic policy model in Poland and other countries in the Soviet sphere of influence. The full employment policy based on the industrial economy, urbanization, free public primary, secondary, and higher education spread, and access to universal health care was a cornerstone of the “communist welfare state.” This system changed, evolved, and took on its national dimension in the following decades, affecting not only the standard of living under the system of real socialism but also the capitalist democracy that came to Poland after 1989.³ The universality and public access to health care, higher education, and millions of cooperatives, companies, and communal housing are a legacy of the Polish People's Republic (PRL, *Polska Rzeczpospolita Ludowa*). A period for the politically dominant forces after 2005 is still a negative reference point. The two parties dominating the Polish party system, Law and Justice (PiS, *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*) and Civic Platform (PO, *Platforma Obywatelska*), refer to the communist period in Poland in an unambiguously pejorative manner. Both formations refer affirmatively in their historical policy to the “Solidarity” (*Solidarność*) movement, whose activity in the 1980s decisively contributed to the collapse of the system of real socialism and the political hegemony of the single party, the Polish United Workers' Party (PZPR, *Polska Zjednoczona Partia Robotnicza*). PiS, in its delegitimization

² Andrzej Leder, *Prześniona Rewolucja. Ćwiczenia z logiki historycznej* [Sleepwalking the Revolution. An Exercise in Historical Logic] (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2014), 7.

³ Tomasz Inglot, *Welfare States in East Central Europe, 1919-2004* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 31.

of the PRL, uses, above all, the argument that communism in Poland was a foreign system imposed and implemented with Soviet violence. The PO is more likely to use liberal arguments, such as Poland under communism having not respected human rights and civil liberties and being an economically inefficient and underprivileged state. The only parliamentary force in Poland that acknowledges the socio-economic gains of the communist period is the New Left (NL, *Nowa Lewica*).⁴

Through comparative and historical analysis and content examination, this study investigates how Polish social democracy purposefully leverages its post-communist legacy in crafting its political agenda. The study will integrate analyses of political communication and the politics of collective memory within the Polish center left. What remains underexplored in the literature is an evaluation of how the SLD/NL's post-communist heritage can serve as a strategic advantage in confronting the two right-wing parties, PiS and PO, across socio-economic and political-symbolic domains. The subsequent analysis can address the question of the degree to which the symbolism of the communist welfare state can constitute a form of social democratic response to neoliberal predominance.

Was Communism a Welfare State? Definitional Challenges

A brief definition of a welfare state is

“a state which spends a large amount of money to make sure that its citizens all have adequate housing, education, public transportation, and health services.”⁵

⁴ The New Left was formed from the merger of the Democratic Left Alliance (SLD, *Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej*) and Robert Biedron's Spring (*Wiosna Roberta Biedronia*) in 2021. SLD was formed in 1999 from a coalition of left-wing political parties centered around the Social Democracy of the Republic of Poland (SdRP, *Socjaldemokracja Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej*). The SdRP was formed in 1990 due to the dissolution of the Polish United Workers' Party. Bartosz Rydliński, “The State of Social Democracy in Poland,” in *The Social Democratic Parties in the Visegrad Countries: Predicaments and Prospects for Progressivism*, Ania Skrzypek, András Bíró-Nagy (eds.) (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), 139.

⁵ Peter Holmes, ed., *Dictionary of Politics and Government. Dictionary of Politics and Government*, 3rd ed. (London: Bloomsbury, 2004), 260.

The Routledge Dictionary of Politics further states that the welfare state is a comprehensive range of public services, predominantly funded through national insurance contributions from employees and employers. The goal of the welfare state is not only to secure the established entitlement to an elderly pension, but also to institutionalize support for unemployment compensation and sickness and injury benefits. The concept of the welfare state emphasizes that the state, through its taxation, should address financial hardships resulting from misfortunes for those unable to manage on their own.⁶

Central to our analysis is an attempt to grapple with the research question of how far the communist system (also called *real socialism* in the existing literature) fulfilled the systemic role of the welfare state. Tomasz Inglot argues that it is

“extremely difficult to accurately assess and classify East and Central European welfare states in relation not only to their Western equivalents but also in reference to the original Soviet model.”⁷

This problem is influenced not only by the sheer diversity of social policy systems in the various socialist countries, but also by the multiplicity of political and economic systems found in Central and Eastern European countries throughout the twentieth century. The Polish case study is an ideal exemplification of this. Since regaining independence in 1918, the country has operated under a democratic system (1918-1926), an authoritarian system (1926-1939), was under Nazi occupation and Stalinist totalitarianism (1939-1945), during the period of People's Poland the political regime was totalitarian (1945-1956), then authoritarian (1956-1989). The victory of *Solidarity* in the partial free elections to the Sejm on June 4, 1989, and the appointment of the first non-communist Prime Minister Tadeusz Mazowiecki, mark the beginning of the democratic system. Each of the aforementioned political systems was associated with a different form of socio-economic system, which

⁶ David Robertson, *The Routledge Dictionary of Politics*, 1st ed. (London: Routledge, 2004), 509-511.

⁷ Inglot, *Welfare States*, 23.

evolved over the decades. The Second Polish Republic was a capitalist country with selective and residual social policies;⁸ the Nazi occupation period was characterized by the colonial dependence of conquered Poland on the Third German Reich.⁹ The period of communist hegemony in Poland, in addition to ideological, political, military, and economic dependence on the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, was the only period in which we observe the creation of policies and institutions that fulfill the systemic role of the welfare state.

Other countries in Central and Eastern Europe witnessed various regimes during the aforesaid periods. Before World War II, Czechoslovakia remained the only democratic state in the region; all other Central and Eastern European countries were authoritarian regimes. During the communist hegemony in the region, we also witnessed vast differences in the scale of regime hardness. For instance, East German, Czechoslovakian, and Romanian systems of real socialism remained more authoritarian than the regime of the People's Poland after 1956. Which is why, as Tomasz Inglot rightly notes:

“We should view any individual East European welfare state as a permanent, slowly evolving «construction site» or an unfinished project that was built on discernible historical foundations with a certain vision of an «ideal-type,» national model of social security but always falling short of reaching its ambitious goals. Thus, the major underlying problem we are facing in this type of analysis is the long and persistent history of political discontinuity and instability in the region. This problem stems from the need to account for the repeated failure of successive governments to secure long-term economic prosperity and legitimacy in this part of Europe during most of the twentieth century.”¹⁰

⁸ Paweł Grata, “Social Privileges in the Second Polish Republic,” *Studia Historiae Oeconomicae* 33, vol. 1 (2016): 19-36, doi:10.1515/sho-2015-0002; Paweł Grata, “At the Origins of Welfare State? Social Expenses in the Budgetary Policy in the Second Polish Republic,” *Studia Historiae Oeconomicae* 35, vol. 1 (2017): 7-26, doi:10.1515/sho-2017-0002.

⁹ David Furber, “Near as Far in the Colonies: The Nazi Occupation of Poland,” *The International History Review* 26, vol. 3 (2004): 541-579.

¹⁰ Inglot, *Welfare States*, 24.

Features of the *Welfare State of People's Poland*

The beginning of the implementation of the communist welfare state coincided with one of the most challenging moments in Polish history. The country was not only changing its national borders, which involved the mass resettlement of millions of citizens from the so-called “eastern borderlands” of today’s Lithuania, Belarus, and Ukraine to the so-called “recovered lands” (part of the former Prussia Varmia and Masuria, Lower and Upper Silesia, and Pomerania). In addition, Poland was entering the communist period with a decimated population. At the outbreak of World War II, Poland had 35.3 million citizens, while after the end of the war, there were less than twenty-four million.¹¹ There were irreversible changes in the nationality structure. Almost all Polish Jews were murdered during the German Nazi genocide of the Holocaust. Poland, as a result of Nazi and Stalinist oppression, also lost its intelligentsia, which was successively annihilated by the German and Soviet dictatorships.

Adam Leszczyński points out that as soon as socialism was implemented in Poland, a state economic planning system began to function which was often a product of intra-party tensions and the hierarchical structure of the PZPR.¹² The solutions of the command economy were based on the longer practice of communist rule in the Soviet Union. In a sense, the attempt to transplant this model involved economic conflicts, as the Polish working class involved in the country’s postwar reconstruction was often under ideological pressure to work piecework under harsh conditions. Despite these tensions and social challenges, the authorities of the People’s Poland introduced a series of changes modernizing the labor market (full employment policy), the social and health insurance system (the universality of benefits), creating millions of communal, company and cooperative rental apartments, spreading

¹¹ Magdalena Ambroch, Grażyna Czermak, Elżbieta Lisiak, Grażyna Szydłowska, *100 Lat Polski w Liczbach (1918-2018)* [100 Years of Poland in Numbers (1918-2018)], accessed March 23, 2025, <https://stat.gov.pl/obszary-tematyczne/inne-opracowania/inne-opracowania-zbiorcze/100-lat-polski-w-liczbach-1918-2018,30,1.html>.

¹² Adam Leszczyński, *Skok w Nowoczesność. Polityka Wzrostu w Krajach Peryferyjnych 1943-1980* [Leap into Modernity – Political Economy of Growth on the Periphery, 1943-1980] (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2013), 355-358.

the system of universal and free education of every level.¹³ In this context, the spread of higher education and the opening to students coming from the peasant and working classes is noteworthy. The introduction of so-called *points for origin*, i.e., the favoritism of the underprivileged classes, was intended to bring about a socialist revolution in science and university education.¹⁴

During the discussed period, labor was the main point of reference of the communist authorities. This was confirmed both in the symbolic layer and in the practice of governance. Symptomatic in this regard is the first sentence of the preamble to the Constitution of the People's Republic of Poland: "The Polish People's Republic is a republic of the working people."¹⁵ Also, the policy of planned urbanization and mass industrialization can be treated as a unique feature of the Polish communist welfare state all the more so because it was a deliberate action of the communist authorities aiming to raise the standard of living of society after the post-war trauma.¹⁶ While the first Three-Year Plan (1947-1949) was a spectacular effort to quickly rebuild critical infrastructure after the hecatomb of the Dawn War, subsequent iterations of the planned economy were more or less dependent on the ideological priorities of the PZPR leadership. The assumptions of successive economic plans were only sometimes based on socio-economic analysis. More often, they were held hostage to the ideological and political priorities of the USSR and, by extension, the People's Poland; Andrzej Leder points out in *Sleepwalking the Revolution*:

¹³ As Marcin Wronski points out in his research, in the People's Republic of Poland, the biological standard of living improved until the 1980s, which we can observe in the progressive growth of body height. In the 1980s, this growth slowed down, while in the 1990s, it stopped. Marcin Wronski, "The Full Distribution of Adult Height in Poland: Cohorts Born Between 1920 and 1996. The Biological Cost of the Economic Transition," *Economics & Human Biology*, 50 (2023): 13, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ehb.2023.101261>; Inglot, *Welfare States*, 26.

¹⁴ Agata Zysiak, *Punkty Za Pochodzenie: Powojenna Modernizacja i Uniwersytet w Robotniczym Mieście* [Points of Origin: Post-War Modernization and the University in the Workers' Town] (Cracow: Zakład Wydawniczy "Nomos," 2016); Joseph P. Fiszman, *Revolution and Tradition in People's Poland: Education and Socialization* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972).

¹⁵ *Konstytucja Polskiej Rzeczypospolitej Ludowej Uchwalona Przez Sejm Ustawodawczy w Dniu 22 Lipca 1952 r.* [Constitution of the Polish People's Republic, adopted by the Legislative Sejm on July 22, 1952], accessed March 23, 2025, <https://isap.sejm.gov.pl/isap.nsf/download.xsp/WDU19520330232/O/D19520232.pdf>.

¹⁶ Leder, *Sleepwalking the Revolution*, 173.

“Industrialization, involving the creation of factories building factories that would ultimately produce tanks, was subordinated to the imperial perspective of the Soviet Union and its war plans.”¹⁷

As a result of the mismatch between economic priorities and social expectations, there were cyclical political crises in the People’s Republic of Poland, which the communist authorities stifled by force. After the workers’ protests on the coast in December 1970 and the assumption of the post of First Secretary of the PZPR Central Committee by the relatively liberal Edward Gierek, a new socio-economic time dawned in People’s Poland. As Adam Leszczynski notes, the new team leading communist Poland in the 1970s promised

“a steady increase in living standards. It no longer expected the citizens to make sacrifices for the sake of a beautiful future. It was also a necessity because dissatisfaction was palpable [...] The realization of the Gierek team's idea of economic growth was possible thanks to the relaxation of international relations and the opening of international financial markets to the PRL.”¹⁸

The so-called *Gierek decade* was the entire period of People's Poland, a period of greatest *prosperity* symbolized by the construction of nearly 2.5 million rental apartments during this period.¹⁹ In addition, during this period, the PRL carried out a number of investments, such as the construction of the Katowice Steelworks, the Central Railway Station in Warsaw, the Central Railway Main Line (CMK), the Warsaw-Katowice expressway, the łazienkowska route in Warsaw, the Refinery and the Northern Port in Gdansk, Small-Scale Automobile Factory (FSM) producing the Fiat 126p (the so-called *Maluch*), the Belchatow Power Plant, and the Bogdanka mine.

¹⁷ Leder, *Sleepwalking the Revolution*, 174.

¹⁸ Leszczyński, *Leap into Modernity*, 353-354.

¹⁹ Andrzej Prajsnar, *Zastał Ceglany, a Zostawił Wielkopłytowe. Ile Mieszkań Wybudował Gierek?* [He Found It Bricked; He Left a Large-format Plate. How Many Apartments Did Gierek Build?], accessed March 23, 2025, <https://forsal.pl/artykuly/938053,zastal-ceglane-a-zostawil-wielkoplytowe-ile-mieszkan-wybudowal-gierek.html>.

As a result of another cyclical economic crisis in the People's Poland's economy, aggravated by the oil crisis and the deterioration of geopolitical relations between the Soviet bloc and the West, in August 1980, the authorities were forced to raise prices on basic goods. As a result, workers' strikes broke out in Gdansk and Szczecin in the shipyards, spreading throughout the country. Thus, the first trade union, independent of the single party, Solidarity, was formed. As David Ost notes,

"Poland's «revolutionaries,» however, did not seek to overthrow the state. They carefully refrained from demanding changes in the party or state structure, for that was «politics.» The new union movement stated clearly from the beginning that it did not want to be a political movement."²⁰

This shows that the so-called *first* Solidarity did not so much want to overthrow, but reform the system of real socialism. Paradoxically, this demonstrates the political success of the communist authorities at the beginning of the 1980s so that it would be more in line with the needs of the working class. In less than thirty-six years, the communist system had led to the full emancipation of workers, who demonstrated their willingness to co-determine the politics and economy of the PRL. From the perspective of our analysis, we can put forward the thesis that the so-called *Solidarity Festival*, which lasted between August 1980 and the imposition of martial law on December 13, 1981, testifies to the modernizing success of the labor world reforms implemented by the communist authorities.

Communist Welfare State Heritage in the Left's Political Narrative

The period of General Wojciech Jaruzelski's rule in the 1980s seriously affected the perception of the last decade of the PRL. The imposition of martial law, the internment of Solidarity leader Edward Gierek and his closest associates, the continuing conflict between the PZPR and Solidarity,

²⁰ David Ost, *Solidarity and the Politics of Anti-Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), 75.

and the deteriorating economic situation influenced the political decline of the People's Republic of Poland. The Round Table talks, in which the ruling *nomenklatura* agreed with the social and ecclesiastical side on the path of transition from authoritarian socialism to liberal democracy, are essential points in leftist memory politics. Post-communist social democracy points to the then attitude of the PZPR elite as an example of state and geopolitical wisdom. Taking part in those historic negotiations, Aleksander Kwasniewski and Leszek Miller, leaders of the SdRP and SLD, symbolized those mentioned above successful systemic transition.

One of the cornerstones of leftist historical politics – which also influences perceptions of the communist state of selection – is criticism of the neoliberal Balcerowicz plan, which involved a radical, *shock therapy* transition from a socialist command economy to free-market capitalism. The plan was associated with exponentially increasing unemployment, which after three years of implementing the reforms amounted to three million people, mass privatization of national assets, and industrial decline.²¹ In this context, it is worth quoting the words of Leszek Miller, former prime minister and chairman of the SLD, who years later described the seizure of power by the Solidarity camp and the context of the enactment of the Balcerowicz plan in this way:

“If you start the story of the Polish transformation from the Round Table agreements and then we compare the ideas made there, the attempts to shape economic policy, the ideas that appeared there with the laws that appeared in the so-called Contract Sejm. So, Sejm, which laid the foundations of the economy and parliamentary democracy in Poland, it must be said that these were two different worlds. The Round Table agreements bet, first of all, a very slow process of evolution of the political system [...] The Mazowiecki government is not a continuation of the Round Table; it is a rupture of the Round Table agreement.”²²

²¹ Bartosz M. Rydlinski, “Economic Crisis as a Factor of the Neoliberal Policy in Poland,” *Prakseologia* 159 (2017): 41.

²² Leszek Miller, “Zdradzili PZPR” [Leszek Miller – They betrayed the PZPR], *Youtube*, accessed March 23, 2025, <https://youtu.be/jEZj32dyy4Q?si=aoJQb5BMDpUv-bYI>.

In Poland, one of the key cleavages that defined politics and social emotions was the post-communist one, in which the right was identified with the legacy of the Solidarity movement.²³ At the same time, the left was seen as the heir of the Polish United Workers' Party and the social gains of People's Poland. The post-Solidarity right in this division tended to play the role of representing the world of capital. At the same time, the post-communist left was mainly identified as the voice of the labor world in the political debate. The role of the post-communist cleavage changed in 2005, when candidates of groups referring to the legacy of Solidarity entered the second round of the presidential election: Lech Kaczyński, representing Law and Justice (PiS), and Donald Tusk, chairman of the Civic Platform (PO).²⁴ These parties also won first and second place in the parliamentary elections.²⁵ The resignation from the presidential election of SLD candidate Włodzimierz Cimoszewicz and the fourth results of this committee in the elections to the Sejm symbolically ended the role and significance of the post-communist division. Since 2005, Polish politics has become an arena of dispute between PiS and PO, which almost entirely fits the sociopolitical cleavages described by Seymour Martin Lipset and Stein Rokkan.²⁶

After 2005, Polish social democracy with its strongest party, the SLD (currently NL), was unable to break the PO-PiS political duopoly. One of the critical aspects of our analysis is whether and how the left tried to use its affirmative approach to the communist period as an argument for the defense and expansion of the welfare state. To this end, it is worthwhile to critically analyze both the speeches of SLD politicians

²³ Mirosława Grabowska, *The Post-Communist Cleavage. Social Bases of Politics in Poland after 1989* (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2021).

²⁴ *Wybory Prezydenta Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej 2005* [2005 Polish presidential election], The National Electoral Commission (website), accessed March 23, 2025, <https://wybory2005.pkw.gov.pl/PZT/PL/WYN/W/index.htm>.

²⁵ *Wyniki Wyborów Do Sejmu Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej zarządzone na dzień 25 września 2005* [Results of the elections to the Sejm of the Republic of Poland announced on September 25, 2005], The National Electoral Commission (website), accessed March 23, 2025, <https://wybory2005.pkw.gov.pl/SJM/PL/WYN/W/index.htm>.

²⁶ Seymour Martin Lipset and Stein Rokkan, *Party Systems and Voter Alignments: Cross-National Perspectives* (New York: The Free Press, 1967).

in the field of the politics of communist memory and the studies of ideological circles associated with Polish social democracy.

In 2012, the Ferdinand Lassalle Center for Social Thought in Wrocław (*Ośrodek Myśli Społecznej im. Ferdynanda Lassalle'a*), a left-wing association, in cooperation with the German social democratic Friedrich Ebert Foundation, published a book titled *Social Democratic Social Policy*. It featured an interview with Rafał Chwedoruk, a political scientist from Warsaw University. When asked by Bartosz Machalica (co-founder of the social democratic think tank Ignacy Daszyński Center) to what extent the People's Poland was a welfare state, Chwedoruk replied:

“Certainly, the PRL model was comparable to Western European welfare states in terms of the effects it had. It was an egalitarian system that changed the structure of Polish society, already significantly altered by the drama of World War II. It solved many social issues, giving full employment and thus eliminating unemployment, creating an extremely efficient educational system through public institutions. Significantly, the division of the country into Poland A and Poland B – typical of the Second Republic and the partition period – was primarily bridged. The People's Poland introduced a pension system reminiscent of social democratic solutions. Housing policy also resembled the German model used after 1945. While the Scandinavian and Austrian models were based on local government in housing, the German model was based on cooperatives.”²⁷

We can see from this example that a researcher at the University of Warsaw points out common features between the social model operating in socialist Poland and the Western European welfare state. In the interview, Rafał Chwedoruk pointed out essential differences between the two systems:

²⁷ Mochał Syska, ed., *Socjaldemokratyczna Polityka Społeczna* [Social Democratic Social Policy] (Warsaw: Ośrodek Myśli Społecznej im. Ferdynanda Lassalle'a, 2012), 173.

"In communist Poland, the subject of social policy was made the enterprise - it was the largest provider. By the way, this was more reminiscent of Japanese solutions than Western European social democratic solutions [...] A certain paternalism also characterized the PRL. This is because it was aimed primarily at the rural population migrating to the cities. Moreover, it was introduced by people who often came from rural backgrounds. Western European social democracy was a decidedly urban movement, focusing on workers' self-liberation and self-organization, as well as their partnership with other actors, including the state and local government."²⁸

In the book we observed an attempt to incorporate into the ideological circulation a narrative testifying that the People's Republic of Poland fulfilled the systemic role of a social state with its civilizational achievements and accomplishments.

A similar description of the communistic past was carried out by the authors of the *Historical Essential of the Left*, a study by the Ignacy Daszynski Center (*Centrum im. Ignacego Daszyńskiego*) on behalf of the SLD. In this analysis, we could read, among other things, the following description of People's Poland:

"The People's Republic of Poland was Poland's most radical attempt to emerge from peripherality. Its tenets were industry construction based on state funding and radical social reforms [...] During the PRL, most Poles stopped working outside of agriculture, and the urban population began to outnumber the rural population [...]. The PRL represented a leap in civilization in the universality of access to education and culture. In the PRL, the entire education process was free. From kindergarten to higher education [...]. By 1970, 600,000 people had received higher education. Between 1971 and 1989, as many as 1.5 million. During the People's Republic of Poland, several new universities were founded. For the first time in history, universities began to operate in Lodz (1945), Torun (1945), Katowice (1968), Gdansk (1970), Szczecin (1984) [...] Young

²⁸ Syska, *Social Democratic Social Policy*, 174.

people from outside the circle of intelligentsia families and social elites could pursue free studies. This was a tool for mass social advancement [...] In the 1970s, an average of 270,000 apartments were put into use annually [...] The years of Edward Gierek's rule (1970-1980) were a period of accelerated development in Poland. The way to achieve this acceleration was to use Western loans. Gierek's incurring of debt was rational [...] the funds were mostly used to modernize industry [...] Gierek's decade was also a period of accelerated development of housing, transport infrastructure (Katowice-Warsaw route, Central Railway Main Line, Central Station, Northern Port), hospitals (Children's Health Center), agriculture (popularization of fertilizers), industry (FSM, Katowice Steel Mill, paper mill in Kwidzyn). Gierek's decade was also a period of popularization of the passenger car as a means of transportation. The increase in the population's living standards was combined with the de facto liberalization of the political system."²⁹

In the quote above, we also see a laudatory attitude to the social and economic gains of communist Poland. The authors of the *Historical Essential of the Left* pointed to the measurable effects of the reforms implemented in the subsequent post-war decades. The decade of Edward Gierek was particularly highly regarded.

In 2013, that is, the year of the publication of the mini book on the left's vision of history, the SLD also came out with an initiative for a social celebration of Gierek's 100th birthday anniversary. At a special press conference held at the Warsaw Central Railway Station, then SLD Secretary General, currently Deputy Prime Minister of the Republic of Poland, Krzysztof Gawkowski said:

"We will want to show those tens of thousands of apartments that have been built, we will want to realize and present the exhibition «Edward Gierek – the decade before him, the decade after him.»

²⁹ Bartosz Machalica, ed., *Niezbędnik Historyczny Lewicy* [Historical Essentials of the Left], accessed March 23, 2025, https://lewica.org.pl/images/dokumenty/Niezbednik_historyczny_lewicy.pdf.

[...] we will show the achievements that have been hypocritical in Poland over the past years. We want to re-legitimize this time [...] This is a time when we want to say clearly and explicitly: this was a good time for Poland - this is a time when we benefited and are benefiting from the achievements to this day [...] our country has changed from a wooden Poland to a brick Poland. Furthermore, for this, Edward Gierek deserves great thanks."³⁰

At another press conference in the Sejm, Gawkowski said:

"Poland was a country under construction, where two and a half million people found housing. How much has benefited from the infrastructure built in the 1970s? The more than twenty billion dollars that were invested in infrastructure that was sold in the 1990s and early 2000s for more than two hundred billion dollars, more than ten times what they were built for, is the best proof that the era of Edward Gierek, the time when he was first secretary, was a very good time."³¹

Gawkowski's statement above corresponds with the overtones of the Ignacy Daszynski Center's *Historical Essential of the Left*. An important aspect is the attention the then SLD's Secretary General paid to the social gains of the People's Republic of Poland in the 1970s. In the quoted statements, the Social Democratic politician does not address the issue at all relative to the liberalization of the political system under Gierek. Instead, he repeatedly uses language that is identical to Western European arguments affirming the achievements of the welfare state from its heyday.

³⁰ "SLD: Niech Rok 2013 Będzie Rokiem Gierka; w Warszawie - Rondo Gierka" [SLD: Let 2013 Be the Year of Gierka; in Warsaw - Gierka Roundabout], Dzieje Portal Historyczny (website), accessed March 23, 2025, <https://dzieje.pl/aktualnosci/sld-niech-rok-2013-bedzie-rokiem-gierka-w-warszawie-rondo-gierka>.

³¹ Konferencja Prasowa – Internetowa Dekada Gierka – Przed Konferencją z Okazji 100. Rocznicy Urodzin Edwarda Gierka [Press Conference – The Online Gierek Decade – Before the Conference on the Occasion of the 100th Birthday of Edward Gierek], Sejm Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej (website), accessed March 23, 2025, https://www.sejm.gov.pl/sejm7.nsf/transmisje_arch.xsp?page=67&unid=CF48D00BA6E86DD1C1257B6300224F2B.

Does the Future of the Polish Left Lie in its Past?

Poland's post-communist left in the twenty-first century stands in the shadow of its electoral glory of the 1990s. In 2015, as a result of misguided and ideologically controversial decisions, for the first time in history, it did not find itself in parliament.³² After four years, the SLD returned to parliament with a third-place result of 12.56%, translating into forty-nine parliamentary seats (460 deputies in the Sejm).³³ In the time outside the parliament, the left continued its politics of memory. In 2017, SLD Chairman Włodzimierz Czarzasty defended the Edward Gierek roundabout in Sosnowiec against decommunization. He said then:

"It is necessary to protest against the fact that history is being changed on paper and not in reality, because in reality, after all, Edward Gierek did a lot for this city."³⁴

The SLD also posted graphics commemorating the First Secretary of the Central Committee of the PZPR from the 1970s on social media.³⁵ After 2019, there was a process of consolidation of Polish social democracy. SLD decided to merge with Robert Biedron's social-liberal Spring following successful parliamentary elections. In the NL program, adopted in 2021, there was an attempt to break away from the post-communist past. In the entire document, only in one place is there a reference to the People's Republic of Poland in defending the pensions of functionaries active before 1989.³⁶ NL has departed from the SLD's practice of pointing to the

³² Rydliński, *The State of Social Democracy in Poland*, 140-141.

³³ 2019 Wybory Do Sejmu i Senatu Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej [2019 Elections to the Sejm and Senate of the Republic of Poland], accessed March 23, 2025, <https://sejmsenat2019.pk.w.gov.pl/sejmsenat2019/pl/wyniki/sejm/pl>.

³⁴ "Rondo Gierka: Lewica Broni Patrona i Pomaga Wypełniać Ankiety" [Rondo Gierka: The Left Defends the Patron and Helps Fill Out Surveys], accessed March 23, 2025, <https://sosnowiec.naszemiasto.pl/rondo-gierka-lewica-broni-patrona-i-pomaga-wypelnia-c/ar/c1-4156340>.

³⁵ Nowaa Lewica, "Facebook SLD", accessed March 23, 2025, <https://www.facebook.com/NowaaLewica/photos/a.139210842809942/1635839896480355/>.

³⁶ „Nowa Lewica – Przyszłość Jest Teraz” [New Left – The Future Is Now], accessed March 23, 2025, <https://lewica.org.pl/images/dokumenty/Przysz%C5%82o%C5%9B%C4%87-Jest-Teraz-Priorytety-Programowe-Nowej-Lewicy.pdf>.

social gains of the communist regime in its election campaigns, of using its post-communism as a strength in discussing the need for state intervention with the economy, well-funded public services, the need for the government to pursue its own and active housing policy.

During the 2023 election campaign for the Sejm, Polish social democracy made the demand for the state to build three hundred thousand social housing units for rent one of its main election slogans. This is because Poland has an almost fully privatized housing market, which, as the result of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis and the influx of hundreds of thousands of refugees in Ukraine, has the character of a speculative bubble.³⁷ NL, instead of referencing the successes of the People's Poland in building cooperatives, companies, and municipal housing, social democratic politicians pointed to Vienna as an inspiration for their agenda. The NL even held a special election convention in Vienna, where they explained the tenets of their program.³⁸ It is worth mentioning that in the entire program of the New Left Election Committee, no single sentence referred to the social gains of the communist period.³⁹

In the October 2023 Parliamentary elections, the New Left coalition achieved 8.61% of the vote,⁴⁰ losing more than 460,000 votes, four percentage points of support, and twenty-three seats in the Sejm. Despite this setback, the NL's performance allowed it to return to power after eighteen years in opposition, though as the weakest coalition government member dominated by the Christian Democratic-neoliberal Civic Platform

³⁷ Radosław Trojanek, Michał Gluszek, Justyna Tanaś, Alex van de Minne, "Detecting Housing Bubble in Poland: Investigation into Two Housing Booms," *Habitat International* 140 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.habitatint.2023.102928>; Radosław Trojanek, Michał Gluszek, "Short-Run Impact of the Ukrainian Refugee Crisis on the Housing Market in Poland," *Finance Research Letters* 50 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.frl.2022.103236>.

³⁸ „Lewica z Wiednia: Mieszkanie Prawem, Nie Towarem” [Left straight from Vienna: Housing is a Right, not a Commodity], Lewica.org (website), accessed March 23, 2025, <https://lewica.org.pl/aktualnosci/9968-lewica-z-wiednia-mieszkanie-prawem-nie-towarem>.

³⁹ „Program Wyborczy KW Nowa Lewica” [Election Program of the New Left], Lewica (website), accessed March 23, 2025, <https://lewica2023.org/program-wyborczy-kw-nowa-lewica/#SWIECKIE-PANSTWO>.

⁴⁰ „Wyniki Głosowania w Wyborach Do Sejmu w 2023 r.” [Results of the 2023 Parliamentary Election], The National Electoral Commission, accessed March 23, 2025, <https://wybory.gov.pl/sejmsenat2023/pl/sejm/wynik/pl>.

and the conservative-liberal Third Way. The extent to which the NL's departure from affirmative language regarding the social gains of the People's Republic of Poland contributed to its poor electoral showing is difficult to determine conclusively. However, exit poll data suggests that the so-called *post-communist sentimental electorate* did not trust the NL's candidates, with only 5.1% of voters aged 50-59 and 5.2% of those over 60 supporting the leftist coalition.⁴¹

The uncertain future of Polish social democracy mirrors the challenges faced by many post-communist political parties in Central Europe, such as the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSČM, *Komunistická strana Čech a Moravy*) or the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP, *Magyar Szocialista Párt*). KSČM, in order to increase their chance of returning to the Czech parliament, joined forces with alt-left and alt-right forces, creating a populist and ideological coalition "Enough!" (*Stačilo!*). MSZP currently has 1% in the pools, and their chances of reserving a parliament reservation are minimal.⁴² In contrast, the case study of Germany's Die Linke shows that the party passed the electoral threshold in a few months and achieved 8.8% of the vote in the 2025 Bundestag elections. The strong socio-economic message of the campaign of the German non-social democratic left is particularly noteworthy, with its narrative focusing on workers' rights, wages, and the rising cost of living in Germany.⁴³

Polish NL occupies a distinct niche, appealing primarily to the most liberal-minded segments of Polish society and championing causes like the separation of church and state, women's rights, and LGBTQ+ equality. Nonetheless, Polish social democracy remains a post-communist formation, continuing to enjoy above-average support in areas with significant

⁴¹ Danuta Pawłowska, Dominik Uhlig, *Wybory 2023. Zobacz, Jak Zagłosowaliśmy - Płeć, Wykształcenie, Miejsce Zamieszkania* [Elections 2023. See How We Voted - Gender, Education, Place of Residence], accessed March 23, 2025, BiqData.pl (website), <https://biqdata.wyborcza.pl/biqdata/7,159116,30304841,wybory-2023-zobacz-komu-udalo-sie-zmobilizowac-wyborcow.html>.

⁴² Hungary — National parliament voting intention, POLITICO (website), accessed March 23, 2025, <https://www.politico.eu/europe-poll-of-polls/hungary/>.

⁴³ Grace Blakeley, *Inside Die Linke's Resurgence*, Jacobin (website), accessed March 23, 2025, <https://jacobin.com/2025/03/die-linke-resurgence-germany-left>.

military and militia presence, and in districts that experienced substantial industrial and infrastructural investments during the People's Republic of Poland era. This legacy presents both challenges and opportunities for the left in Poland. On the one hand, the left must grapple with the complexities of its post-communist identity and navigate the perceptions associated with it. On the other hand, the left can potentially leverage the positive aspects of this legacy, such as the achievements of the communist welfare state, and the social advancements made for peasants and workers during that period. Crafting a unique and compelling imaginarium that resonates with the contemporary aspirations of Polish society could be crucial for the left's future political success and its ability to champion the welfare state agenda.

Conclusion

The future of Polish social democracy is uncertain. Central European parties derived from communist groupings are in permanent crisis. The Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia is outside Parliament, and the Hungarian Socialist Party is balancing on the electoral threshold. The New Left in Poland plays a different role than the parties mentioned earlier in the political system. Above all, it represents the most liberal-minded part of Polish society, supporters of the separation of state and church, women's rights, and LGBTQ+ people.⁴⁴

Nonetheless, Polish social democracy remains a post-communist formation, which achieves above-average support in districts with large military and militia units or where we witnessed significant industrial and infrastructural investments during the People's Republic of Poland. The left can make a political asset out of its past, the legacy of the communist welfare state, and the social advancement of millions of peasants and workers during the communist period. Successful politics need its own unique *Imaginarium*. The question is if the Polish social democracy would be able to use its past as a tool for further struggle for the welfare state.

⁴⁴ Bartosz M. Rydliński, "Social Democracy without the People? Case Study of the Democratic Left Alliance (SLD)/New Left (NL)," *On-Line Journal Modelling the New Europe* 41 (2023): 4-27.