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New Wave of Polish Activists, Entrepreneurs

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PLURALISM has already emerged in Poland - a development that overshadows the government's well-publicized promise to grant Solidarity recognition or the current negotiations between the government and Solidarity.

For Poles, "entrepreneurship" and private "organizing" are rapidly becoming tickets to influence in public life. This is phenomenal under a communist government such as Poland's, which eight years ago declared martial law to crush the popular Solidarity movement. A worsening economy and weakening government have opened the door for grass-roots organizations, private enterprise, and special interest groups.

Many ingenious, determined Poles have moved out of the mode of helplessness and inertia that followed martial law and have taken control of all aspects of their life, from housing to schools to businesses. Money is speaking and Poland is listening.

Leaders from government and Solidarity alike are jumping on the entrepreneurship and organizing bandwagons. Mieczyslaw Wilczek, recently appointed minister of industry, is a successful private entrepreneur and founder of a group that lobbies government on behalf of private enterprise. The government hopes to soak up the profits of private businesses through taxes as high as 80 percent and thereby help reform the floundering Polish economy.

SOLIDARITY activists are redefining reform by directing their efforts from political to economic activity and preaching a new philosophy: Form a club or lobby to do what needs doing, and finance it yourself in the marketplace.

Zbigniew Bujak, for example, a legendary hero who spent four and a half years underground during martial law, has started his own timber and furniture-making business. Hundreds of other activists have established their own companies - 80 in Gdansk, the birthplace of Solidarity, alone. Mr. Bujak, along with several other prominent activists, initiated the Foundation for Helping Families with Many Children at Bujak's former workplace, a tractor factory. The foundation, financed by the business profits of its founders, was granted official government registration last November.

In order to operate openly without fear of persecution - to hold public meetings, collect money, and publish newsletters - such grass-roots groups have begun seeking government recognition. According to the official Polish weekly Polityka, nearly 200 private associations have been registered in the past year. And many more are seeking government approval for activities that would have been banned during most of Poland's communist history.

Private organizations have emerged even in areas that are officially the responsibility of the socialist state. One group organizes its own garbage collection and insurance. Others are lobbying government to clean up polluted rivers and air, or to relax restraints on forming private businesses. Some are religious - and not just Roman Catholic.

What explains these startling developments? Many Poles say that after Soviet-style communist government was imposed, Polish citizens grew complacent. For over 40 years, the government ostensibly took care of everything - food on the table, housing, education, medicine, and social security. People learned to accept what was given - little as it was.

The system made people lazy. For example, Poles speak of being "employed" at state jobs, but few speak of working. The lackadaisical attitude toward government-provided jobs prompted one Communist Party member to comment: "Under socialism people are free at work but not outside of it, and under capitalism it is the opposite."

Solidarity, the grass-roots trade union movement that emerged in September 1980 and grew to encompass one-third of the Polish labor force, shook people out of complacency. Voluntary groups of all kinds began to appear. But martial law, declared 18 months later, outlawed them. It created a climate in which starting such groups was dangerous. People retreated to the shelter provided by family and trusted friends, to the network of mutual help sustained by an intense feeling of "us versus the state."

But underlying the camaraderie were despair and inertia, except for those actively involved in underground work. As time passed and martial law restrictions were gradually loosened, the energies that Poles once devoted to politics were turned toward the problems of everyday life.

The government that crushed political dissent is proving confused and toothless against economic initiative and grass-roots organizing. No one seems to be in control, and the law is negotiable. This gives the private players free rein to jockey for influence.

Aleksander Paszynski started the Economic Association, an organization to support private enterprise, after resigning his position as editor in chief of the influential official weekly Polityka in protest of martial law. He is among the many prominent journalists who joined grass-roots groups after martial law left them disillusioned and jobless.

Members of the Economic Association are involved in entrepreneurial activity - from construction enterprises to brokerage firms that trade computers and information. Although registered only in October, for nearly two years the organization has been offering legal and administrative consulting services and lobbying the government to ease restrictions on private enterprise.

Another founding member of the Economic Association is Gabriel Janowski, a private farmer and Solidarity leader. Mr. Janowski helped organize the Independent Union of Private Farmers, an organization connected with the outlawed Solidarity union and therefore unregistered. The organization lobbies government to produce more farm equipment and to reduce restrictions on buying and selling land. It lobbies local authorities to introduce plumbing and other improvements in rural areas.

Lech Stefanski, another former Polityka journalist, also helped found the Economic Association. Stefanski worked as a gardener for five months after losing his newspaper job. Then he started Murator, an economic cooperative concerned with housing and architecture. The cooperative provides technical advice to builders and to people needing housing. Given the severe housing shortage, private companies have turned to Murator to plan housing complexes near their factories. Says Stefanski, "Martial law made it necessary to retreat from the visibility of public life - to do something needed. Something that would make a contribution and also earn money."

According to official sources, more than 2,000 voluntary environmental groups have sprung up in recent years. (Sociologists at the Polish Academy of Sciences estimate the number of groups to be several times higher.) Poland contains six of the 12 most polluted European cities. In Warsaw, the capital, the tap water is so unsafe many families spend scant resources on bottled water. In Krakow, pollution from nearby steel mills is associated with high levels of serious illness. Some of the new groups conduct ecological research; others monitor pollution and pressure local authorities to respond to environmental problems.

Education is another service poorly provided by the government. Organizations in Warsaw, Krakow, Gdansk, and

Wroclaw are trying to form private, but officially recognized schools. Robert Smoktunowicz, a 26-year-old lawyer, is involved in lobbying efforts for private schools, though he has no children of his own yet. Poised and dapper, Mr. Smoktunowicz belongs to a growing group of relatively wealthy young people who want to use their money for social projects such as schools.

While many of his peers live with parents and face a 10- to 20-year wait for a small government-supplied apartment, Smoktunowicz owns a private $80,000 house on a quaint, cobblestone Warsaw street. He owes his success to a ladies' lingerie business he started while still a law student. Weekends he traveled to West Berlin to buy material for underwear and bras, and began with only two women to sew the garments. Soon there were more. He expanded into construction and other businesses so large he can't safely discuss them. "Ladies' lingerie is lucrative," says Smoktunowicz.

He says he avoids flaunting his wealth. While private businessmen are less fearful of authorities than they used to be, they know they always can be singled out for investigation. Entrepreneurs are caught in a maze of bureaucracies, patronages, and conflicting interests. It is nearly impossible to manage a business without circumventing regulations or turning to the black market for goods and services. The law itself is in a state of confusion. Some factions in the government are encouraging the new trend toward private enterprise or are powerless to do anything about it, but other factions are defending the old policies and resisting change.

Private business, and dreams of earning more than a state job can provide, are not new. Private markets for everything from dogs to farm produce, from privately imported VCRs to fast food, have existed since the 1970s. But people find it more socially acceptable to make money now. Even close friends who would have thought it inappropriate to accept dollars from a visitor three years ago eagerly did so during my recent visit.

There is of course resistance among traditionalists. Some chide that moneymaking is replacing cultural and intellectual pursuits. Professors complain that their best students are no longer concerned with ideas, but only with business.

THE growing popularity of business worries both the government and Solidarity. The government's fears are obvious - that an independent monied class is being created, which could challenge the Communist Party for political leadership. Some within Solidarity warn that in their whole-hearted pursuit of business endeavors, Solidarity activists are compromising political ideals. Indeed, some people who formerly held frequent parties to exchange underground leaflets or discuss literature now sell computers and get together to trade software and financial schemes.

It remains to be seen whether the material success of former Solidarity activists and other Poles will lead to complacency, or whether Western-style democracy will emerge. But it is clear that the eruption of entrepreneurship and private organizing is transforming Poland's economic, political, and social landscape.

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GRAPHIC: Illustration, no caption, SUSAN BALLENGER