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Poland: Still Socialist

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HIGHLIGHT:

Poles expect a strong welfare democracy

AS Poland's economic crisis deepens, the country faces an even deeper crisis between a pro-market agenda advocated by nearly everyone and the society's deeply ingrained socialist values. Solidarity hopes to implement a revolutionary market reform of the communist state economy. But although Poles are embracing such solutions to the country's economic woes, the people widely endorse meat-and-potatoes socialism (not to be confused with communism).

Among Solidarity's strongest supporters are the "liberals." Like classic 19th-century liberals, these Poles urge reform of the economy through unregulated market forces, while seeking legal limitations on the role of the state.

Free-market libertarianism and reprivatization have been influential in a nation searching for alternatives and solutions. Having swept through the educated Polish community in recent years, these ideas find influential supporters within both Solidarity and the Communist Party.

I recently talked with Mieczyslaw Wilczek, successful businessman and minister of industry until the communist government collapsed, and Aleksander Paszynski, who resigned his position as editor in chief of the authoritative, official weekly *Polityka* in protest of martial law. Mr. Paszynski is now minister of housing in the new Solidarity government. Communist Wilczek and oppositionist Paszynski echo each other's positions: Both avidly support the liquidation of state ownership, and each has formed an organization that lobbies the government to ease restrictions on private enterprise.

But entrepreneurial restructuring alone will not reform the economy. Solidarity and communists alike say that such unpopular austerities as wage freezes must be imposed if Poland's spiraling inflation is to be controlled. Solidarity's proposals for economic reform promise to be just as hard on the average state worker as were the government's. This presents a pressing problem for both Solidarity and the Communist Party, which traditionally have depended on workers' support: How to promote long-term economic reform and appease the shorter-term grievances of workers who confront rapidly declining living standards.

Like the communist regime, Solidarity's main support lies in large, outmoded, unproductive factories that the government is closing one by one. "Liberals" call for closing down many of these factories - a measure that results in mass unemployment. Liberal spokesman Janusz Korwin-Mikke goes so far as to say that unemployment is not a problem and that the only concern of any enterprise should be profit.

In the factories that remain open, economic reformers urge layoffs and wage freezes. Factory Solidarity chapters thus face internal conflict between the austerity measures of the liberals and Solidarity's commitment as a trade union to defend workers' rights. Many blue-collar workers still feel that Solidarity might help to butter their bread. But many industry professionals who backed Solidarity's 1981 strikes are now sympathetic to the liberal cause and did not join the 1988 work stoppages.

Although the liberals stir public discussion, they might have less success at actually implementing their policies. For 40 years, the government took care of everything - food on the table, housing, health care, and employment. Even though state jobs were low paying, they were undemanding and assured basic security. Medicine was often in short supply, but it was free. Poles came to take such benefits for granted.

Opinion surveys confirm that guaranteed jobs, housing, medical care, and social-security benefits are generally favored. According to a 1989 University of Krakow study, even Poles who choose lucrative private employment believe they should be entitled to the same social-welfare benefits as state workers.

With Poland's economic crisis intensifying, pro-market forces are bound to clash with the people's socialist demands. Even under a Solidarity-led government, the potential for volatility is considerable. Wildcat strikes against layoffs and for higher pay might lead to police intervention and the suspension of trade unions. The current Solidarity government's continued leadership may rest on its ability to reconcile the new liberalism with the old socialist expectations.

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