

# It's Not Only the Economy, Stupid: Progress in Poland after Socialism



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MAREK  
TATAŁA

**M**any people are familiar with President Bill Clinton's "It's the economy, stupid" campaign slogan. The economic success of Poland since 1989 is indisputable. Nevertheless, defenders of Poland's success story may sometimes hear that they focus too much on economic advances, prosperity, and GDP growth instead of thinking about the actual lives of "average people" and the "social costs" of Poland's transformation.

There are many myths connected with the concept of "social costs" and its understanding by the opponents of Poland's path towards a free-market economy. Critics of the transformation usually ignore "social costs" of no reforms and root causes of many negative developments that can be linked to over 40 years of socialism. The transformation is closely linked to the idea of progress and its impact on human beings – not only elites but also "ordinary people". Various external and internal forces made it difficult for Poles to reap the full benefits of the intellectual revolution of the Enlightenment, industrialization and globalization.

One of the key barriers to prosperity was the lack of individual freedom. Only in 1989 did Poland become a full member of the club of progress, which gave the country an opportunity to catch up with the more prosperous West. Various measures – from life expectancy to some environmental and political indicators – show how life has been improving since 1989. Special attention is devoted to the topic of nature because the disastrous environmental impact of socialism is often forgotten. In the end of the article the nostalgia towards socialism is discussed and how, in a free market economy, even this type of nostalgia can be...profitable. Furthermore, Civil Development Forum (FOR) is active in educating young people about

## ” DISTINGUISHING BETWEEN ECONOMIC AND NON- ECONOMIC CHANGES IS OFTEN FUTILE

Poland's transformation, including a virtual "Museum 1989".

It is also important to emphasize that distinguishing between economic and non-economic changes is often futile. Economics is not only a study of consumption, production, or money – although it is often associated only with these measures, – but mostly of human choices and behavior in the world of incentives and constraints.

From this perspective, it does not really matter if we say that "It's the economy, stupid" or "It's *not only* the economy, stupid", as many areas can be associated with the economy and prosperity anyway. While GDP is not a perfect indicator (such a perfect measure has not yet been identified), it is a good proxy of standard of living and essential (but not the only) condition for human progress. Moreover, many other qualitative aspects of human lives are correlated with GDP and income.

The celebrations of the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the transformation in Poland and elsewhere should be forward-looking. Remembrance



## THE REFORMS FREEING THE ECONOMY AND INDIVIDUALS ONLY REVEALED MANY FAILURES OF THE PREVIOUS SYSTEM

about failures and the costs of socialism is needed so people do not repeat mistakes from the past. Post-transformation achievements are also an important lesson and inspiration for another wave of necessary reforms in the future. And awareness of progress in Poland after socialism matters as excessive pessimism is a fertile ground for various radical demagogues in politics – people who are willing to sacrifice catching up with the Western standard of living in Poland for their short-term political gains.

### THE MYTH OF “SOCIAL COSTS” OF TRANSFORMATION

Debates about transformation in Poland usually fall into a rather familiar pattern: One side is rightly showing enormous economic success of Poland, visible in comparative analyses of GDP per capita since 1989 in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). The other side usually responds with “social costs” of transformation, a vague term meaning usually everything people dislike – unemployment, poverty, insecurity, and even stress. “It was very safe in our police state. We didn’t have competition, or the accompanying

stress. There was no rat race” – wrote Sławomir Sierakowski<sup>1</sup>, a founder of one of the leading left-wing NGOs that frequently publishes articles in which the transformation is blamed for its “social costs”.

It is true that people who understand and appreciate Poland’s success story after 1989 should talk more about measures other than GDP and its spectacular growth which enabled Poland’s economic miracle<sup>2</sup>. It is, however, mostly a question of better communication, but “social costs” propagators are wrong on various levels and they spread many myths and manipulations that should be exposed.

Firstly, people speaking about “social costs” usually ignore the benefits of transformation and the potential costs of alternative reform paths. As Leszek Balcerowicz explained, “People associate social cost with reforms, while delaying reforms brings about much larger social costs”<sup>3</sup>. The father of the economic transformation in Poland also claimed “those who talk of the social costs of reforms omit the far higher social costs of failing to reform”<sup>4</sup>. How delays and failures in reforming the economy and the socio-political system can generate enormous costs one can learn from the post-1989 history of Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, and some other post-Soviet republics<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/jun/04/communism-poland-democracy-pepsi>

<sup>2</sup> In June 2019, FOR Foundation launched a special website dedicate to Poland’s economic miracle. Available [online]: <http://cud.for.org.pl/>

<sup>3</sup> An interview with Leszek Balcerowicz conducted by the IMF, see: <https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/fandd/2017/06/trenches.htm>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.obserwatorfinansowy.pl/tematyka/in-english/we-can-avoid-the-slowdown/>

<sup>5</sup> For comparison of Poland and Ukraine see: Hartwell, Ch. A. (2016) *Two Roads Diverge : The Transition Experience of Poland and Ukraine*, New York: Cambridge University Press; for comparative analysis of post-socialist economies see, for example : Aslund, A. (2012) *How*



## THE RATE OF PROGRESS WAS NOT EVEN ALL AROUND THE WORLD

Even when we speak about Slawomir Sierakowski's nostalgia towards the Polish People's Republic and its "very safe police state", we should ask ourselves, what kind of stress is worse? One stemming from a competition in a liberalized labor market and free market economy? One that is caused by a threat of an arbitrary arrest or killing? Or being unable to buy some basic consumer goods for you and your family? And is this "rat race" (which obviously did also exist under socialism) to get a better job or higher salary worse than a race to buy necessities after several hours of queuing?

Secondly, many economic developments that happened in the early years of transition had root causes not even in transformation itself, but in over forty years of socialism. The reforms freeing the economy and individuals only revealed many failures of the previous system. Hidden unemployment and over-employment or huge inefficiencies, driven by mass state ownership and central planning, were extremely costly. The system was, in fact, dominated by economic lies. Valery Legasov, one of the characters of a popular 2019 TV-series "Chernobyl", points out in the last episode that "Every lie

we tell incurs a debt to the truth", and then adds that "sooner or later, that debt is paid". Some of the phenomena branded as "social costs" of transformation were, in fact, repayments of this debt to the truth.

Finally, we should also remember all the benefits that appeared after 1989. If the word 'social' is added to the word 'costs' to emphasize that costs are paid by the society, one can even talk about social benefits. But adjectives here are meaningless. What is needed is better awareness that the list of benefits enabled by a successful transformation in Poland (with similar situations in some other CEE countries like the Baltic states or Slovakia) is long and goes beyond typical economic measures like GDP per capita and income, although many positive developments correlate with these indicators. If we want to use a broader category associated not only with money and value of goods and services that we have in our wallets, households, or economy, we shall talk about progress.

### JOINING THE CLUB

When analyzing the history of progress, we can easily notice that it is a rather short period in comparison to the history of mankind. For a long time, the majority of the global population was poor and died young (from today's perspective) and after a short life in very bad conditions. This is why the graphs of GDP since the year 0 to 2019 resemble a hockey stick<sup>6</sup>.

"Serious growth happened only after 1800 – at first in north-western Europe, 2% per capita in PPP conventionally adjusted for inflation, as in the USA 1800–present, and now the world", explained one of the experts on progress, Deirdre McCloskey, au-

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*Capitalism Was Built: The Transformation of Central and Eastern Europe, Russia, the Caucasus, and Central Asia*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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<sup>6</sup> See also a nomination for "most important graph in the world" by Jonathan Haidt. Available [online]: <https://www.humansandnature.org/culture-how-capitalism-changes-conscience>

thor of *The Bourgeois Virtues: Ethics for an Age of Commerce* and other books about the Bourgeois Era<sup>7</sup>. The Enlightenment and Industrial Revolution “were enough to liberate a large part of humanity from the harsh living conditions it had always lived under”, – Johan Norbreg reminded us in his book *Progress: Ten Reasons to Look Forward to the Future*. Another acceleration happened due to post-Second World War globalization<sup>8</sup>. The Enlightenment is also a leading theme in a work by Steven Pinker, the author of the book *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism and Progress*, who also appreciates “longer, healthier, safer, freer, richer[,] and wiser lives” of people thanks to the processes initiated in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century<sup>9</sup>.

Nevertheless, the rate of progress was not even all around the world. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, during the partitions of Poland, the possibilities to reap the benefits of the intellectual revolution of the Enlightenment and industrialization period were limited. Then, as concluded by Piotr Korys, “in the interwar period, Poland did not manage to achieve developmental success”<sup>10</sup>. The post-war socialism, with its state-led industrialization and central planning, failed to close a huge gap between the standard of living of the West and Poland. In all these periods “we tried to industrialize in a way that was led and financed by the state” but since the transformation, as indicated by Rafał Trzeciakowski at the special Civil Development Forum’s website on Polish economic miracle, “we decided to follow the example

<sup>7</sup> [https://www.deirdremccloskey.com/docs/pdf/McCloskey\\_HowGrowthHappens.pdf](https://www.deirdremccloskey.com/docs/pdf/McCloskey_HowGrowthHappens.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.asiatimes.com/2016/12/article/abstract-book-progress-johan-norberg/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-enlightenment-is-working-1518191343>

<sup>10</sup> Korys, P. (2018) *Poland from Partitions to EU Accession: A Modern Economic History, 1772–2004*, Palgrave Macmillan, p. 245.



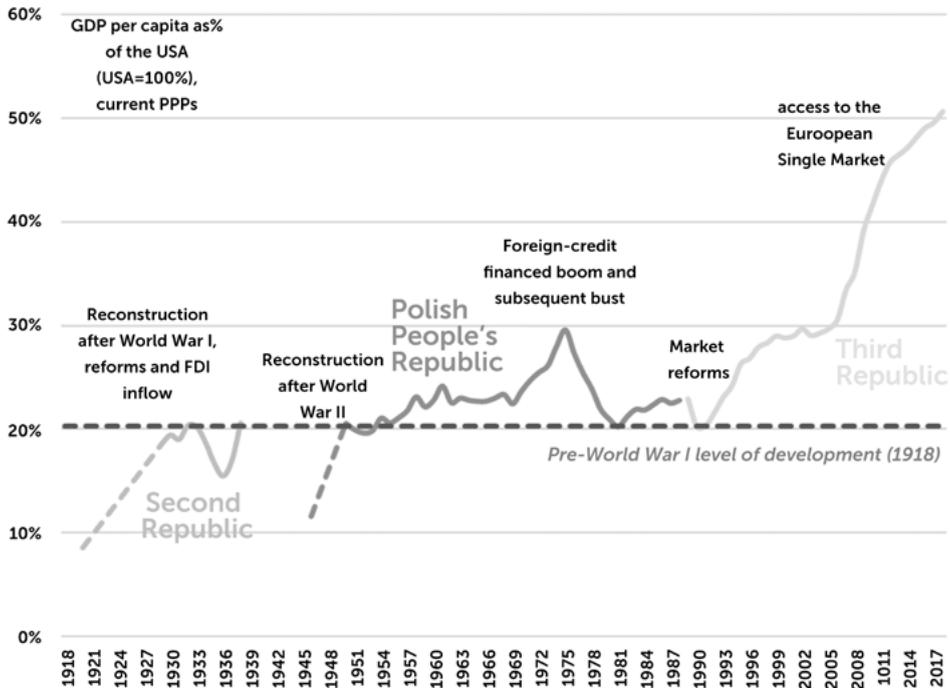
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of the West: we allowed the Poles to act, developing the market and reforming state institutions”<sup>11</sup>.

This observation does not, of course, mean that in certain areas there was no progress at all before the transformation, because there was. Nonetheless, after achieving

<sup>11</sup> <https://for.org.pl/pl/a/6846.komunikat-21/2019-pol-ski-cud-gospodarczy-droga-na-zachod> [in Polish]

Figure 1: Poland's level of economic development relative to the United States



Source: Trzeciakowski, R. (2018) "Poland's Independence and Standard of Living in Poland", lin]: 4liberty.eu. Available [online]: <http://4liberty.eu/polands-independence-and-standard-of-living-in-poland/>

some progress, the ceiling was reached, and Poland was unable to break through it due to various forces – the main thing missing was individual freedom. Only after 1989, thanks to the transition from authoritarian socialism towards constitutional democracy with a free market economy, was Poland able to get a full membership in the club of human progress.

### POLAND'S TRANSITION TOWARDS A BETTER LIFE

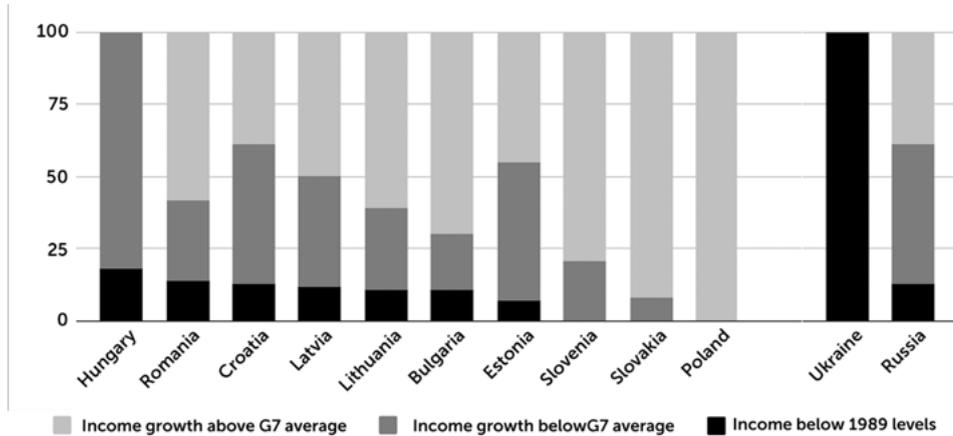
What was this ceiling for Poland? For many years Poland [See: Figure 1] was unable to permanently break a barrier of around 20% of the standard of living in the United States<sup>12</sup>. The transformation of 1989 and the continuation of the reform-path afterwards,

based on a free market economy, openness for trade, enhanced by the accession to the European Union, and advancement of democratic institutions (including the rule of law), finally enabled Poland to close a substantial part of the gap between the country and much more developed Western economies. What is even more important is that all income groups benefited from the transition as demonstrated by the EBRD's calculations from 1989 to 2016 [See: Figure 2]. Since the transformation the pie has been growing, almost everyone has benefited from the growing pie, and even the government has had more money for various public services.

<sup>12</sup> GDP per capita is used as a proxy.

<sup>13</sup> G7 countries: Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

Figure 2: Percentiles of the population with income growth above/below the G7<sup>13</sup> [average, 1989-2016]



Source: EBRD (2016) *Transition Report 2016-17*. Available [online]: <https://www.ebrd.com/news/publications/transition-report/transition-report-201617.html>

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Steven Pinker wrote about “longer lives” as one of the aspects of progress. In Figure 3 we can see how life expectancy in Poland became stagnant from the mid-1960s for males and the mid-1970s for women. Only after reforming the economy in 1989 did both genders observe a steady improvement of a perspective of longer lives. The ceiling was broken when Poland became

a full member of the club of progress.

In some areas, progress in Poland was re-launched after reaching a certain ceiling during the socialist times, whereas in others – it accelerated. These changes enabled Poland to catch up with the wealthier countries of the West not only in terms of GDP per capita, but also in other areas that affect the standard of living [See: Table 1]. Much bigger shops are beneficial for consumers as they mean access to supermarkets with their “services (...) indispensable to making quality food available to consumers, when and where they need it, at a reasonable price. The institution of the supermarket testifies to their usefulness” – as concluded by Pierre Desrochers and Kevin Brookes in their report *The Miracle of Supermarkets*<sup>14</sup>. Higher life expectancy is, of course, good news – especially when combined with the fact that more people are satisfied with their health<sup>15</sup>.

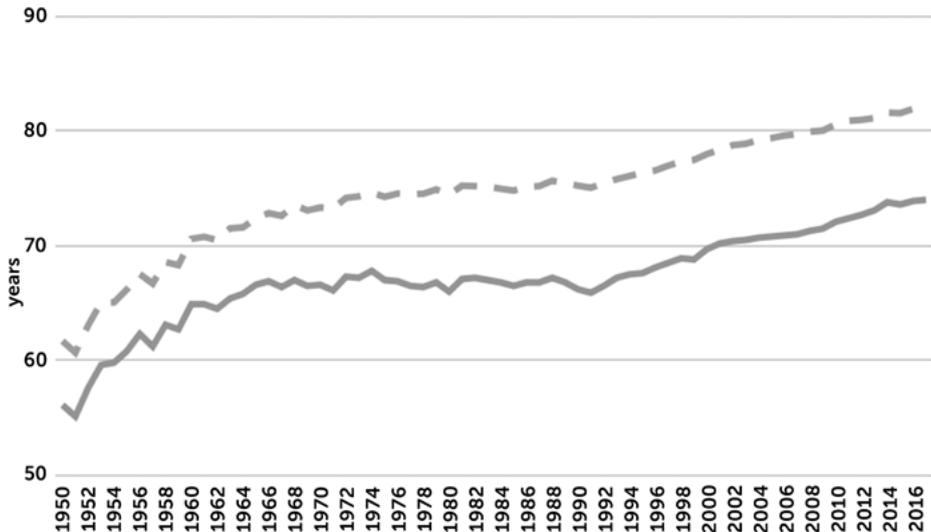


ENVIRONMENTAL  
FACTORS MATTER  
FOR THE QUALITY  
OF LIFE

<sup>14</sup> [https://www.iedm.org/sites/default/files/web/pub\\_files/cahier0418\\_en.pdf](https://www.iedm.org/sites/default/files/web/pub_files/cahier0418_en.pdf)

<sup>15</sup> Since the Polish people are known for their

Figure 3: Life expectancy in Poland (1950-2017)



Source: Statistics Poland (GUS)

Infant mortality is currently also more than three times lower than it was at the beginning of the transformation. It is true that it has been falling for decades in many places around the world, including various political and economic systems, but this trend should not be taken for granted. Policy failures in countries like Venezuela can easily move the infant mortality rate in the opposite direction.

Noteworthy, better environmental protections have contributed to a smaller number of deaths related to air pollution. Finally, access to education in Poland has also improved, which enables people to learn, acquire new skills, and have better professional careers – which translates into higher incomes.

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predisposition to complaining, it is not surprising that this measure is still not very high. Meanwhile, the current quality and opinions about the healthcare system may also be a contributing factor in the evaluation process.

When we look in greater detail into environmental protection, one may see how it has changed thanks to the transformation. Clearly, environmental factors matter for the quality of life. Moreover, when economic well being grows, people care more about nature, whereas governments have more resources to protect environmental heritage.

The history of Poland under socialism shows a significant disregard for the quality of water, air, land, and other important parts of nature. In an interview with Ilona Jedrasik we can read that “Balcerowicz was the greenest politician”<sup>16</sup> during the transition, for which he was responsible as the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance. Under his term, many inefficient state-owned factories and heavy polluters ceased to exist. They were not only inefficient and costly from a budgetary perspective, but also disastrous to the nature and health of Poland.

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<sup>16</sup> <https://kulturaliberalna.pl/2019/07/02/jedrasik-ekologia-wywiad-polska/> [in Polish]

Table 1: Selected positive changes in Poland after 1989

<b>Average size of a shop</b>	45 m <sup>2</sup> (1990)	105 m <sup>2</sup> (2018)
<b>Satisfaction with health</b>	9% of people (1990)	19% of people (2017)
<b>Infant mortality</b>	15 per 100,000 births (1990)	2.9 per 100,000 births (2016)
<b>Deaths due to air pollution</b>	55 per 100,000 people (1990)	30 per 100,000 people (2017)
<b>Secondary or higher education</b>	28% of people (1990)	53% of people (2017)

Source: Polish Economic Institute (2019) *30 lat transformacji gospodarczej; Polska gospodarka zbliża się do standardów zachodnich*. Available [online]: <http://pie.net.pl/30-lat-transformacji-gospodarczej-polska-gospodarka-zbliza-sie-do-standardow-zachodnich/> [in Polish]

Only after the fall of socialism, discharging of industrial and municipal wastewater requiring treatment into waters, or into the ground, diminished. Moreover, the untreated part of wastewater fell from above 40% to less than 5% [See: Figure 4].

What about CO<sub>2</sub> emissions before and after the transformation in Poland? We can see how emissions were growing in the 1960s and early 1970s [See: Figure 4]. Despite a minor fall due to various economic failures<sup>17</sup>, the level still exceeded 11 metric tons per capita in the late 1980s. The transformation changed this picture significantly and in less than ten years the emissions reached around 8 metric tons per capita. Also, there is a growing efficiency of business, as less and less kilograms of CO<sub>2</sub> were emitted per steadily growing GDP [See: Figure 5].

Under socialism, especially in the 1980s, the pollution in many parts of Poland posed a threat to the lives and health of the

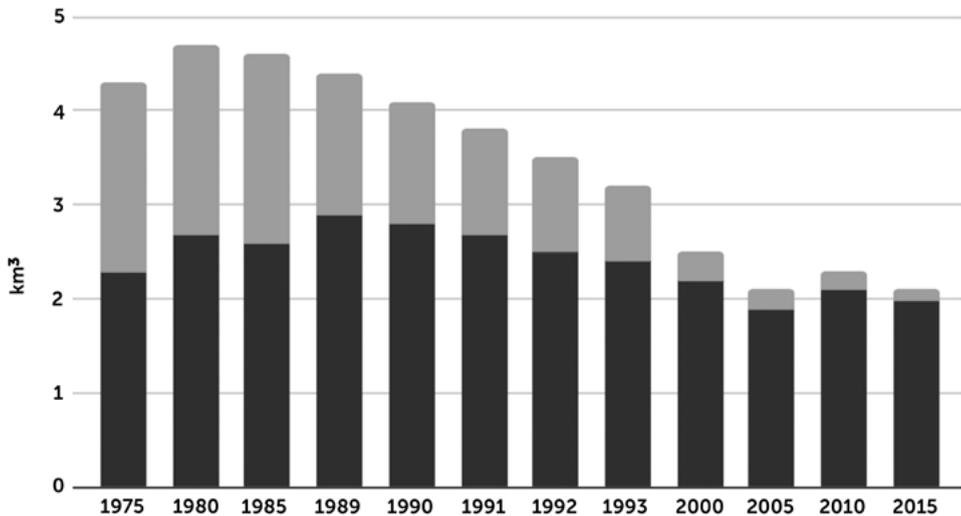
inhabitants. "In the early 1980s the Statistics Poland (GUS) distinguished 27 areas of ecological threats, covering 10% of the county with 1/3 of Poland's population"<sup>18</sup>, with the worst conditions in the Upper Silesia. Poles had to wait until 1980 for comprehensive legislation on environmental protection – hence, it is not surprising that the environment was an important element in the anti-communist opposition agenda. In the 1989 Roundtable Talks, one working group was strictly devoted to ecology and managed to work out twenty-seven postulates.

Thanks to the transformation, the activity of the most poisonous heavy industry was significantly reduced due to modernization or liquidation. Privatization enabled the government to focus on its regulatory activities and not on the ownership. When government was both the owner and regulator of enterprises, conflicts of interest were evident and enforcing certain standards,

<sup>17</sup> E.g. economic crisis after foreign-credit financed boom under the 1970s.

<sup>18</sup> [https://for.org.pl/pliki/podstrony/5404\\_5-korzysci-z-transformacji-poprawa-ochrony-i-stanu-srodowiska-naturalnego-w-polsce-po-1989-r.pdf](https://for.org.pl/pliki/podstrony/5404_5-korzysci-z-transformacji-poprawa-ochrony-i-stanu-srodowiska-naturalnego-w-polsce-po-1989-r.pdf) [in Polish]

Figure 4: Industrial and municipal wastewater requiring treatment discharged into waters or into the ground



Source: Statistics Poland (GUS)

even if they existed, were illusory. Moreover, ownership supervision of state-owned enterprises was transferred to the Ministry of Ownership Transformation (later the Ministry of Treasury), which weakened influences of various ministries, responsible for regulations in their areas of specialization, on public sector companies. It was another important step to at least minimize potential conflicts between the ownership and regulatory activities.

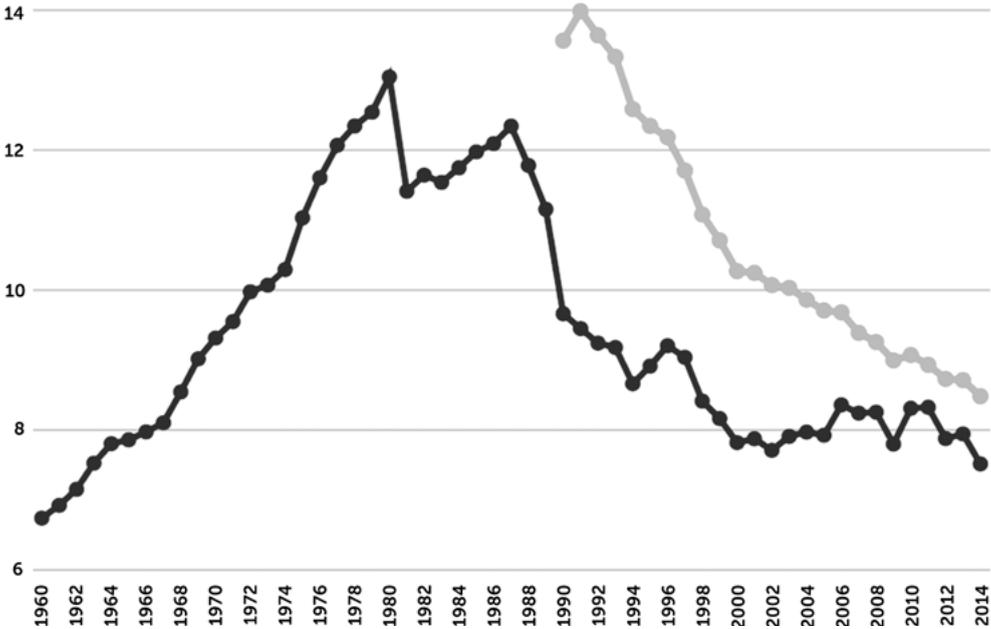
Legal changes introduced higher standards of environmental protection, awareness of consumers raised, and – especially with the growth of personal income – people have become more active in the field of ecology without the threat of harsh repercussions by the authorities. So, even though “it’s not only the economy, stupid”, economic and political transition definitely helped achieve environmental progress in Poland. This is why in 2018, the Civil Development Forum (FOR) decided to include the ecological

factor to its special edition of the contest for economic comic books devoted to the Polish transformation. We truly believe this positive aspect of the post-1989 transition shall also be promoted and acknowledged by the public opinion in Poland.

Another area which should not be neglected is constituted by political rights and civil liberties – freedom of speech, assembly, or association. On the Internet, one can easily find many stories about President Ronald Reagan telling Soviet-era jokes<sup>19</sup>. One of them is about an American and a Russian arguing about their two countries. The American says: “I can walk into the Oval Office, I can pound the president’s desk, and I can say, Mr. President, I don’t like the way you’re running our country.” And the Soviet citizen responds, “I can do that”. And, to the surprise of the American, he explains that:

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.upi.com/Archives/1987/11/18/Reagans-jokes-draw-Soviet-frown/2291564210000/>

Figure 5: CO2 emissions in Poland in metric tons per capita (left axis) and CO2 emissions in kg per 2011 PPP USD of GDP (right axis)



Source: World Bank Open Data. Available [online]: <https://data.worldbank.org/>

“I can go into the Kremlin to the general secretary’s office, I can pound his desk and say, Mr. General Secretary, I don’t like the way President Reagan’s running his country.” Of course, entering the Oval Office or the Polish prime minister’s office is not an easy thing to do, but the joke is about possibility to question the authorities.

The transformation in Poland led to enormous progress in the fields of political rights and civil liberties, as measured by Freedom House [See: Figure 6]. Poles were finally able to enjoy free elections, create or join various political parties, and challenge the incumbents without the threat of intimidation. A much higher level of freedom of expression has also been enjoyed. Still, it may be extremely difficult to visit the prime minister’s office, pound on the desk, and say

that “we don’t like the way you’re running our country”, as in the joke, but Polish citizens are free to do it in public – from major squares and streets to the Internet.

Moreover, Poles now have access to various media outlets that are not controlled by the government – the media environment is more vibrant overall. Freedom of religion is much higher and believers are not controlled nor repressed by the government and its agencies.

The transformation converted the system of the rule of a single party into the system of the rule of law. While due to the ruling party Law and Justice’s policies we observe some challenges to the rule of law<sup>20</sup> and

<sup>20</sup> Tatala, M. (2018) “Freedom-Loving People Should

various civil liberties (which may explain the deterioration of Poland's score in the Freedom House dataset), we should appreciate what was achieved after 1989 thanks to a successful transformation. Additionally, any attempts to push the Polish institutional system, which guarantees and secures our rights and liberties, into the gloomy socialist past should be sternly opposed.

Still, despite the numerous examples of how the lives of Poles have improved after the transformation and enabled a full membership in the club progress, some nostalgia towards the socialist past may be observed in the society.

#### **UNDERSTANDING RECENT HISTORY AND BIASED NOSTALGIA**

The last available opinion poll from 2014 shows that 44% of Poles had positive, or rather a positive attitude, towards socialist Poland; whereas 46% exhibited a negative or rather a negative attitude. When asked about their main associations with the Polish People's Republic, 19% indicated "lack of unemployment/full employment". The next connotations on the list were negative – "queues in the shops" (18%), "empty shops and shortages" (17%), and "rationing of food and other consumer goods" (17%). Apart from this, 10% indicated association of the socialist period with "better life/sentiment towards the past". When only people above forty years old were taken into consideration, the positive attitude towards the socialist past was even higher<sup>21</sup>. Therefore, to some extent, it may not be so much about "nostalgia towards socialism" but rather people's youth. But will these proportions change over time?

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Defend the Rule of Law in Poland", [in]: *4Liberty.eu Review*, No. 8. Available [online]: <http://4liberty.eu/review-8-freedom-loving-people-should-defend-the-rule-of-law-in-poland/>

<sup>21</sup> [https://cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2014/K\\_061\\_14.PDF](https://cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2014/K_061_14.PDF)



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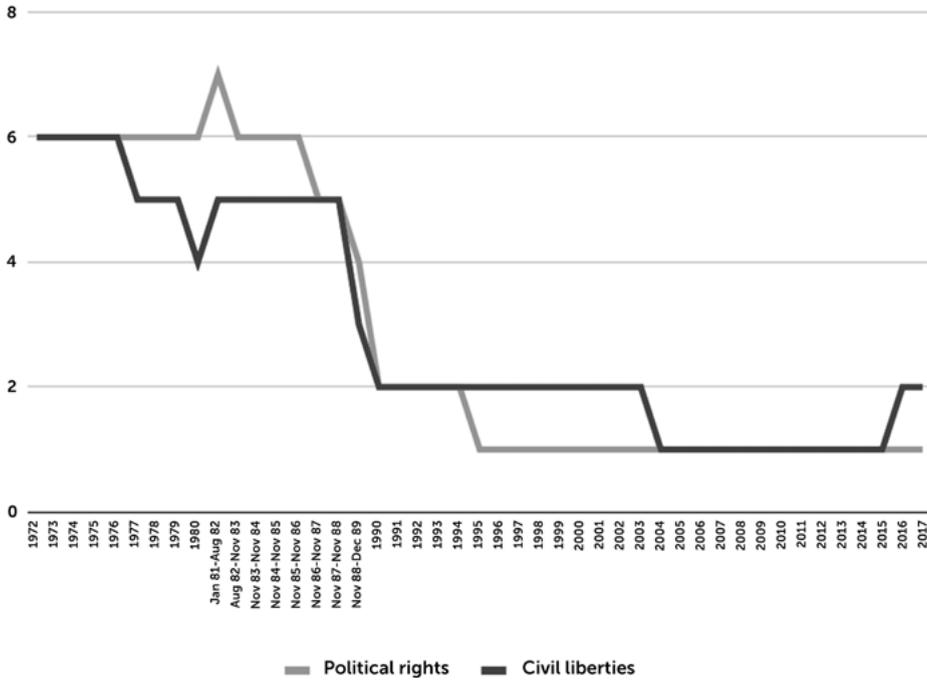
FOR decided to become more active in the field of education about transformation. After an analysis of almost all Polish history textbooks for the secondary schools, we learnt that they either ignore the transformation completely, or present a much manipulated and excessively critical picture of this period.

This is why in June 2019, FOR opened "Museum 1989" – a virtual museum of the transformation<sup>22</sup>. In various "rooms" of this online museum, visitors may learn about the gloomy days of the 1980s and the elections of June 4, 1989, which led to the successful Polish transformation – the event that had a significant contribution to the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union. In September and December 2019, new rooms of the virtual museum connected with the first non-communist government in Poland of Tadeusz Mazowiecki and the

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<sup>22</sup> <https://muzeum1989.pl/>

Figure 6: Political Rights and Civil Liberties in Poland in 1972-2017 [1 – highest level; 7 – lowest]



Source: World Bank Open Data. Available [online]: <https://data.worldbank.org/>

“Balcerowicz Plan” – a foundation of Polish economic transition – will be opened. Note-worthy, the main target group of the “Museum 1989” is young people, in hopes that nostalgia towards the socialist past is not re-born in the new generations of voters.

What is an interesting paradox is that nostalgia towards socialism can generate... profits. In various cities in Poland, one can find museums of the Polish People’s Republic (many of them are private initiatives), join a guided tour around socialist relics, or have a ride in one of the achievements of the pre-1989 automobile sector. Although some of these activities remind us about hardships of this period, they are also fun for locals and foreigners. Moreover, you can find shops with souvenirs and gadgets connected with

the history and everyday life in the Polish People’s Republic – even some brands, popular under socialism, have their second life nowadays.

There is, of course, nothing wrong in providing goods and services to people willing to voluntarily exchange money for them. In 2019, it might be fun to pay for a little experience with real socialism, but let us not forget that it was precisely the transformation that enabled to run all these nostalgia-based businesses. At the same time, it is necessary to raise awareness that the life of Poles is better under constitutional democracy with a free market economy, thanks to the economic success after the transition and all interrelated aspects of progress.



# LET US NOT FORGET THAT IT WAS PRECISELY THE TRANS- FORMATION THAT ENABLED TO RUN ALL THESE NOSTALGIA-BASED BUSINESSES

## PREACH THE GOOD NEWS

Why does spreading information about positive economic and socio-political aspects of the transformation in Poland and elsewhere matter? Steven Pinker noticed that “indiscriminate pessimism can lead to fatalism: to wondering why we should throw time and money at a hopeless cause. And it can lead to radicalism: to calls to smash the machine, drain the swamp or empower a charismatic tyrant”<sup>23</sup>. We can observe these types of behaviors in Poland.

I am convinced that strong pessimism about progress after 1989 and inaccuracies about Polish achievements, so clear especially from a comparative perspective, create a fertile ground for authoritarian populists and other radical demagogues. Therefore, when we hear again and again about the “social costs” of the transformation or – what was told by the Law and Justice party’s

leaders before 2015 elections – “Poland in ruins”, we should respond with facts (in an attractive way, as facts still require true and emotional narratives).

In 1989, Poland finally broke the ceiling, and through enabling people to utilize their individual freedom we have been improving our lives as the full member of the club of progress. Higher life expectancy, much better access to consumer goods, a better natural environment, and various political rights and civil liberties have all been conducive to improving the lives of Polish citizens.

Nevertheless, in many areas we still observe a substantial gap between Poland and the more prosperous West. We should not allow nostalgia towards socialism, ignorance towards facts about Poland’s successes, and bad policies restricting various forms of individual freedom to restrain or halt progress when we finally live in the times when we can reap the full benefits of the world of ideas, entrepreneurship, technology, trade, and globalization.



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MAREK  
TATAŁA

Vice-President and Economist at the Civil Development Forum (FOR), a think tank from Poland founded by Professor Leszek Balcerowicz. Graduate of the University of Bristol, Warsaw School of Economics and Atlas Leadership Academy. His research interests include law and economics, rule of law, justice system reforms, populism and economic freedom

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-enlightenment-is-working-1518191343>