

Article

Journalists' Associations in Poland Before and After 1980

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Abstract

Even under the authoritarian political system, the Association of Polish Journalists was able to achieve a certain level of independence. Journalists sought to use any possibility to expand the area of their freedom; however, the more possibilities arose, the bigger were differences of opinions about the ways and means of democratization. Contemporary arguments between diverse journalists' associations in Poland reveal how difficult it is to separate a common concern for professional journalism from political divisions.

Keywords

association; democratization; journalism; Poland; politics; professionalism

Issue

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1. Introduction

This article is an attempt to explain why journalists' associations in contemporary Poland are divided, discordant, and weak. Such a state is probably due to a number of different causes. This article is based on the hypothesis that one of these causes is an old tradition formed long before 1989, which induces trade unions and associations to act as political actors. Trade unions and associations, instead of political parties, were stakeholders in conflicts between the nation and the Communist authorities. That is why divisions within society were transferred to journalists' associations.

In contemporary Poland these divisions not only remain, but they even led to an inversion of roles. One of the associations, which in the past distinguished itself in resistance against the authoritarian rulers of the country, presently supports restricting the principles of democracy. Another association created under the martial law and then backed by the military authorities now tries to defend democratic institutions which are at stake.

2. Appearance of Unity

In a democratic society the question seems to be simple. One can tell four journalistic roles: monitorial, facilitative,

radical and collaborative (Christians, Glasser, McQuail, Nordenstreng, & White, 2009, pp. 30–32). Actual journalistic operations can be contained within the field designated by these four roles. Entman (2004, pp. 2–12) presented this question even simpler, when he wrote about attitudes of journalists toward government's foreign policy. Ideally, a free press balances official views with a more impartial perspective. In practice, three models occur: hegemony, indexing and cascade. The first and second ones were based largely on events during the Cold War. According to these two models journalists make no independent contribution to foreign policy debate. The third model assumes that ideas cascade downward from the administration's first public expressions about an event. The news goes through a network of different opinions of journalists and politicians. Each level of a cascade makes its own contribution to the mix and flow of ideas before the news will reach the audience.

None of these models can be applied to journalism in Poland in the 1970s. Government exercised power in an authoritarian manner, using such instruments as preventive censorship, monopoly on broadcasting, licensing of the press, personnel policy and rationing of newsprint paper. However, there was a graded approach to the level of controls. The largest part of daily press, with respect to the number of titles and circulation, was represented

by the Communist Party (CP) dailies. These newspapers were strictly controlled. The press of two smaller parties that remained in alliance with the CP, as well as a few non-partisan dailies, had more freedom but a smaller range. The Catholic press was relatively free, but suffered from a severe lack of paper. In the economy of scarcity a publisher could not buy newsprint paper, but had to obtain an allowance. Small paper allowances meant the Catholic weekly *Tygodnik Powszechny*, known for its independence, could not accept new subscriptions; they could be only inherited (Żakowski, 1999, p. 150).

Even authoritarian power cannot rely only on violence. It also needs an ideological justification. Marxism–Leninism, which initially seemed to have a certain amount of allure, provided the ideological base. Some outstanding Polish intellectuals were, in their youth, influenced by this ideology, such as Zygmunt Bauman and Leszek Kołakowski. The latter argues that Marxism–Leninism in its Stalinist version was only a broad façade, which pretended to be a legitimate heir of socialist dreams and values and an incarnation of humanism. Marxism–Leninism did not aim to conquest, but to put an end to oppression and harm. Such an ideology, though hypocritical, contained the germs of its later revision and self-destruction (Kołakowski, 2006, pp. 388–391).

The time to awake to reality came with subsequent protests and rebellions. The years 1956, 1968, 1970, and 1976 indicate in the Polish political calendar open rebellions, followed by a certain level of relaxation of authoritarianism. After a time control was re-asserted, but some gains remained. Ideology began to lose its meaning and during the 1970s was gradually being replaced by a more pragmatic approach. The ideology was for Edward Gierek, leader of the Polish CP throughout 1970s, open to interpretation: “I was and I still am a Communist. I never was an ideologue, ideology was for me an instrument to solve problems. If this instrument failed, I sought other solutions apart from it or beyond it” (Czubiński, 2002, p. 291).

Pragmatism could also be noticed by the intellectuals. Kołakowski (2006, p. 443) advises “Let’s think about what is possible, let’s make corrections within the imposed limits”. Kołakowski recommends to do what was then capable of doing and to keep in sight the main goal which was out of reach, but which should be gradually achieved. Such an approach was used by pragmatists on both sides—the government at that time and the democratic opposition represented by “Solidarity” trade union. This approach after many years led to the Round Table agreement, concluded in the spring of 1989. This agreement paved the way to the parliamentary election a few months later and to the emergence of the first non-Communist Polish government since 1945.

However, in the 1970s, Poland was in grip of an authoritarian system. The political system consisted of the CP and two smaller parties allied with it, official trade unions, and a few associations. Under this rigid pattern actual divisions were hidden. In other words: differences of

political attitudes could not be expressed freely and they were hidden under an appearance of order and unity.

3. The Association of Polish Journalists

In the Polish People’s Republic, every journalist had a choice like any other citizen: They could join the CP or remain outside the party. The latter decision was like turning a cold shoulder towards the government at that time. Nevertheless, joining the Polish CP in the 1970s was more an act of loyalty or an expression of willingness to be active in public life rather than a confession of the Communist faith. There was a saying that the party card was treated like a driver’s license. In the beginning of 1980 there were more than 3 million members of the CP in Poland (Łuczak, 2012, p. 229), close to 10% of the population.

The case of the Association of Polish Journalists (SDP) was quite different. The SDP was founded in 1951 as the sole journalists’ organization in the Polish People’s Republic. It was considered a professional organization and to some extent had an elite character. A candidacy period of two years and journalistic achievements were required. Elections to governing bodies, especially on the lower levels, were not strictly controlled by the CP, although CP obviously influenced the SDP.

The SDP took care of the journalistic professionalism. Every year a Bolesław Prus Prize for outstanding journalists and a Julian Brun Prize for best journalists under 30 years of age were awarded. Both prizes enjoyed high recognition among journalists. In more than 20 specialist clubs of the Association, journalists could group together to get a special body of knowledge, get information and try to influence government’s policy. The clubs also awarded their yearly prizes. Journalists interested in learning foreign languages could attend courses abroad organized by the SDP. The SDP supported recreational activities and the social life of journalists and their families.

At that time a professional journalist did not have to strive for a scoop. Topics for the first page were always provided by the ruling party. Professional journalists tried their best to formulate their critical message in such a way, that it could pass through the censorship and still be understood by readers. Rather than following the party guidelines, a good journalist tended to improve the system (Curry, 1990, pp. 1, 114). In this respect, a leading role was played by the weekly *Polityka*. This and other weeklies consistently indicated systemic errors and drew attention to the emerging crisis. When the strikes broke out in the summer of 1980, journalists of *Polityka* were among the first group of correspondents who reported about the strikes and supported the striking workers. The renowned reporter and writer Ryszard Kapuściński was amongst this group.

It is not easy to indicate the exact number of the SDP members. Bajka (1991, p. 149) estimated the number of journalists in Poland at the end of 1981 at 9,600 to 10,000. Ziemiński (1982, p. 36) gave similar number. On

the other hand, the SDP Governing Board agreed a resolution in December 1979, which referred to 8,000 members of the Association. A comparison of these numbers reveal that the vast majority of Polish journalists were SDP members.

Against this background, the democratic opposition in Poland was few in numbers. The biggest and most serious oppositional organization was the Committee for Support of the Workers (KOR), established in 1976. The KOR operated openly, systematically and for a long time. Its activities were based on the existing rules, which were contained in the constitution but ignored by the government. The KOR was founded to bring help to people, mainly in Radom and Ursus near Warsaw, who spontaneously protested the rise of food prices and were consequently persecuted. It should be explained that at that time of a centralized planned economy, the government set all the prices. One year later, 1977, there were about 30 members of KOR, plus about 100–200 collaborators in Warsaw and a similar number of collaborators outside Warsaw (Friszke, 2001, p. 439). The names of KOR members were publicly known. Among them there were authors (e.g. Jerzy Andrzejewski), scientists (e.g. Edward Lipiński) and artists (e.g. Halina Mikołajska). Collaborators for KOR acted unofficially to avoid retaliations. There were many journalists who supported KOR and the organization's influence was much greater than the size of its membership, because its illegal publications about judicial proceedings, repressions and legal assistance were widely read.

4. Disclosing of Divisions

Radical change started in 1980–1981. Mass labour strikes forced the CP and the government to recognize that an independent trade union would emerge and act on behalf of the labour force. The emergence and recognition of "Solidarity" was both energising and liberating. The spiral of silence theory explains the phenomenon (Noelle-Neumann, 2001, p. 299). Initially those few who behave differently from others, for instance openly resisting the power of government, are regarded as idealists and eccentrics. A general climate of opinion tends towards tolerance of any errors of the government. Even those dissatisfied with the political situation are not willing to stand up and criticize the government publicly. People who believe they are in minority, are not willing to expound their opinions. Nobody wants to feel alone, isolated, and significantly different from others. The opponents of the system do exist, but they are neither seen nor heard.

Meanwhile authoritarian power does not change. A feeling of dissatisfaction develops. Finally, a small and determined group will emerge, which will not be afraid of social isolation. If this group chooses the right moment and starts to protest, it can—in favourable circumstances—serve as an example to be followed by others. After crossing a certain critical point the protest

emerges into a mass movement. Now the spiral of silence reverses. Even those who did not especially identify themselves as victims, do not want to be isolated so they join the protest. A worthwhile strategy for opposing the government power is to list damages, and demand corrections. Agreements with the striking workers in Szczecin and Gdańsk were concluded at the end of August 1980. One year later "Solidarity" had more than 9 million members (Karpiński, 1990, p. 11).

The majority of journalists immediately joined this revolt against the authoritarian power of government. An Extraordinary Congress of the SDP was held in October 1980. Of 391 delegates, 227 were CP members but their membership had no influence. Indeed the congress criticized both censorship and the media politics of the CP, and delegates spoke up for the excellency and prestige of journalism (Habielski, 2009, p. 312). In a special resolution, congress expressed full support for the process of democratic changes in Poland. Stefan Bratkowski was elected president of SDP. He was at this election a member of the CP, but a year later was stripped of his membership. Soon after the Extraordinary Congress, the SDP initiated a "Forum". The Forum was a cycle of public debates on a broad range of critical topics. Numerous other initiatives continued to emerge. There were supporters of radical changes as well as those who opted for more balanced criticism. A few voices of supporters of the old regime could also be heard.

The imposition of martial law in December 1981 attempted to reverse the liberating effect of "Solidarity". Martial law enabled the government to dissolve the SDP and almost all the other organizations. A new Association of Journalists of the Polish People's Republic (SDPRL) was founded in 1982. In March 1983, one year later there were 5,375 members of the SDPRL (Wiechno, 1983, p. 3). All journalists were subjected to verification. It took the form of an official interview during which journalists had to explain their previous attitude to "Solidarity" and to declare their loyalty to the military authorities. Refusals to do so by public radio and television journalists led to 500 persons expelled (Majchrzak, 2016, p. 58). Despite this, the desire for liberty could not be suppressed. After the initial shock, many illegal organizations and publishers appeared. The Catholic church also provided support for resistant movements. Social resistance grew and eventually led to the Round Table talks in the spring of 1989, which triggered the transformation of Poland's political and economic system.

5. Association, Trade Union or Political Party?

One of the dimensions of journalism is a variation between authorship and employment (McQuail, 2013, pp. 11–12). Journalists as members of editorial staff, employed under accepted conditions, will seek support of their trade union. By contrast, journalists as creative authors remain independent or choose an association that best suits their needs.

In 1980, the trade union “Solidarity” had emerged from a protest movement against the authoritarian power of Poland’s government. Thus, trade unions were gaining the characteristics of being political parties. To be a member of “Solidarity” meant a will to defend the rights of employees, but it was also a political declaration and an act of protest against the existing powers. It was similar under the martial law. Membership of a government approved trade union or association was a declaration of loyalty. People contesting martial law, or only maintaining a distance from it, refrained from becoming members of such organizations. An apolitical trade union or an apolitical association was an illusion. Membership and non-membership became a political declaration.

The Governing Board of the SDP, elected by the Extraordinary Congress in October 1980, consisted of 15 people and was an authentic representation of Polish journalists. The Board worked constantly although not all its members were able to attend every meeting, and published many resolutions concerning current political events (Fikus, 1989, pp. 41–42). A clear majority of journalists supported democratic changes. There was, however, no official consent, as to the scope and pace of these changes.

A paradigm consists of negotiations over a collective labour agreement for journalists, which consisted of two parts: economic and self-governing. The economic part concerned the conditions of work and wages. The SDP demanded all postulates submitted during the Extraordinary Congress be included in the self-governing part. The most important items included: (1) editors-in-chief should be appointed or revoked only with the editorial staff’s approval; (2) the staff can undertake a vote of confidence of its editor-in-chief; (3) employers and political appointees can make assessments but will not interfere directly in the work of journalists. So long as the government lacked authority, the negotiations continued. Three weeks before imposing martial law, the re-invigorated government decided to break off the self-governing part of the negotiations (Fikus, 1989, pp. 72, 180).

Łukasiewicz wrote openly about differences of opinions among journalists before the imposition of martial law. He was a journalist of the daily *Kurier Polski* and the leader of “Solidarity” trade union in the publishing house Epoka:

I regret it, but it must be said, that almost all the colleagues from *Kurier* who had been soldiers of the conspiratorial Home Army during the war, now did not behave especially commendably. If they did not demonstrate directly their deep aversion...to “Solidarity” and the policy line of *Kurier*, they kept a safe distance from us. They were also the core of the old trade unions. (Łukasiewicz, 1994, p. 45)

Dariusz Fikus, who was elected Secretary of the SDP Governing Board at the Extraordinary Congress, wrote later about a statement, signed in August 1981 by more than

a hundred journalists. They criticized what they thought to be a one-sided political engagement of the SPD leadership. Many other journalists and editorial staffs published a later statement supporting the position of the SDP (Fikus, 1989, pp. 135–138).

For October 1981, a congress of International Organization of Journalists was scheduled in Moscow. The SDP was a co-founder of International Organization of Journalists (IOJ) and the president of the SDP held, ex-officio, the function of vice-president of IOJ. The Polish Communist authorities attempted to prevent Stefan Bratkowski from being elected vice-president of IOJ. Two days before his trip to Moscow, the CP expelled him. It turned out in Moscow that Polish journalists were represented not only by the SDP, but also by a delegation from the Trade Union of Journalists of the Polish People’s Republic (TUJPPR), founded few months earlier and numbering about 300 members. Consequently, the position of the IOJ’s vice-president, which was reserved for Poland, remained vacant. The candidate should be selected by agreement between the SDP and the TUJPPR (Fikus, 1989, pp. 149–152).

In December 1981, martial law enabled the government to dissolve both the SDP and the TUJPPR forcing many journalists leave their profession. The political divisions remained deep. It was only after the beginning of the transformation in Poland in the early 1990s that various new journalists’ associations could be established. Bajka (2000, p. 42) estimates that in 2000 about 25% of journalists belonged to one association or another. The four largest were the Association of Journalists of the Republic of Poland (formerly the SDPRL) with about 7,500 members; the re-registered Association of Polish Journalist (SDP) with about 1,500 members; the Syndicate of Polish Journalists with about 1,400 members; and the Catholic Association of Journalists with about 500 members.

6. Inversion of Roles

The turbulent start of the transformation in Poland did not facilitate any regular and solid research of journalists. Only in 2009–2014 did surveys confirm that only a small proportion of journalists belonged to journalists’ associations or trade unions. A survey conducted in 2009 within a group of 329 journalists working for the media of national coverage revealed that only 14.3% of respondents declared their membership in a journalistic organization (Stępińska & Ossowski, 2011, p. 6). Changes in membership were significantly linked to the age of respondents. Whereas 21% of journalists over the age of 35 years were members of a journalistic organization, only 7% of the under 35 years old group were members. Research, conducted in 2012–2014, as a part of the “Changes in Journalism” project, on a representative sample of 500 Polish journalists demonstrated that only 17% of respondents declared being a member of a journalistic association (Dobek-Ostrowska, Barczyszyn, & Michel, 2013, p. 8).

It should be added that in March 2016, when the Polish journalistic monthly *Press* celebrated its twentieth

anniversary, it published results of a survey of journalists. 398 journalists answered many various questions, but there was no question concerning membership in a journalists' association. Apparently, the question was not considered to be significant.

One could argue that journalists' associations in Poland no longer make a lot of sense. The "Sturm und Drang" period is over. In 1989 Poland entered the way of democratic transformation and noticeable improvements in the living conditions have and are taking place (Czapiński & Panek, 2015, p. 16). Bitter quarrels came to an end. Successive governments, democratically elected, contributed in their own way to the well-being of the people. Politicians are observed by attentive and professional journalists. The transformation of the media system, initially turbulent, should now be assessed as successful. Although journalists' associations are still divided, the causes lie in the past. Besides, citizens in democratic societies have diverse opinions, which are reflected in the emergence of distinct political parties and many various associations.

This optimistic image changed drastically consequent to the presidential and parliamentary elections in 2015. One of the first decisions of the new government passed into law on January 1st 2016. The Minister of the Treasury now has the right to appoint and dismiss the heads of the public radio and television, at any time, without giving any reasons, and without any consultations. Something like this has not happened in Poland since 1989. The minister exercises this new right. This decision resulted in numerous changes in employment in the public service media. Many experienced and popular journalists were expelled, induced to leave, or relocated to politically less sensitive positions. Subsequently, the public media in Poland became obedient to government, its audience declined significantly, and private broadcasters benefited from these changes. Later regulations did not substantially alter this situation. This fact confirms that democratization is not a smooth process occurring in one direction. Containments and revocations are also possible (Sztompka, 2005, p. 284).

The Society of Journalists did express solidarity with dismissed colleagues. This Society was established in 2012 by journalists who did not want to belong to either of the larger journalistic organizations: the Association of Journalists of the Republic of Poland (SDRP) and the SDP. The website of the Society of Journalists displays a list of journalists who were recently expelled from Polish public media. In the middle of April 2017 there were 228 names on this list (Towarzystwo Dziennikarskie, 2017). The SDRP has also objected to these expulsions.

By contrast, the SDP took a different stance and sided with the government. "I cannot see any reason to protest. These changes do not extend beyond the normal practice of changing the staff, as a result of changing the managers", declared Agnieszka Romaszewska-Guzy, vice president of SDP (Skworz, 2016, p. 3).

The roles seem to have been reversed. The SDP has a long tradition of resistance to authoritarian power, especially in the years 1980–1981 and under martial law. Now it seems the SDP has returned to its position of supporting the government as it had in the Polish People's Republic. Although the present government possesses democratic legitimacy, it does not follow that all their decisions are in accord with the principles of liberal democracy.

Interestingly, the SDRP, which was created during the martial law period by journalists who tolerated military rule as the lesser of two evils, has also reversed its stance. Now the SDRP, just as the much younger and smaller Society of Journalists, protests the actions of the government, which maybe in accordance with national law, but are contrary to the principle of the division of powers and the freedom of the press.

7. Conclusions

Political divisions among journalists, like divisions throughout society, are common and normal. Under the post-World War II authoritarian political system these divisions were hidden, since both proponents and critics were subject to censorship. Only the process of democratization at the start of the 1990s allowed the expression of divergent and political opinions. Initially there were severe disagreements, then instead of a solitary association representing journalists and their rights, several new organizations were established. They remain politically divided and weak. Their former achievements and experiences proved to be insufficient to enhance cooperation and a smooth transformation to democracy.

The transformation from an authoritarian political system to democracy does not end at the outcome of the first election. The process is ongoing and needs to be nurtured. Journalists and their organizations are crucial factors in democratic processes. Under perfect conditions weak journalists' associations may safely exist. It is only when a crisis occurs and the principles of democracy are at stake, do new opportunities for journalists' associations emerge.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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