

A HOLE IN THE GEOGRAPHY OF SOCIALISM? POLAND AT THE HOUR OF DE-STALINIZATION

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Abstract: In 1956, the communist world experienced a revolutionary outburst entailed by Moscow's attempt to ideologically and politically redefine itself after the end of the Stalin era. Once the «screw» was loosened, social protests emerged within the borders of some East European satellites. The Hungarian revolution is generally considered, before 1989, to be the most dangerous moment for the Soviet Union's postwar geopolitical and political conquest. I agree with the argument, however considering it short termed. On long term, as this paper tries to prove, the Polish «crack» seemed to have a much more corroding effect over communism in Eastern Europe.

Key words: post-Stalinism, PCUS's 20th Congress, political crisis, social protests, Władysław Gomułka

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INTRODUCTION

The profound changes experienced by the “socialist camp” along the 50's were due exclusively to the trying of managing, in appropriate manner (in this case, destitute as much as possible of political and social turbulences) the difficult and overwhelming Stalinism legacy. The desideratum could not be fulfilled only partially. This was because the earthquake produced through the denunciation of Stalin by his successors had a greater impact over the peripheries of the communist world than over its center.

De-Stalinization, though necessary, was hampered by the fact that its promoters were, above all, the Stalinists: "their potential choices, the perimeter of their visions, their conception of a socialist future were severely limited by that experience (of Stalinism, E.C.). They had relatively few ideas about how the socialism agenda could look like and the strategy of leading in the absence of Stalin".¹ As I have mentioned on other occasion², I do not agree with considering the period 1953-1955 as part of the process of de-Stalinization. Post-Stalinism anticipates, of course, de-Stalinization, representing a period relatively confuse for the Soviet policymakers, during which are initiated limited economic and

¹ Schöpflin, G., 1993, p. 106

² Copilas: 2010a, on publishing in *Sfera Politicii*

political reforms (the 'new course', the 'collective leadership'), being recognized also some errors and excesses impossible to elude. But most of them were not attributed to Stalin, at least not directly, but mainly to the former leader of NKVD, purged at the end of 1953, Lavrenti Pavlovici Beria.³

Only in the XX-th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), consumed in February 1956, Khrushchev will make public, in a limited background, some crimes and excesses of Stalin. During the official Congress, so before the revelations that will be made that night to a dumbfounded audience, previously selected with great care, the responsibilities for the shortcomings in the Soviet Union occurred in recent decades had been attributed, once again, to "the clique of Beria".⁴ The impact of "the secret speech" on the audience was tremendous. Adam Ulam considers it absolutely "devastating".⁵ Piotr Pospelov, a Stalinist veteran, who have been un veteran and which was given the responsibility by the Soviet Prime-Secretary in the previous year to form a committee to prove with irrefutable documentation the abuses of Stalin, presented to the Soviet leadership, a few days before the Congress, the report with the conclusions of the activity made by the commission. Here's how Anastas Mikoyan, then a member of the Political Office of the CPSU, remembers the event: "The facts were so terrifying that [...] he came into tears and his voice trembled. We were all amazed: although we knew a lot, all that the committee reported to us, obvious we didn't know. And now all it is verified and confirmed by documents."⁶

REDISCOVERING FALLIBILITY: INTERSYSTEM REVERBERATIONS OF DE-STALINIZATION

The profound mark of the political metamorphosis initiated by Nikita Khrushchev on the communist regimes from Eastern Europe helps at hatching the context which made possible the events responsible for testing the very foundations of international communism in second half of 1956. Michael Shafir distinguishes two approaches of the Khrushchevite phenomenon. The first one, the intrasystemic one, is calked on "the examination of the declared and undeclared objectives" which Moscow had in that period in the Eastern European area. The perspective is deprived of analytical fertility because, analyzing the problem in these terms, "the conclusion that Khrushchev was the embodiment of failure is simply inevitable". A more promising alternative is represented by the intersystemic approach, which takes into account "the impact of Khrushchev's role on social and political developments in Eastern Europe". This line of research is remarkable trough the fact that it emphasizes the changes and transformations experienced by the "socialist camp" not only from the perspective of Moscow and its hegemonic ambitions, but from the changes entailed by the Khrushchevist point of view, most of them independent from the will of the CPSU's First Secretary himself.⁷

Relevant to a term that has made a career, namely the de-Stalinization, is that it does not appear neither in the "secret" report presented at the XX-th Congress of CPSU, nor in the Soviet leaders vocabulary, to whom they were

³ Brzezinski, Z., 1971, pp. 55-180, Stikalin A., in Cătănuș, Buga: 2006, pp. 16-17

⁴ Werth, N., 2004, p. 22

⁵ Ulam, A., 1968, p. 575

⁶ Mikoyan apud. Pop, A., 2002, pp. 49-50

⁷ Shafir, M. in McCauley, M., 1987, pp. 156-158

devolve upon the major consequences which had as a main cause the process of de-Stalinisation.⁸ Instead, the report submitted by Khrushchev stressed the "cult of personality" of which Stalin had been guilty. "The genial leader of people" was guilty of many serious accusation, including the distortion "of the party principles, of the democracy of the party and of the revolutionary legality", and also "the violation of the Party collective leadership principle and "accumulation of an enormous and limitless power" used, with the passing of years, more discretionary and abusive.⁹ The First Secretary of CPSU initiative' was limited but equally partisan. Limited, because "it concerned only the crimes committed against the party (not against the society also n.m.) and only after 1936 (more likely 1934, the year when the CPSU XVIIth Congress took place n.m)¹⁰, namely after the beginning of The Great Terror; or, it is undoubtedly known that also before this period fights for power and "settling accounts" took place in CPSU and had finished in crimes. Partisan, because de-Stalinization had benefic political implications for Khrushchev, allowing him to discredit the Stalinist old guard which obstructed his access in obtaining a higher level of power. Not being a part of Stalin's inner circle until after The Second World War, he could easily elude any blame that would have presented him as a follower of the reprehensible actions of his older colleagues. Precisely for this reason, Jean Francois Soulet opines that Khrushchev's report is "selective" and "shallow".¹¹

Consequently, the original purpose of de-Stalinization was of political nature, this meaning in the first place a useful instrument for the Soviet political elite affirming itself on the power struggle scene, very intense and with unexpected twists, vacuumed by the disappearance of the former Soviet dictator. A few months after the XXth Congress of CPSU, at least 40% of the members of the party Central Committee had been purged.¹² But in Soviet society and in the "socialist camp" in general, de-Stalinization gained from case to case a pronounced reformist propensity scale and a proportion located far beyond the limits which Khrushchev was willing to tolerate. It turned, in other words, against him, drawing an intense socio-political reaction, more exactly a seismic one in the case of several satellite regimes from Eastern Europe. This was because, from the very beginning, the "secret" report presented a series of sub-estimated contradictions by the CPSU leader, whose subversive effects will be soon experienced by the regime. First of all, the fault for existing shortcomings was transpositioned from the shoulders of the party and of the regime exclusively on the shoulders of Stalin; then, Khrushchev condemned the "Stalinist terror" and the dictatorial methods of the former leader, pretending "in the same time, the maintaining of an unconditional obedience". Not at least, in the place of the dismantled Stalinist myth and symbol there was no alternative, at least not one of the same level. The derive in which the communist world will enter in 1956 will prove, with all its strategic convulsions and musters, irreversible.¹³

The Eastern European socialist regimes didn't react in a unitary manner to the considerable challenges raised by de-Stalinization. Although they have tried to limit its impact and, as much as possible to elude it, the communist

⁸ Stanciu, C., 2009, p. 130

⁹ Khrushchev, N., in Jacobs, D., 1979, p. 162

¹⁰ Pop, A., 2002, p. 50

¹¹ Soulet, J.F., 1998, p. 104, Werth, N., 2004, pp. 23-24

¹² Friedrich, C., Brzezinski, Z., 1956, p. 52

¹³ Gotowich, J., Delwit, P., De Waele, J.M., 2003, pp. 166-167

leaderships from Eastern Europe have followed the new direction drowned by Moscow in individual, not collective manner. So, while some Soviet satellites have confronted with major social and political turbulences (Poland, Hungary), others, like Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia or Romania were able to moderate reformist tendencies of their own societies and more or less strong cleavages inside the ruling political elites. Albania was the only one that condemned open and virulent the attack initiated over Stalin and his legacy, while Yugoslavia tried to ameliorate its image capital in the communist world, affected by the conflict between Tito and Stalin in 1948, posing a a potential subtle alternative to Moscow's hegemony in East European area, which would lead to a new dispute, less intense this time, with the Soviet Union. Hungary, the East European satellite that has experienced the deepest de-Stalinization shock, was decisively influenced by the contesting Polish movements.

Thus, in Bulgaria, the most faithful Eastern European ally of the Soviets¹⁴, the Stalinist Vulko Cervenkov was dismissed in April from his post as prime-minister, being replaced, with the consent and direct supervision of Moscow¹⁵, by Anthony Yugov, a replacement that assured to the Secretary General Todor Zhivkov the central role in the power game of this state. In the following months consistent economical and social reforms were initiated: reduction of the work week, of the price for the main consumer goods, the increasing of children allowances, of pensions and wages, benefits given to the farmers etc. On the other hand, the next year demonstrates the limits of the reforms the Bulgarian communists were willing to accept. In this sense, punitive measures were initiated against journalists and public officials. Also, attenuations of the grievances of students and intellectuals are put into effect.¹⁶ Bulgarian Communist Party's „revolutionary vigilance” obstructed the manifestation of any dissatisfaction regarding the regime's politics outside the framework imposed by it.

Klement Gottwald, an emblematic figure of Czechoslovak communist movement, died, a few days after Stalin, due to severe cardiac disease. A pillar of the legitimacy Czechoslovak Communist Party, his image was not damaged during de-Stalinization. By contrast, his successor Antonín Zápotocký channeled the failures and the abuses from the Stalinist period, in the same way as it would happen in Romania, on other prominent Czechoslovak communist, murdered in 1952 during one of the many "show trials" orchestrated by Stalin - Rudolf Slansky. Then, the Defense Minister, Alexej Čepička, the son-in-law of the former General Secretary, was transformed into a “Czechoslovak Beria”. Another method used to exculpate Gottwald, was the blaming of his social environment, suggesting in this way that part of his collaborators have “isolated” themselves in relation “with the day-to-day party members”. The main blames regarding the Czechoslovak communist regime were initiated, as in the case of all “popular democracies”, by intellectual and students, being however tactically overcame by the Prague leadership.¹⁷

In the case of Albania, the communist leader Enver Hodja systematically and totally opposed to any form of de-Stalinization, even symbolic. At the national conference of the Albanian Communist Party in April 1956, some participants, encouraged by the decisions adopted at the XX-th Congress of

¹⁴ Shafir, M., 1987, p. 162

¹⁵ Brogan, P., 1990, p. 201

¹⁶ Baeva, I., in Cătănuș, D., Buga, V., 2006, pp. 64-85

¹⁷ Balík, S., Holzer, J., in Cătănuș, D., Buga, V., 2006, pp. 86-108

CPSU, raised legitimate and objective questions about economical weaknesses, low living standards, the absence of any criticism form or the nepotism omnipresent in administration and the Albanian political system. Hodja, who didn't take part at the conference in the first day, probably to identify the most critical voices against him, launched, supported by members of the Politburo, a violent tirade against the speakers, charging them mainly with political accusations. Unlike the communist parties from Romania, Bulgaria or Czechoslovakia, which at least mimed, in different measures, de-Stalinization, the Albanian communists have not released the informations presented at the Congress of the CPSU in local organizations. Moreover, the text of the report presented by Khrushchev was not even distributed to the members of the Central Committee. After his return from the Soviet capital, Hodja convoked a plenary meeting of the Central Committee where "he offered only a summary of «what he remembered after reading the report»". The Albanian leader acknowledged the implications of dismantling Stalin's cult for his own political position, trying and succeeding, unfortunately, to annihilate any potential reform and to persecute in the same time any type of reformist thinking that could occur within the party or the Albanian society, in general. Hodja considered de-Stalinization a "weakness" over which the enemies of communism could take full advantage and which could undermine, as in the case of Poland and Hungary, the very foundations of Leninist regimes in Eastern Europe.¹⁸ The de-Stalinization operated by Khrushchev was at the basis of the glacial relations between Albania and Soviet Union, leading, in the following years, to a progressive approach between Tirana and Beijing. Hodja felt threatened by the Soviet initiatives for the reintegration of Yugoslavia in the "socialist camp", that is because between Tito and Hoxha existed since the second half of the '40s, an undisguised animosity; the lack of success of Khrushchev's plans will reassure, at least for the moment, the Albanian dictator.¹⁹ Not all communist regimes will be as "fortunate" as those mentioned above. The Polish workers' revolt in Poznan will signal the beginning of a short but very intense period of social and political unrest which, although it manifested itself most visibly in Poland and Hungary, has reverberated deeply upon all communist parties in Eastern Europe, marking them throughout their entire existence.

THE LATE OVERCOMING OF A POLITICAL CRISIS

In Poland, the effects of dismantling Stalin's cult have begun a sequence of events that appear, in retrospect, as unusual. This attribute can be comprehended if we take into account the fact that the Warsaw leaders have been, in the post-Stalinist period, the last, compared with the others Eastern Europe leaderships, who adopted the principles of the new course initiated by the Soviet prime-minister Gheorghji Malenkov.²⁰ Also, Poland became the first Moscow satellite where de-Stalinization effects have reverberated deeply at social, not only political levels, thereby rendering the whole host of revolutionary events that customizes, within the socialist camp and in the Cold War history in general, the year 1956.

Cautious, the Stalinist leader Bolesław Bierut tried to avoid at all costs to limit the dissemination of de-Stalinization outside the party apparatus, fearing a

¹⁸ Lalaj, A., in Cătănuș, D., Buga, V., 2006, pp. 34-63

¹⁹ Brogan, P., 1990, pp. 180-181

²⁰ Brzezinski, Z., 1971, p. 239, Berend, I., 1998, p. 207

liberalization that could call into question, as indeed happened, the legitimacy of the regime itself. But there were a series of events which, beginning with the first months after Stalin's death, intensified public anxieties and its demands towards some improvements in the material living conditions. So, at the end of 1953, Józef Światło, a preeminent member of the Polish political police, obtained political asylum in West Berlin. In the next years, in a series of Free Europe radio shows and, respectively, Voice of America, but also with the help of some balloons that spread manifests in Poland, he condemned in harsh terms the abuses implemented by Polish secret services, respectively the consistent penetration of their high-ranking Soviet officers, informations intended to demolish any independent image of Warsaw in the West. Following Światło's accusations, the security services and Poland Ministry of Internal Affairs have been deeply restructured and the people reacted negatively knowing now, on relatively large scale, the excesses practiced by those who, normally, ought to ensure its security. At least for the moment, street protests did not occur.²¹

Then, in an unconvincing effort to copy the model imposed by the Moscow Center, Polish United Workers Party (PUWP) will implement, at its own turn, the principles of collective leadership. Bolesław Bierut, president and Prime Minister until 1954, will renounce at his function in favor of Józef Cyrankiewicz, „who enjoyed such powers in the 1947-1952 period”; Bierut will now assign to himself the post of first secretary of the party.²² Not least, the former General Secretary and also the architect of PUWP after the fusion in 1948 of the Polish Communist party with the Polish Socialist party²³ - Władysław Gomułka, who was arrested and expelled from the party in 1951, will be released from prison in August 1956 and once again received into PUWP.²⁴

The summer of 1955 witnessed the multiplication of peoples', students' and workers' claims, particularly those addressed to the regime. An early civil society gradually emerges through the launching, in the spring of same year, of the “Fourfold Circle Club”. Focused on intellectual nature discussions of political and economical issues, the club has gradually widened its social base, extending in a galloping pace throughout the entire country. Until the next year autumn there were over 200 such clubs²⁵ which, sustained by a more “daring” press and on the base of an penury alimentation and depreciation of living conditions in general, became the ferment that stimulated the social turmoil, enhanced at their turn by a political crisis, that for the first time questioned the triumphal irreversibility of communism, theorized to the brim in all states where the Bolshevik revolutionary experiment was carried out successfully.

Nowa Kultura weekly newspaper was publishing in 1955 a poem which became the classical cultural expression of the existing indispositions and dissatisfactions in the Polish society. The author of “The poem for adults”, Adam Wazyk, an old member of the party and Marxist intellectual, was exposing in lyrics an incisive criticism of the betrayals of which PMUP was guilty before the workers, students and even members of the party which centralized the entire energy for the support of the revolutionary ideal, now seized and damaged by an

²¹ Brzezinski, Z., 1971, pp. 240-24, Pop, A., 2002, pp. 58-59, Kamiński, L. in Cătănuș, D., Buga, V., 2006, p. 201, Staar in Gyorgy, 1966, p. 69

²² Karpinski, J., 1993, pp. 70-71

²³ Brogan, P., 1990, p. 51

²⁴ Karpinski, J., 1993, p. 73, Brzezinski, Z., 1971, p. 241, Staar, R., in Gyorgy, A., 1966, p. 72

²⁵ Brzezinski, Z., 1971, p. 243

unworthy political elite for a mission which they arrogated. „I came back home / like a man who went to buy drugs / And came back after twenty years. / My wife asked me: Where were you? / The kids asked me: Where were you? / I was silent, trembling like a mouse.” On the ruins of the communist dream, the reality of everyday life of the Poles appears increasingly depressing. "The dreamer Fourier prophesied beautifully / That the sea will flow with lemonade. / And does it not flow? / They drink seawater and cry / Lemonade! / They return quietly home / to vomit / to vomit." Accusing the enormous costs for the military technology to the detriment of the consumer industry, Wazyk banter the propaganda attempts to transform them into successes of "building socialism". The expensive jet aircrafts of the Polish army are presented as it follows: "When we no longer want to talk about the earth we know / then we say: The sky is not empty". The poem ends with a list of firm demands, but all – expressing probably the socialist beliefs of the author or the will to see his poem published – advanced through the party, not outside of it. "We make demands on this earth, / for people who are overworked, / for keys to open doors, / for rooms with windows, / for walls which do not rot, / for hatred of little documents, / for holy human time, / for safe homecoming, / for a simple distinction between words and deeds." The last verse practically constitutes the essence of the poem, and more exactly the deceived honesty of the workers who demanded nothing else but a catharsis of the party, a reassuming, authentic this time, of its vanguard role. "We make demands of this earth, / for which we did not throw dice, / for which a million perished in battle: / for a clear truth, / for the bread of freedom, / for burning reason, / for burning reason. / We demand these every day. / We demand through the Party".²⁶

As it was expected, Wazyk's poem was virulently denounced by the writers affiliated with the management regime PUWP, being labeled as "an infantile hysteria".²⁷ However, the pro-reform current could not be stopped; in contrast, it became widespread with its overt support by the weekly student newspaper *Po Prostu* ("Simple"). Criticism against the regime began to increase, both in frequency and intensity. But it did not reach most of the Polish population, being still limited to the intellectual environment.²⁸

The latch occurred in February next year, when the secret speech of Nikita Khrushchev was giving the signal of de-Stalinization. The participation at the XXth Congress of CPSU was fatal to Boleslaw Bierut, the General Secretary of PUWP. His cardiac affections have been enhanced by the impact of Stalin's crimes disclosures, which caused him, some days later, death. "Despite the express orders of his successor, Edward Ochab, that the Khrushchevite secret report, translated into Polish, to circulate only between members of the Central Committee and in a limited number of ten thousand numbered copies, thousands of copies, with fake numbering, circulated free in Warsaw, and could even be bought on the black market with an average monthly wage equivalent."²⁹ The choice of Ochab had been directly influenced by Khrushchev, who took part at the Plenary Meeting of the Central Committee of PUWP which chose a new Prime Secretary (occasion when he declaimed the "second secret speech", above mentioned). He did not agree with Roman Zambrowski, member of the

²⁶ Zinner, P., 1956, pp. 41-48

²⁷ Constantin, I., in Cătănuș, D., Buga, V., 2006, p. 257

²⁸ Kaminski, L., in Cătănuș, D., Buga, V., 2006, p. 202

²⁹ Pop, A., 2002, p. 59

government at that time, “under the pretext that he was Jew”, a fact “that could cause difficulties among population”. The arbitrary attitude and the “anti-Semite open tone” of the Soviet entailed dissatisfactions among Polish communists, especially in the context of liberalization which he just announced.³⁰

Becoming public, even though not at official level, the report read by the Prime Secretary of CPSU at the XXth Congress potentiated the intellectuals’ and also to the Polish workers’ dissatisfactions. Unlike the others communist states from Eastern Europe, where the circulation of the report was strictly limited, the Polish press will play an active role in the veiled dissemination of its conclusions.³¹ Successively, the rehabilitations of some important East European communists purged in the last “show” trial processes led by Stalin followed (Traicho Kostov, Laszlo Rajk): dismissals of the most compromised Stalinists of the army, the Ministry of Interior and Justice, waves of amnesties for the political prisoners and sentence reductions for ordinary people.³²

Still, it was not enough. At the economical level, to achieve, even partially, the growth figures that had been planned, with costs as low as possible, the authorities decided to increase the working program and the duties of workers, maintaining their responsibilities or decreasing their wages.³³ In the context of de-Stalinization, it was a measure at least imprudent. The workers from Poznan protested by organizing a general strike where they claimed a decent payment, reasonable work rules and overall increased quality of life and safety. „At the immediate origin of the revolt was”, André Fontaine writes, “the fake rumor according to which a delegation sent to Warsaw to demand better working conditions had been arrested”.³⁴ The presumed arrest was nothing but a pretext to trigger protests; the main cause of the revolt was the systematic oppression that the Polish workers were subjected by the regime, paradoxically, the social category most favored by communism, at least at media and propagandistic levels.

The itinerary strike from Poznan comprises two successive moments. The first one consists of economical solicitations, when on the strikers’ posters can be read: “We want salary increases”, “We want bread”, “and We are hungry” or “Stop exploiting the workers”. Later, when the situation has precipitated and the security forces have entered into action, political demands were added to the economical ones. New posters contain messages like: “Without the Bolsheviks,” “Without this kind of freedom,” “No Communists”, “Freedom”, “We want free elections under UN supervision”.³⁵ The radio and the police buildings are attacked, without any result in the first case. After the appearance of the army forces, violent clashes took place with dozens killed and hundreds wounded. Several hundred protesters had been arrested.³⁶ Worth mentioning here is that, as in the case of Hungary, the claims of the Polish workers were substantially inspired by the Yugoslav economical model. It is posed the reconfiguration problem “internally and of their management” within the meaning of “self-management applied in Yugoslavia.” PUWP was forced to give up, and gradually reached a compromise with the workers, letting them set up in September, “the

³⁰ Fontaine, A., 1993, p. 286

³¹ Fontaine, A., 1993, p. 284

³² Fontaine, A., 1993, pp. 286-287, Brzezinski, Z., 1971, p. 246

³³ Burakovski, A., in Cătănuș, D., Buga, V., 2006, p. 225, Constantin, I., in Cătănuș, D., Buga, V., 2006, pp. 264-265; Constantin, I., 2006, p. 20

³⁴ Fontaine: 1993, 288

³⁵ Kaminski, L., in Cătănuș, D., Buga, V., 2006, p. 206

³⁶ Fontaine, A., 1993, p. 288, Karpinski, J., 1993, p. 83

first workers' councils".³⁷ As we will have the occasion to notice, there are some significant differences between the events from that year in Poland and respectively in Hungary, useful in explaining the Soviet Union decision to intervene military only in Budapest. For now, it is sufficient to mention the failed insurrectionary Polish initiative to occupy the radio building in order to mediate at maximum their actions, a gesture that the Budapest people managed to take it to the end. Then, the PUWP leaders agreed, even credited to a certain point, the workers accusations of bureaucracy for the existing shortcomings in the economic sector. Instead, the Hungarian First Secretary Ernő Gerő condemned in pejorative terms the popular outbreak, referring to it as a "counterrevolution" financed by the "imperialists" and applied with the help of the local "fascist" resistance, without manifesting any compassion or understanding for its protagonists. But the most important aspect that differentiates Warsaw and Budapest in 1956 resides in cohesiveness of the political elites. PUWP succeeded, in the last moment, to overcome the internal tensions and to choose a leader with an impressive image capital, to please, besides the party, the Polish society and also the Soviet leaders. Demonstrating an indisputable political sense, the PMUP First Secretary Edward Ochab ceded his place to Wladyslaw Gomulka and their joint efforts succeeded to win Khrushchev's trust and avoid a Soviet military intervention, especially since the Red Army tanks had already begun their march to the Polish capital. We cannot say the same about Gero, the ephemeral Hungarian Communist leader. Also in Hungary there was a communist leader that people trust, Imre Nagy, but Gerő stubbornly refused to give him his place, although he was named Prime Minister. In a way, he was right because, as a consequence of the manifestations' magnitude and violence, which took proportions faster comparing them with those in Poland, the Hungarian communists' party, entered in a stage of decomposing, and Nagy, although he initially sustained the repressing of the street protests, he will finally rally with the revolutionaries. Hesitant, without giving the impression of a country with an adequate character of the moment, he didn't succeed to win even the trust of his "party fellows", neither the trust of Khrushchev, fact which led to tragic consequences.

Returning to the Polish worker protests, they were spread fairly quickly in the main industrial centers of the country.³⁸ Alarmed, mainly due to incidents which took place in Poznan, the epicenter of revolutionary outburst, the PUWP leaders meet in July in a plenary session to analyze the situation and to contain it as efficiently as possible, aiming primarily to limit the scale and intensity of street protests. The literature dedicated to the post-Stalinist Poland and to the events of 1956 distinguishes, particularly during this plenary session, the manifestation of the opposition between two competing political factions, whose configuration is located approximately in 1954. It is about the faction "Natolin" (named after a palace in Warsaw where the members reunited under that name used to meet), and respectively the faction "Puławska" whose members were meeting on the streets of Warsaw with the same name.

The first ones, considered dogmatic Stalinists, argued in favor of maintaining the closest possible ties with the Soviet Union, for the restoration of censorship on the press, maintaining the main coordinates of Stalinism in the

³⁷ Soulet, J.F., 2008, p. 95

³⁸ Burakovski A., in Cătănuș, D., Buga, V., 2006, pp. 218-256

economic area (industrialization) and ideological (class struggle), limiting Jewish access to public officials, wages increase by 50% and the restoration of Gomulka's political credentials, meaning his reintegration in the Politburo.³⁹ Taking into account the latent anti-Semitism of the Polish people, they sought the culpability of the party members of Jewish origin for the failures of the regime.⁴⁰ The last ones, those with reformist views, sustained the necessity of regime liberalization, both economically and politically. Incorporating Jewish who held important positions, for example the Prime Minister Józef Cyrankiewicz, they lacked the anti-Semitism manifested by the "Natolins". As Brzezinski writes, "the main source of cohesion" of the reformist group "was the opposition to the Natolin program".⁴¹ In other words, the reformist group was neither uniform nor well defined.

I disagree with this reductionist and dichotomist division of the opposition manifested within PMUP at the mid '50s, which Brzezinski vehemently cataloged it as being "stereotypical".⁴² Overall, the situation was much more complex and fluid to be adequately represented by only two competing factions. First, the so-called reformists did not want the return to power of Gomulka, known for his orientation in favor of a "Polish way to socialism", because they feared a possible reinforcement of the "Natolin" forces. Then, "the Stalinist label could be attached with a greater justification to the faction "Puławska" because it was actually leading and controlling the country at that time", permanently manifesting rigidity and dogmatism.⁴³ Indeed, the repression of street protests had been ordered in the period when the so-called reformers made their presence felt more and more in the party leadership and in the state apparatus. Then, the above mentioned factions relied primarily on "personal antipathies", which subsequently obtained a certain political dimension, but secondary in relation to their individual conflicts which underlied them. Not least, when the situation has precipitated and the perspectives of a Soviet invasion began to take shape more and more threatening, the faction "Puławska" gave confidence to Gomulka, and supported by "Natolin", he was named First Secretary of PZPR.⁴⁴ Finally, the two factions similarly addressed the events that took place in Poznan, even if in different plans, the "Natolin" trying to use them as an excuse to return to the tough political measures orientated towards social control – in internal plan - while the reformists stressed upon the "bandit character" and "foreign-inspired" sources of the workers manifestations⁴⁵, severely admonished a few months later by Gomulka himself.

The conclusion one arrives at by highlighting the ambiguities that arise when trying to dichotomize the Polish political scene in 1956 is that these factions are heterogeneous and have contradictory characteristics (reformists oppose Gomulka tacitly and repressed the demands of the labor movement, while the so called Stalinists sustain him) and are based on personal conflicts rather than on ideological opposition. One cannot really distinguish between non-Stalinists and Stalinists, between reformists and non-reformists. Consequently, these factors are only a simplification with theoretical purpose of a real complex and fluid situation and which is thereby distorted. However, the

³⁹ Brzezinski, Z., 1971, pp. 249-250

⁴⁰ Kamiński, L., in Cătănuș, D., Buga, V., 2006, p. 203

⁴¹ Brzezinski, Z., 1971, p. 250

⁴² Brzezinski, Z., 1971, p. 249

⁴³ Staar, R., in Gyorgy, A., 1966, p. 71

⁴⁴ Popa, A., 2002, p. 64, Constantin, I., in Cătănuș, D., Buga, V., 2006, p. 268, Constantin, I., 2006, p. 21

⁴⁵ Burakowski, A., in Cătănuș, D., Buga, V., 2006, p. 233

denial of the factions does not imply the denial of a reformist current, respectively of an anti-reformist current in PMUP. Their polarization did not take the shape of the two factions as homogeneous and well defined, but was rather diffuse, covering, as in the case of the intestines disputes from Romanian Workers party (RWP)⁴⁶, the specter of a dynamic struggle, in which the actors did not remain on the positions established during the course of the conflict.

Gomułka didn't accept the role of a puppet. He conditioned his return to power, from which he was removed in 1951 by some conservative Stalinists, than integrated into the so-called "Natolin" group, by the "withdrawal of the Soviet officers and experts from the Polish armed forces and security apparatus." Not least, the national communists now again in direct political ascent, he demanded that the symbol of the Soviet oppression, Marshall Rokossowski, to be removed from the Politburo of PUWP.⁴⁷ Artful, the First Secretary Edward Ochab will soon cede his position to Gomułka, gesture which lead to the ending or at least to the diminishing of some divergences which profoundly affected the de-Stalinized Poland. First of all, the political tensions had been, for the moment, attenuated. Then, the threatening of the Soviet invasion had been also removed. Not least, the return to power of the one who defied Stalin by refusing to accept the Cominform preeminence in the internal affairs of Poland significantly reduced public hostility towards the party.⁴⁸

At the social level, the situation still remained tense. The popular strikes and demonstrations continued, now mostly in the major Polish cities, and bringing Gomułka back to the head of PUWP was one of the main demands of the protestants. To prevent the escape of control of the situation and also to calm down the spirits in Moscow, PUWP Political Bureau met in the second half of October, to complete the party leadership election. It was voted to include Gomułka in the Politburo and in the Secretariat of the Central Committee, while from the same governing bodies had been excluded the most loyal and consistent Stalinists, including Marshal Rokossowski.⁴⁹ However, the Soviets, unhappy with changes that happened without their knowledge or permission, have arrived in Warsaw on October 19th, where Khrushchev began to apostrophe roughly the leadership of PUWP immediately after the landing of the airplane with which he travelled.⁵⁰

Poland was a key part of the Kremlin's geopolitical equation, ensuring access to Soviet troops in East Germany, the bastion of socialism on the border with the Western world. Consequently, any major change in its leadership had a first-rate importance for Moscow. "The discussions were held in an atmosphere of sincere friendship and comradesly" *Trybuna Ludu* announced the next day⁵¹, which meant that the frictions between the Soviet and Polish leaders were at high levels. Meanwhile, the new dominant figure of PUWP was informed of the advancing of Red Army infantry and tanks into the capital of Poland. Indignant, he asked Khrushchev, who characterized the maneuvers as "military exercises", to order their immediate end, otherwise the Polish Army would enter into action. Indeed, the First Secretary of PCSU was advised by Marshal Rokossowski that

⁴⁶ Copilaş, E., 2010b, on publishing in *Sfera Politicii*

⁴⁷ Gluchowski, L., W., 1995, p. 38; Kramer, M., 1995, p. 50

⁴⁸ Gluchowski, L.W., 1995, p. 38

⁴⁹ Gluchowski, L.W., 1995, p. 39

⁵⁰ Brogan, P., 1990, p. 55, Fontaine, A., 1993, p. 292

⁵¹ Zinner, P., 1956, p. 197

Poles will not passively watch any armed Soviet intervention in their country. The workers in Warsaw had been armed by the authorities and at the direct order of Gomulka, the police and gendarmerie had mobilized to prevent access of the Soviet troops in the city.⁵² It seems that the decision of a "direct" intervention was taken at Moscow even since the mid-October.⁵³

Finally, Khrushchev renounced his intentions. Soviet troops were withdrawn, as the new PUWP leadership and the people made common front against "The Big Brother". However, the reason for the decision of Khrushchev was not by any means the intimidation and what happened in Budapest a few days later it is fully proven. Rather, Khrushchev was convinced of the sincerity of the new Polish leader regarding the need to maintain close relations with the Soviet Union. "I do not want to break the Polish-Soviet friendship," said Gomulka in discussions of October 19. "I think that what we propose will strengthen [this] friendship. Any other way of resolving this business will only lead to strengthen the anti-Soviet campaign."⁵⁴ Indeed, Gomulka was convinced of the necessity of maintaining the Red Army on Polish territory, which represented, in his opinion, a guarantee of maintaining Poland's western border in the event of a resurgence of German imperialism.⁵⁵ Not least, he was a determined communist who would not allow liberalization that could undermine the regime, while having the certainty that the process of "building socialism" simply could not be done against Soviet Union, but together with it. "If in the past the relations between our Party and CPSU and between Poland and the Soviet Union did not take the shape that should have taken in our acceptance, then in our days this fact belongs to the irrevocable past. If in a domain or another of our lives there are still problems to be solved, then this has to be done in a friendly and a calm manner, because this kind of behavior should characterize the relations between the parties and the states of the Socialist camp. And if there is someone who thinks that it is possible to stimulate the anti-Soviet feelings in Poland, then he is profoundly wrong. We will not allow the obstruction of the vital interests of the Polish state and the cause of building socialism in Poland".⁵⁶

Ensured by the continuing firmness of "the work of building socialism" in Poland, the Soviet delegation returned to Moscow on October 20, the same day the *Tybuna Ludu* was publishing the aforementioned ranks. The next day, Gomulka will be officially confirmed in the position of First Secretary of PUWP. Paradoxically, the street protests got larger in the coming days, getting a more pronounced anti-Soviet character, just when the new Polish leader gained the confidence and support of Moscow.⁵⁷ Considerable influencing the atmosphere in Hungary, the Polish protests were now at their turn stimulated by the events in Budapest, a fact which leads to the conclusion that the two revolutionary centers, the Polish and the Hungarian ones, have boosted each other greatly. Trying to do everything possible to keep their problems under control and to prevent the dissolution of the Hungarian Communism, from whose backwash was making increasing efforts to escape, PMUP "will publicly condemn the Nagy government".⁵⁸

⁵² Kramer, M., 1995, pp. 50-51; Fejtő, F., 1979, p. 108

⁵³ Remington, A., 1971, p. 31

⁵⁴ Gluchowski, L.W., 1995, p. 40

⁵⁵ Granville, J., 2002, pp. 540-541, Nagee, J., Donaldson, R., 1988, p. 227

⁵⁶ Zinner, P., 1956, p. 233

⁵⁷ Brzezinski, Z., 1971, p. 262

⁵⁸ Brzezinski, 1971

In an appeal of the Central Committee of PUWP to the Hungarian Workers Party (HWP) dated October 28, signed by Gomułka and the Prime Minister Cyrankiewicz, sustained that “the tragic news” from Hungary are being received by the friendly Polish nation with “great sorrow and deep anxiety” (my emphasis). Conscious that its “internationalist” duty obliged it “not to remain silent”, but, in the same time, not to have the intention to interfere in the Hungarian internal business, PUWP insisted on the common character of the Polish demands and also the Hungarian ones. “For centuries our nations have been linked with a love for common liberty”. Because they have “fought” shoulder to shoulder throughout history against “aggressive monarchs” and “Hitler's fascism”, the “local landowners and factory owners” and, recently, “for democratic socialism” of their countries, for “sovereignty and equality in relations between socialist states” - PUWP felt entitled to launch this “ardent appeal” to the HWP and the Hungarian nation. “Hungarian Brothers! You and we are on the same side, the one of freedom and socialism. Please: enough blood, enough destruction, enough fratricidal struggle”.⁵⁹ Of course, the appeal did not have the desired consequences, which resulted in the public condemnation above mentioned of the Hungarian revolutionary movement. Confronted with the spectrum of dismantling the Hungarian communist regime, the Polish First Secretary manifested his “ideological” orthodoxy and, exactly like Tito, approved the intervention of the Soviet tanks to “pacify” Hungary. What ultimately demonstrates the enormous power of ideocracy: for a communist, as reformist or liberal he would claim to be, the democracy will always be subordinated to the ideal of “building socialism”. It should not be forgotten the fact that, at least in the first phase of the Hungarian revolution, the PUWP leader proved to be sympathetic at the demands of the Budapest insurgents’ requests, agreeing with the withdrawal of the Red Army from Hungary.⁶⁰ Only after he convinced himself that HWP is not capable to deal with the situation and that, on the Hungarian territory, the “gains of socialism” were endangered – the Polish leader changed his opinion, approving the Soviet intervention.

The duties that Gomulka will give to the party, of a controlled reformism, can be summarized as it follows: “de- collectivization”, meaning the amortization of the political pressures on the agriculture (in Poland these were always lower than in the rest of the camp), a relief of the religious life (Catholicism played, starting with the modern era, a fundamental role in the Polish civil life) and, not least, economic reforms, all in the service of the “development «of the socialist democracy »”.⁶¹ Really unusual for a Communist regime, Gomulka allowed the emergence of a limited political pluralism. Thus appeared the Democratic Party, The United Peasant Party, together with other “various Catholic political groups”.⁶² Totally, the non-communist political segment will achieve a percentage of 18.3%,⁶³ something that customizes the Polish political regime over the other “popular democracy” and Yugoslavia as well (which never declared itself a “popular democracy”). But all these political parties were subsumed more or less explicitly, as in the case of Belgrade, to a “National Front” where the central role was held, of course, by PUWP. Also, for the first time since Poland’s communization, at the

⁵⁹ Zinner, P., 1956, pp. 444-445

⁶⁰ Lostun, M., 2006, p. 31

⁶¹ Fejtő, F., 1979, p. 111

⁶² Bromke, A., in London, K., 1966, p. 76

⁶³ Constantin, I., in Cătănu□;, D., Buga, V., 2006, p. 278

parliamentary elections from the beginning of 1957, besides the fact that many non-communists candidates participated and which occupied almost half of the legislative places, the number of the candidates exceeded the number of the available places, even if all were part of the same list.⁶⁴

Pluralism has not been limited only at the political sphere. In the public administration have been integrated specialists who were not party members, selected on their professional skills. Most universities began to admit students regardless of their social origins, which was another premiere. The class struggle in higher education being stopped, significant steps have been done towards certain decentralization. The role of state (Parliament) in the legislative initiatives was reinforced in relation to the party, but without becoming dominant. Despite these undeniable liberalizations, "Gomułka moved cautiously." Another major contrast to what his counterpart Imre Nagy tried in Hungary lays in the emphasis of the PUWP First Secretary of maintaining Poland in the economic and security structures of the socialist camp. Gomułka never wanted his country to renounce at its status of Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (CMEA) member or, worse, that of the Warsaw Treaty Organization (OTV); on the contrary, he condemned Nagy even when, on 30 October 1956, the UN announced Hungary's neutrality by leaving the OTV. By his permanently call to Leninism, Gomułka insisted on democratization by the party and strongly drawn towards "building socialism", by no chance outside the party and against "building socialism".⁶⁵ His strategy for consolidation of the regime was a tripartite one, involving "the strengthening of his personal authority, renewing the quality as a member of the party" and, most importantly, "the reaffirming of the party functions in social and economic activities".⁶⁶

As Ray Taras argues, the authenticity of the reformism manifested by the PUWP First Secretary cannot be proved. "He was a veteran communist not less autocratic than Stalinists in whose company he had spent so many years." Consequently, an excessive permissiveness towards pluralism and democratization could lead to questioning the party's main role in Polish leadership, and thus Gomułka's role within the party. Such an outcome was totally unacceptable for the (yet) popular Polish leader. So, starting the year that followed his election to office, he "began to attack with equal force the eclectic reformers and dogmatic Stalinists." Sensitive to the risk of undermining communism by an excess of democracy, Gomułka will declare that "dogmatism cannot be cured by revisionism".⁶⁷ The brief liberal spurt experienced by the society, PUWP and the Polish state will enter thus on a descent way as the leader in who had been invested so much hope strengthen his position and managed to handle popular demands through a more false and obsolete dialogue with the Polish workers and intellectuals.⁶⁸

Poznan will remain a turning point in relations between the party and society. Regarding it, Gomułka will say frankly: "The causes of the Poznan tragedy and the deep dissatisfaction of the entire working class are all to be found in ourselves, in the party, in the government".⁶⁹ The difficulties that

⁶⁴ Constantin, I., in Cătănuș, D., Buga, V., 2006, p. 277

⁶⁵ Bromke A., in London, K., 1966, pp. 75-76

⁶⁶ Bielasiak J., in Brumberg, A., 1983, p. 13

⁶⁷ Taras, R., 1986, pp. 54-55

⁶⁸ Soulet, J.F., 2008, p. 101

⁶⁹ Zinner, P., 1956, p. 208

Poland experienced in those moments could be overcome, considered the First Secretary of PMUP, only through the proletariat. "All, including today and the future prospective, depend on its attitude". Finally, Gomułka insists on his own responsibilities in setting up a functional relationship with the workers, the Polish society, precisely because the very credibility of this relationship was so dramatically questioned by the protests in Poznań.⁷⁰

POLAND AND HUNGARY IN 1956. A BRIEF POLITICAL COMPARISON

For better overall comprehension of the events which occurred in 1956 within the "socialist camp", particularly instructive is the comparison between the two revolutionary outbreaks: Poland and Hungary. There are several good outlined reasons because of which the riots in Poznań and subsequently in Warsaw have not turned in the Budapest revolution and vice versa. They can be grouped into two categories: the nature of requests, namely the character and behavior of leaders during the protests.

Thus, if the requirements of the Poznań workers were mainly economic, with a less pronounced political component, in Budapest happened just the opposite. The fourteen requests of the Hungarian revolutionaries were primarily political, and only secondly had an economic sideline, therefore being more difficult to satisfy by a communist regime, in which all other aspects of social life are subordinated to politics. Then, Edward Ochab and PUWP Political Bureau were present in the country ever since the beginning of turmoil, thus having time to become familiar with them and provide a somewhat appropriate response. Gerö and his colleagues, on the other hand, were in Yugoslavia to win Tito's goodwill and trust, leaving domestic issues in the background. We recall that they returned to the country just the day large-scale protests had started and, instead of making efforts, as their Polish counterparts did, to demonstrate a certain understanding, if not sympathy, towards the causes of the people's dissatisfaction, Gerö's broadcast speech inflamed spirits even more, by showing contempt, condescension and a total inability to grasp the potential of the phenomenon the HWP was facing. Furthermore, Polish leaders did not call for military aid from Moscow. This issue was not even raised, while Gerö appealed to this method of problem solving from the first evening of popular riot, without even trying to surmount the difficulties encountered by internal means.⁷¹

The list of differences continues. While the Hungarian army fraternized spontaneously with the revolutionaries, the Polish military forces, dominated by Soviet officers, went through this phase only in the beginning, and even then sporadically. Ultimately, Suslov and Mikoyan claimed cynically, Moscow's representatives to Budapest, the Hungarian demonstrators were fired at very late, thus allowing them to organize and muster up courage. In Poland, protests were met with fire from an early stage, which more likely contributed to the deterrence of many of those on the streets to persevere in confronting the regime.⁷²

The personal factor is crucial in the political equation of events consumed in 1956 in the communist world. Imre Nagy had, compared to Gomułka, a much more subdued political instinct, being instead better prepared theoretically. But argumentative eloquence, even if in the spirit of Marxism-Leninism, will be of no use to Nagy in those moments. Conversely, it can be concluded that

⁷⁰ Zinner, P., 1956, pp. 206-207

⁷¹ Granville, J., 2002, pp. 528-529

⁷² Granville, J., 2002, pp. 536-539

“bookishness” (an orientation based on excessive theorizing of revolutionary problems, thus “unaware of reality”) disadvantaged him. Then, the Polish first secretary’s presence and self mastery, who, himself a worker by profession, knew how to manage and moderate the crowd gathered on the streets of Warsaw and whose position was much less stable than generally believed – positively impressed the leadership in Moscow, Khrushchev becoming in time one of his best personal friends. Not the same can be said about Nagy, who, despite his charisma, completely and irretrievably lost control of the situation.

The most important difference between Poland and Hungary in 1956 is, however, one of international nature. Gomułka, fearing German revanchism and being aware that, without Moscow’s guarantees, it could not maintain Poland’s postwar western border, which now comprised a large part of former East Prussia, has never committed the fatal imprudence to act according to the requests concerning Poland’s proclamation of neutrality and its withdrawal from the Warsaw Pact. Even if the Soviets had decided to intervene for the second time in Hungary before Nagy did so, the Hungarian Prime Minister’s gesture could only reinforce their belief that they acted properly.⁷³

After 1956, the PUWP gradually began to restrict civil liberties that it set up to deal with protests and mitigate them. In relations with Moscow it will begin to show a growing degree of autonomy, which, unofficially, will justify especially based on domestic considerations, namely the Poles’ traditional anti-Russian feelings.⁷⁴ At the conference of communist parties held in Moscow the next year, the Polish delegation displayed “an attitude of unprincipled concessions towards imperialist circles”, renouncing the classical Leninist thesis that postulated the imperialism’s implosion due to its internal contradictions, being motivated by the unwillingness to compromise its trade relations with some Western countries, which had started promisingly. Also, the Poles did not manifest as critically as the other communist parties against “revisionists”, a concept which referred to the Yugoslavian “comrades”. They had an ambivalent attitude towards the Hungarian revolution, which once more affected the relations between Belgrade and Moscow, although not at the same intensity as during the Tito-Stalin conflict. “Dogmatism” should have been considered as hazardous as “revisionism” to international communism, Poland’s representatives argued, who also did not approve the “thesis about the Soviet Union’s role at the head of socialist countries and as a center of unity of the international communist movement”.⁷⁵

Hungary, on the other hand, had a different evolution, if not even opposed to the Polish one. Minimizing the memory of the revolution being the main objective, Hungarian United Workers Party’ (HUSP – the denomination was adopted in the last days of the 1956 revolution) first secretary introduced certain limited economic and cultural concessions, which, however, were not constant, varying according to the short and medium term objectives of the regime. But he did not respect his promise to show leniency and mercy to former anti-communist combatants, “and the political trials, deportations, arrests, and secret executions, reminiscent of Rákosi’s Stalinist regime, once again came to the fore front”. Also, the party itself had undergone major metamorphoses: it bureaucratized itself, to be as sure as possible of the support of its members, united itself, and of the repression exerted on former revolutionary, and

⁷³ Granville, J., 2002, pp. 543-563, Nagee, J., Donaldson, R., 1988, pp. 227-229

⁷⁴ Skilling, G., 1964, p. 13

⁷⁵ Cătănuș, D., 2004, p. 28

gradually distanced itself from the population, getting more and more the characteristics of a religious sect. Internationally, on the other hand, Kadar remained one of the most loyal allies of the Soviet Union.⁷⁶ He owed his political position to Khrushchev personally, therefore looking so as to avoid any possible dissatisfaction of Moscow, unlike Gomulka, which had the party's support, and, partially, that of the people. The revolution of 1956 will, however, continue to be for Kadar and for the party he led an unexplainable moment, whose impossible surmounting will be a permanent tare for Hungarian communism, until the moment of its inglorious end.

Therefore, we can conclude that what is now called by historians and political scientists "the Polish October" was not a short term crack within the communist world; that role was fully played by the Hungarian revolution. Instead, Poland's 1956 moment represented a long term, very serious crack of the communist geography. By tolerating even a very limited form of pluralism, PWP gradually undermined its ideological and political monopoly over the society. This, combined with the militant Catholicism of the Polish people, eventually led to the creation of Solidarity (Solidarność) trade-union movement, a symbol of the most powerful civil society within a communist state and a permanent effigy of anticommunism.

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⁷⁶ (Váli F., in Gyorgy, A., 1966, pp. 86-107).

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