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THE MASSIVE EXCHANGE OF ELITES AS A MEAN OF FORMATION OF THE AUTHORITARIAN REGIME

■ The policy of “good change” and “massive exchange of elites”

The parliamentary election that took place in Poland in 2015 initiated the major socio-political transformation labeled by its authors, politicians of the winning party, the “good change”. There are various ways of description of the “good change”. In my opinion, however, its main characteristic is the process of the massive exchange of elites. This process concerns all fields that remain under direct or indirect control of the state authority. Thus, it pertains to the state administration, the apparatus of justice, the army, the police, media, state-owned companies, educational institutions, cultural institutions (also these that are formally independent but receive some subsidies from the state).

The process of exchange of the elites has elaborated ideological justifications – broadly popularized legitimizing myth. The main elements of this myth include the thesis about illegitimate origins of the Third Republic of Poland that was established after the fall of communism (it was allegedly a result of collusion of the communist and Solidarity elites), about the treacherous policy of the elites (Jarosław Kaczyński, the leader of the new government coalition, described Poland as a German-Russian condominium), about massive corruption of the previous governments that sold Polish companies to foreign corporations, about destroying of the Polish traditions and the reputation of the Polish nation (for example by acknowledging the post-war cases of pogroms and mass-murders of Jews who survived the Holocaust) etc. The quintessence of all these “grave sins” of the existing elites is their refusal to admit that the Smolensk catastrophe – the plane crash that involved

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death of 96 persons including the Polish president (Jarosław Kaczyński's twin brother) and many top political and military officials – was an assassination (in fact there is no smallest evidence that the crash was caused intentionally by anybody). These and some other accusations of the existing elites is supposed to justify its elimination and replacement by the new elite chosen by the governing authorities.

The ideas and intents of the rapid exchange of elites have appeared in the minds of various people in various countries. For example, in the US it takes a form of an intensive hostility toward “Washington”, that is, toward the political elite that is accused of various kinds of wrongdoings. There are politicians that base their political campaigns on the promise of a radical change of the Washington elite (Frank 2004). This kind of thinking was (is) popular among members of Tea Party (Beck 2009) or Donald Trump's supporters. But in fact it was popular in various countries among radical political movements – left and right.

The practical realization of the idea of the massive exchange of elites might require certain conditions. Such conditions have appeared in Poland. We can mention the following.

First, the existence of social groups that feel that the current system limits their chances for personal advancement or harms them in various ways. Such feeling exists in Poland among various groups. It is manifested in the form of economic emigration, in common complaints about employment conditions, in widespread dissatisfaction of young people who feel that their life perspectives are highly limited. It is related to broadening the system of employment described as “junk contracts” that implies very limited rights of the employee. There are also numerous groups of conservative Catholics who felt marginalized by political “mainstream”. In fact, the hierarchy of the Catholic Church had strong reservations toward the ruling elites for their liberalism – these reservations were shared by numerous conservatively minded groups especially among people living in small towns and villages. Moreover, there are also some former members of the “Solidarity” movement that felt that democratic transformation put them aside.

Second, the very broad disappointment with the ruling elites. The indications of this disappointment could be noticed not only among the socially disadvantaged groups, but also among many others. It was reflected, among others, in high abstention rate in the election among supporters of the ruling center-right party (Civic Platform – PO) as well as a widespread belief that the ruling circles created a closed system of connections not permeable for “outsiders”.

Third, the growing tolerance for authoritarian politics. There is many socio-psychological research showing that increase of authoritarianism is

a typical reaction in situations of increased sense of social threat and stress (Jost et al. 2003, Mirisola et al. 2004, Onraet, Dhont, Van Hiel 2014). For example, the growth of the Right Wing Authoritarianism was observed among Americans after September 11, as well as among Spaniards after the terror attack on the railway station in Madrid, and in many other cases (Matthews, Levin, Sidanius 2009).

In the Polish society, the increased sense of threat among the society could be caused by a number of factors such as:

The growing economic uncertainties evoked, among others, by old pension reform.

The Smolensk catastrophe, which undermined trust in the wisdom and sense of responsibility of those who govern. This loss of trust affected people who saw that the accident was a consequence of a mess among high level decision makers and recklessness of people responsible for the safety of the state. Even greater distrust appeared among those who got convinced that the catastrophe was orchestrated by the enemies of the Polish president and the previous regime was somewhat responsible for what happened.

The growing fear of terrorism. The fear was augmented by the perspective of arrival of refugees, especially from the Muslim countries. There is a wide chasm between elite groups and so called common people about acceptance of refugees in Poland. The elites presented admission of the Muslim refugees as a moral obligation and condemned the people who were against it. But for the majority of citizens whose knowledge about Muslims is limited to the information heard on TV or read in popular newspapers or Internet, these people are very dangerous due to their attachment to primitive traditions (e.g. killing daughters who violated the family code), hatred for the Western civilization and resistance to its influences. Muslim communities are regarded as homes to ruthless terrorists responsible for mass-murdering of innocent people. These people are supposed to come to Poland as a result of the decisions made by artsy dreamers from Warsaw. Fear and hatred invoked by such groups can be easily transferred to those who advocate for them.

A caveat should be added here: In the last two years the proportion of people in Poland who have agreed with the statement that “non-democratic government is more desirable than democratic one” has markedly declined. In November 2015 40% of respondents agreed with the statement and 40% have disagreed. In January 2017 agreed 28% – disagreed 52% (CBOS 2017). Apparently the policy of “good change” has changed the popular opinion about democracy.

Fourth, the massive exchange of elites is more likely to be successful if this policy gains a broad social support. Of course, first of all such support can be

obtained from these who can personally benefit from this policy. But support can be much broader, if government introduces reforms improving the economic situation of the disadvantaged social groups, the ones who felt neglected by the previous regimes. Without such social support, exchange of elites could require the use of direct, physical force to overcome a possible resistance. The rulers in Poland made several changes in economic policy that brought a visible improvement in the situation of the large part of underprivileged groups.

Is the situation in Poland unique? Yes and no.

It is not unique, because in many European Union countries there are clear signs of dissatisfaction with the existing authorities, and with their policy. This dissatisfaction is reflected in the systematic decline of confidence in the authorities. As shown by Standard Eurobarometer 84, between 2004 and 2014 there was a decrease of confidence both in the European Union leaders (from 50% to 32%), the national parliaments (38% to 28%) and the national governments (34% to 27%). The EU citizens have a particularly low confidence in the political parties – in 2014 in 21 countries more than 75% of the respondents had expressed distrust to political parties (in some countries – over 90%).

The increase in the popularity of the radical right in Europe can be regarded as an indication of dissatisfaction with the existing elites and increasing approval for some kind of radical changes. The political movements advocating radical changes become visible in various European countries such as Great Britain, Denmark, Finland, the Netherlands, Romania, Slovakia and Switzerland. In some countries they were able to obtain political power (Hungary, Poland) and in some other they got close to it (Austria, France) (Mudde 2007, Mudde, 2011). It means that processes in Poland are similar to processes in Europe but are more intensive, more radical.

It is hard to predict what might happen in European states if the observed trend would not be stopped. If the radical right would win parliamentary or presidential elections may it incur merely some more or less serious modifications of the existing policy or much deeper changes – something akin to a broad change of the elites? Most likely, the depth of the changes might depend on the strength of democracy in the given country – the degree to which the democratic system is rooted in the political culture of the given society (Wiatr, this issue). However, as much as Poland is concerned the political trends observed in Europe can strengthen the policy of “good change”.

So far, the entire process of exchange of the elites in Poland has been executed by political measures supported by intense propaganda aimed at discrediting and denigrating the opponents, including their ancestors until the third generation. However, the methods might change, when the resistance against the “good change” policy becomes stronger, and when

social support for the ruling party declines due to economic problems. In such circumstances, the more fanatic forces inside the ruling party might employ other measures.

There are two kinds of indications as to the kind of possible measures. One indication is the progress in forming the paramilitary forces subordinated personally to the Minister of National Defense having the well-deserved opinion of an extremist. Such forces having special privileges and not regulated by law can be a convenient instrument in hands of politicians who would like to crack down on their enemies. The existing propaganda apparatus is able to provide abundance of moral justifications of such actions.

The second indication that physical violence is not strange to the authors of “good change” is their positive attitude to the groups of sport fans engaged in the stadium violence. They are prized for their “patriotism” and their aggressive behavior is justified.

The policy of “good change” and “massive exchange of elites” has its predecessors in Poland and in some other countries. In the recent Polish history, communist government that took power in 1945, after the WWII, instituted the policy of a very radical exchange of elites. In 1968 nationalists in the ruling communist party organized a massive purge under the banner of the fight with Zionism. Some major changes primarily among the political elite took place after 1989 during transformation of the socio-economic system in Poland (after “fall of communism”). These changes, however, have not affected Polish cultural elites because a considerable part of these elites was engaged in opposition against the previous system. Moreover, the norms of the democratic system inhibited a policy of revenge or dominance of a particular political group.

■ (Massive) exchange of elites and the Chinese Cultural Revolution

One of the most extreme and drastic example of the massive exchange of elites is the Chinese Cultural Revolution (Fenby 2008). It is obvious that there are vast differences between that revolution and the “good change”. However, on a more abstract level, we can identify certain similar general mechanisms that might operate in various socio-geographical contexts. We might consider the following:

Similarity of assumptions:

- the previous order is fundamentally wrong and must be abolished,
- people who created this order and supported it were driven by their selfish (dirty) interests, inimical to the interest of the nation and they should be replaced with the people who want to build the new order and are loyal to

it. The concept of the new order is not clearly defined. It allegedly exists in the mind of the leader but his followers are convinced in its unquestionable superiority over the previous one.

A similarity of technology of the change:

It consists first of all in compromising the existing authorities and in destroying symbols of the past. In Poland it took the form of elaborated attack (not physical) on the icons of the democratic transformation, first of all on Lech Wałęsa and Adam Michnik and on other well-deserved Solidarity activists as well as on politicians who have built the democratic system in Poland. The new rulers try to popularize their own authorities and their own symbols (cf. the cult of Lech Kaczyński, the Smolensk disaster, the “cursed soldiers” – that is the armed underground opposition against the communist government after the WWII etc.).

During the Cultural Revolution the popular instruments of attack on people regarded as its enemies and representatives of the past were the Big-Character Posters. Of course, such posters do not appear in Poland. Instead, Internet is the place where opponents of “good change” – lawyers, judges (including former presidents of the Constitutional Tribunal), journalists, writers and other critics of the policy of “good change” are condemned, ridiculed, accused of various contemptible acts and even a betrayal. Contempt, disrespect, and mockery aimed at the most prominent figures of the Polish public life are very common practice of leading politicians of the ruling party.

Similarity (although very remote) of treatment of the members of the old elites, especially these regarded as opponents or enemies of the change.

The officials, specialists, managers whose present or past professional opinions or activities are not liked by the rulers or just because they obtained their positions in the past, are dismissed from their posts or send away to the remote places “in the provinces”. Truly, it is not as bad as being sent to farms in the countryside for hard forced physical labor – the common practice of the Chinese Cultural Revolution.

Espousing the radical youth.

Radical youth tends to be the striking force of the policy of exchange of elites. In Poland, there exist the right wing radical youth organizations that seem to be sympathetic to “good change” and meet with tolerance or protection of the rulers. There are some indications that among Polish youth there is a recruiting base for contemporary form of the “cultural revolution”. But at present, the connections between radical youth and the ruling party appear as not very strong. On the other side, there are also large groups of youth devoted to democratic ideals. They were visible in manifestations in defense of the constitution and the rule of law.

Despite such and other similarities, both the scale and the level of brutality of the policy of “good change” is of course incomparable to “cultural revolution”. We live in a different culture, in a different international context, and governing party has rather limited powers. And there is a strong opposition against this policy. Large groups of Poles publicly manifest their disapproval – hundred thousands of demonstrators take to the streets to manifest their opposition against the “good change”. Moreover, still working democratic institutions are not easily silenced or eliminated. In other words, the executors of “good change” face numerous limitations. Jarosław Kaczyński is far from being like Mao Tse-tung. However, he consistently aims at increasing the extent of his power.

■ **Change of elites – a desirable or even a necessary process**

While discussing the phenomenon of the change of elites, we should not ignore the fact that some degree of change can be a desirable or even a necessary process. Although it is usually an evolutionary process combining continuity and change, there are instances when the natural change of elites is inhibited. The system is blocked and any major improvements are prevented. For example, recently, there have been many voices pointing out that Wall Street’s financial elites have created a closed system that protects them from any significant changes as well as from responsibility for the disastrous social consequences of their practices. Thus, one cannot, a priori, question the very fact of replacing a part of elites, as it might have some healing effect for the society. But the main issue is the rules of change: the criteria of change, the procedures of change, the professional and moral qualities of these who replace the previous elites.

In the Polish case, the main criterion of the change is assumed loyalty to the ruling party. People are removed from their posts not because of lack of competence and poor performance but because of lack of the blind subordination to directives of their political superiors. It serves the concentration of power in the hands of one party and its leader. In other words, the change consists in the transformation of the political system in the authoritarian direction.

The best example of this process is the forceful replacement of the judges of the Constitutional Tribunal whose main function is evaluation whether the existing or new law conforms to the principles of the Polish constitution. The procedure of appointment of the new judges obedient to the party line was a clear breach of the constitution. The highest European Union legal and political authorities condemned it.

To sum up, I would like to stress that the most frightening aspect of the policy of “good change” is its goal. Apparently, this policy is orientated toward formation of an authoritarian state. The massive exchange of the elites is

one of the main instruments of this policy. Therefore, in creation of the new elites open-mindedness, competence, professional qualifications, democratic ethos do not seem to matter much. Such a course of events might have highly negative consequences for the Polish society.

Perhaps there is one exception – the authors of the “good change” pursuing their own political interests try to strengthen their support from the underprivileged social groups that feel victims of the transformation. They instituted a social policy leading to a significant improvement of the economic situation of these groups. This might remain as a positive legacy of the “good change”.

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After parliamentary election of 2015 in Poland the winning party (Law and Justice, PiS) initiated the major socio-political transformation labeled by its authors the “good change”. Its main characteristic is the process of the massive exchange of elites. The process of exchange of the elites has elaborated ideological justifications – broadly popularized legitimizing myth. Its main claim is the thesis about illegitimate origins of the Third Republic of Poland that was established after the fall of communism and about policies of the previous governments that were allegedly contrary to the basic interests of Poland. The practical realization of the idea of the massive exchange of elites might require certain conditions such as the existence of social groups that feel that the current system limits their chances for personal advancement, broad disappointment with the ruling elites, growing tolerance for authoritarian politics, social support for the change. It should be noted that some of these conditions exist, to the certain degree, in various countries of Europe and facilitate the development of the radical right wing movements. This paper describes some of the mechanisms of the change that on the abstract level are similar to processes of exchange of elites in other geo-political contexts.

Key words: elite change, legitimizing myth, right-wing authoritarianism, confidence in authorities, cultural revolution