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THE POLISH WRITERS' CONGRESS

Summary: The recent two-day (February 4-5) congress of the Polish Writers' Union has offered a clearer picture of the basic outlines of the Gierek leadership's cultural policies and some insight into the present mood of the nation's intellectuals. Although the latter have taken an increasingly assertive stance in recent months, the delegates in Lodz apparently sought to avoid a confrontation with the authorities. However, they displayed far less tolerance toward those of their colleagues who had gained positions in the union's executive bodies at the 1969 congress by virtue of their accommodation with the previous regime. These individuals failed to win re-election to the central board, and many of their seats were taken by liberals who had been subject to various types of intimidation and harassment in the latter years of Gomulka's rule. In addition, the delegates decided to revise the PWU statutes, a move motivated in part by the desire to abrogate various changes that were made in the statutes at the last congress.

As for the regime, the available evidence suggests that it has attempted to reach a modus vivendi with the writers. In return for a variety of concessions, the leadership apparently expects the benevolent neutrality, if not the active support, of the literary community in dealing with issues of a "fundamental political nature." The reaction of the writers is not yet clear, but the initial indications are that the basis for a compromise agreement has been found.

This paper reviews the background to the congress, examines the principal highlights of the two-day meeting, and discusses the latter's implications for the relationship between regime and writers in Poland. It concludes that the viability of any compromise solution will, in the final analysis, depend on the willingness of the intellectuals to acknowledge the cultural guidelines of the Gierek leadership. Although the terms offered to the writers for such a compromise are perhaps more reasonable than any others offered in the recent past, it remains to be seen if they will be accepted.

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The 18th Congress of the Polish Writers' Union (PWU) took place in Lodz on February 4-5 in an atmosphere far different from the one that prevailed at the organization's last congress three years ago. (1) In attendance were 113 writers, elected as delegates at earlier meetings of the union's various branches. Also present were representatives of the government (Deputy Premier Wincenty Krasko and Minister of Culture and the Arts Stanislaw Wronski) and party (Politburo member and CC Secretary Jozef Tejchma and the head of the CC Department of Culture Jerzy Kwiatek), as well as foreign delegations from the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, and East Germany. Among the highlights of the two-day session were the election of a new central board of the Writers' Union, and the decision to revise the PWU statutes. In addition, the newly re-elected chairman of the central board, Jaroslaw Iwaskiewicz, indicated after the congress (2) that "a number of proposals related to the living conditions of writers" would be submitted to the Ministry of Culture and the Arts. He did not refer to proposals involving the far more fundamental issues of censorship and the role of writers in Poland today, but the available evidence indicates that these matters were the main discussion topics in Lodz.

The Background

The PWU congress was convened amidst expectations that the meeting might provide some indication of the present mood of the nation's intellectuals and a clearer picture of the regime's attitude toward the creative community. (3) That such insights were still being sought more than 13 months after the leadership changes in Poland could be traced back to the circumstances prior and subsequent to the downfall of Wladyslaw Gomulka and the installation of Edward Gierek as PUWP first secretary. The intellectuals -- traditionally cast as the standard-bearers of the nation's demands and aspirations -- had lent both theoretical and practical meaning to the post-1956 reform movement and had been among Gomulka's most bitter antagonists as he gradually proceeded to negate the spirit and the substance of the Polish "October." Yet, in 1970, having suffered under the cumulative effects of severe censorship, administrative measures, and physical and professional intimidation (particularly during and after the ordeal of the "March events" of 1968), they watched in relative silence as the workers of the Baltic seacoast brought the Gomulka era to an end.

Although the removal of Gomulka and his closest associates produced no immediate change in the position of the intellectuals, a combination of circumstances over the past year has facilitated their re-emergence as an important and assertive group on the Polish scene. Ironically, the policies of the Gierek leadership itself played a major contributory role in this regard. In the first place, the regime -- in line with its initial efforts to gain the

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- (1) For the details on the 17th congress, held in February 1969, see Polish Situation Reports/10 and 11, Radio Free Europe Research (EERA), 7 and 10 February 1969.
 - (2) In an interview with PAP, 5 February 1972.
 - (3) See, for example, The New York Times, 5 February 1972.

support of the population -- adopted a more tolerant attitude toward the intellectuals, and several prominent writers silenced by Gomulka after "March," e.g., Stefan Kisielewski and Antoni Slonimski, were allowed to have their works published again. Their return to public life coincided with a general reaction against those cultural opportunists who had successfully accommodated themselves to the rigid demands of the previous leadership. Moreover, given the Gierek regime's preoccupation with socioeconomic issues, the self-confidence of the intellectual community was able to develop within the generally more relaxed atmosphere afforded by the "renewal" process.

Recently, this resurgence of spirit has been manifest in several dramatic ways. In early December, Slonimski wrote a courageous response to the accusations launched against him in 1968. (4) Shortly thereafter, it was learned that 17 writers had signed a letter to the Minister of the Interior in protest against the severity of the sentences handed down in the trials (in July and October of 1971) of the "Ruch" group. (5) The famous author Jerzy Andrzejewski reportedly wrote a letter to Gierek on the same subject. (6)

That Poland's intellectuals were gradually emerging from the shell imposed on them in the latter years of the Gomulka era could also be gauged by the increasing assertiveness and intensity of the discussion within the literary community on such issues as artistic criteria and values, the relationship between literature and politics, and various shortcomings in the technical aspects of publication, as well as in financial remuneration for writers. In one of the October issues of the Writers' Union periodical Wspolczesnosc, Marek Jaworski bluntly referred to the "paralysis" in the literary movement and to the fact that "whereas our reality has been extremely political for years . . . our literature has become increasingly apolitical." (7) Referring to the forthcoming writers' congress, he posed the rhetorical questions:

Is the writers' congress to be confronted only with material, social, and organizational problems again? Is the period of salutary post-December effervescence covering the whole of society to affect the literary community only so superficially on the issues which a writer should have most at heart?

The regime itself has acknowledged that "difficulties and signs of stagnation in various fields of cultural endeavor" emerged in recent years, (8) but

(4) Tygodnik Powszechny, 5 December 1971.

(5) The protest was initially revealed by Dan Morgan in the Washington Post on December 19. Several West European correspondents, including Bernard Margueritte in Le Monde (February 2), have subsequently reported on the letter.

(6) See Margueritte, ibid., and Jonathan Steele in The Guardian, 9 February 1972.

(7) 3-16 October 1971.

(8) In the CC report on party activity between the fifth and sixth PUWP congresses, Trybuna Ludu, 5 December 1971.

its approach to the intellectual community has been generally marked by a certain amount of ambiguity and inconsistency. On the one hand, there have been signs of conciliation and moderation -- e.g., the personal meetings between party and government officials and cultural representatives, the reappearance in print of certain authors, the removal of some individuals identified with the cultural policies of the Gomulka period, and the recognition of the financial and technical hardships prevailing in the cultural sphere. But on the other hand, the Gierek leadership has not retracted the charges leveled against prominent intellectuals three years ago, nor has it revised the former regime's interpretation of the "March events." (9) Moreover, it has retained a firm, albeit somewhat more discriminating, grip on the reins of censorship.

The priority accorded to socioeconomic matters may in part explain the leadership's past failure to articulate any type of concrete policy toward the intellectual community. Its attitude of late has seemed to reflect both the technocratic mentality on the ascendancy in Warsaw -- i.e., the references in the PUWP pregress Guidelines to a long-term "development program" and the "administration of cultural activity" (10) -- and the limitations imposed by doctrinal considerations. This latter element was particularly evident at the Sixth Congress of the PUWP, at which Gierek expounded the party's view of intellectual activity:

. . . The sole criterion in judging art and the arts is the ideological, social, and artistic worth of a work, its contribution to the consolidation of the nation, its internal force, and international position. (11)

Even more significantly, he singled out the period from 1956 to 1959 as one in which "the necessary elimination of specific dogmatic and sectarian errors" had been accompanied by "compromises with revisionism." Although not spelled out, the implication of the statement for the intellectual community -- whose euphoric performance in those earlier years had been an essential ingredient of the post-Stalinist thaw -- seemed both direct and ominous: the rejection of Gomulka's "autocratic" methods and style of rule would not lead to similar ideological "compromises" in the future.

(9) For an interesting and perceptive explanation of the factors -- practical, political, and ideological -- that continue to place any discussion of the "March events" in the "taboo" category, see Bernhard Heimrich in the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 4 February 1972.

(10) See Michael Costello, "The PUWP Guidelines and the Pregress Discussion," Polish Background Report/25, RFER (EERA), 30 November 1971.

(11) Trybuna Ludu, 7 December 1971.

The Congress Discussion

Given this background -- the leadership's commitment to ideological orthodoxy expressed at the party congress in December 1971 and the growing sense of assertiveness in literary circles -- it appeared possible, as the date of the writers' congress approached, that a conflict situation might develop. An important omen in this respect was the preconference meetings of the various sections of the PWU. The slate of delegates elected at these sessions included such liberal figures as Andrzejewski, Slonimski, and the novelist Igor Neverly, who had earlier turned in his party card in protest against the ousting of Professor Leszek Kolakowski from the PUWP. On the other hand, many hardliners and representatives of the Gomulka era, including Wladyslaw Machejek, the editor-in-chief of the Cracow weekly Zycie Literackie, and three members of the PWU central board -- the Pax writer Jan Dobraczynski, the playwright Jerzy Jurandot, and the novelist Wojciech Zukrowski -- were not elected delegates. At the January 6 meeting of the Warsaw section, which, as the largest branch of the PWU, chose the majority of the delegates for the congress, 35, or more than half of the 65 delegates selected, were not members of the PUWP. Moreover, the participants in the meeting adopted a motion calling for the abrogation of certain amendments to the PWU statutes approved at the 17th congress in 1969 under severe pressure from the Gomulka regime. These developments were clearly indicative of the writers' determination to discard the legacy of the latter years of Gomulka's rule at the 18th congress. What remained to be seen was the leadership's response to this effort, as well as the related, but far more important, matter of the intentions of the participants in the Lodz meeting as regarded the nature of the future relationship between the regime and the nation's intellectuals.

Several of these questions were, in effect, to be answered even before the official opening of the congress on February 4. On that day, the party newspaper Trybuna Ludu published an extensive article on cultural affairs suggesting an official inclination to avoid confrontation with the writers. Indicating awareness of "the numerous shortcomings in the domain of Polish culture, in the organization of cultural life, incorrect publishing policies, and the insufficiently stabilized living and working conditions of various groups of creative and cultural workers," the article noted that such problems were "the result of neglect piling up for years, and cannot be removed at once." It promised that these problems would be resolved as soon as possible, and that "bureaucratic restrictions on cultural activity" would be eliminated. While asserting that Poland's writers had a "moral duty" to be ideologically committed, the party newspaper stated that "controversial opinions" would not be suppressed, if they are not at cross-purposes with "the most vital interests of the Polish nation and the socialist system." Trybuna Ludu also seemed to express the limits of the leadership's tolerance, when noting that, in the course of recent literary discussions, "hasty opinions were expressed, some of them incorrectly putting in doubt the basic principles of, and the necessity to preserve, the continuity of the Polish cultural policy." (12)

(12) For additional details, see Steele, op. cit.

Those "principles" were elaborated upon in a speech by the recently appointed Minister of Culture and the Arts, Stanislaw Wronski, to the opening session of the congress. (13) They were said to include preference for "works advocating progress and socialism" and the prevention of the "penetration of works which are hostile to socialism and which undermine our fraternal alliances with the socialist countries." However, Wronski stressed that, apart from "conditions of this fundamental political nature, we do not, and will not, restrict the freedom of creative work in culture." Taking the same conciliatory stance as had Trybuna Ludu, he noted that the regime's cultural policy would not "ignore" the intellectuals' "right to various creative experiments, to an individual viewpoint, and to a polemical approach to various problems." The minister also devoted considerable attention to the working and living conditions of writers, emphasizing that improvements would be made in these spheres.

On the subject of the past, Wronski admitted that "there have been examples of the application of unjustified restrictions. . . ." However, this criticism of the former leadership was balanced by the subsequent assertion that ". . . there have also been examples of the abuse of writers' freedom for political purposes contrary to socialism." As for the future, he concluded by stating that "it is my wish that we should reach accord on fundamental issues."

Although Radio Warsaw (14) asserted that Wronski's speech had been received with "great satisfaction" by the delegates, the Polish media have published little, if any, information on individual responses to it, or on the general nature of the congress discussion itself. In an interview (15) at the conclusion of the first day of debates, one of the participants commented that some of the 113 delegates had spoken frankly about "shortcomings" in cultural policy, but no specifics were mentioned. There would seem to be little doubt, however, that much of the discussion focused on the issue of the latitude to be allowed to writers in dealing with topical subjects. Several delegates reportedly criticized the negative impact of censorship on Polish literature. (16) The literary critic Artur Sandauer allegedly asserted that "we are able to speak only half-truths and we can never read the whole truth," (17) while Iwaskiewicz stated, after the congress, that previously "not all writers were allowed to write and there existed taboo subjects." (18)

(13) Trybuna Ludu, 6 February 1972.

(14) 5 February 1972.

(15) Radio Warsaw, 4 February 1972.

(16) See, for example, The Times (London), 7 February 1972, the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 8 February 1972, and the Sueddeutsche Zeitung, 8 February 1972.

(17) The Times, ibid.

(18) In an interview with Dziennik Lodzki, summarized by PAP on 7 February 1972.

In appealing for greater "truth" in literature, the newly re-elected chairman of the PWU central board also voiced the hope that "the new political atmosphere in this country will stimulate the creation of such works." The bitterness reflected in some of the delegates' remarks notwithstanding, such cautious expressions of optimism appear to have been a dominant theme at the congress. Slonimski, for example, is said also to have referred to a new "climate of hope"; much of his speech apparently consisted of quotations from an article that was written by him on the eve of the Lodz meeting. (19) In it, the prominent poet emphasized "the possibility of finding an area of agreement between the authorities and the creative circles" and characterized a "compromise" solution as "not only possible, but necessary, if we are concerned about the development of our culture." However, he stressed that any compromise would have to be a "reasonable" one, and that "an open and honest opponent is always better than an ever-willing bootlicker." Slonimski concluded by calling for more regular consultation between "outstanding active writers of various views and the authorities," an appeal that has been subsequently echoed. (20)

The Election of the Central Board

If the general attitude toward the Gierek leadership appears to have been marked by guarded optimism and the desire for conciliation, far less tolerance was shown toward those writers who had successfully accommodated themselves to the post-March 1968 atmosphere and thus gained positions on the PWU central board at the previous congress in 1969. At that session, five members of the 1965 board were dropped and ten new ones were elected, bringing total membership in the body to 25. At the Lodz congress, none of the additions to the 1969 board won re-election, while two of the five removed in 1969 -- the outspoken proponents of freedom of speech, Andrzej Braun and Tadeusz Holuj -- were again named to the board. Moreover, nine other members of the 1969 board were not re-elected. The new 24-member central board thus consists of six who have been on it since at least 1965 and 18 newly elected writers, some of whom had served on the board in earlier years, such as Braun, Holuj, and Mieczyslaw Jastrun, a board member prior to 1954, who resigned his party membership in 1957 over the closing of the monthly Europa even before its first issue appeared.

The chief beneficiaries of this radical turnover were the liberals, whose representatives on the new board included -- in addition to Braun, Holuj, and Jastrun -- such figures as the poet Zbigniew Herbert and the essayist Henryk Bereza. The outspoken Catholic weekly Tygodnik Powszechny was represented by one of Poland's best essayists, Andrzej Kijowski.

(19) The article appeared in the February 6 issue of the Catholic weekly Tygodnik Powszechny.

(20) For example, by Wladyslaw Terlecki, one of the newly elected members of the PWU central board, on Radio Warsaw, 9 February 1972.

Of the writers who managed to retain their positions, the cases of two are particularly interesting. Iwaskiewicz, the 78-year-old "man of the center" who has served as chairman of the board for more than 10 years, was re-elected to that post. However, for the first time in PWU history, there were two candidates for the chairmanship and the incumbent's margin over his adversary, Igor Neverly, reported to be 64 votes to 46, was hardly convincing. Indeed, Iwaskiewicz's victory seemed less a tribute to his past record than to the recognition by some of the liberal delegates that the election of such a controversial figure as Neverly might be interpreted by the regime as a direct challenge.

No such gesture of moderation was apparent in the case of Jerzy Putrament, an apologist for the Gomulka regime's cultural policies who has also won the confidence of the Gierek leadership. (21) He came under attack during the congress debates (22) and was only re-elected to the central board after a second ballot runoff against several other candidates. Putrament and Zbigniew Zaluski, a former spokesman for the Partisan faction who has been elected to the board for the first time, are the most prominent party members on the board.

In addition to Machejek, Dobraczynski, Jurandot, and Zukrowski -- who were not even chosen as delegates -- the members of the old board who have not been re-elected include: the old revolutionary Janina Dziarnowska, Leopold Lewin, Jozef Lenart, and Stefan Olcha, such well-known figures as the aged Pax follower, Professor Konrad Gorski, and the novelist Roman Bratny, who had served with little distinction as head of the PWU committee charged with negotiating censorship disputes with the authorities. Others not re-elected to the new board were Wilhelm Szewczyk, a contributor to Zycie Literackie and a Silesian very closely connected with Katowice, where he still holds important literary and theatrical offices, and the writer Andrzej Wasilewski, who had been elected an alternate CC member at the sixth congress in December. He had been one of the 10 elected to the previous board in 1969.

Fewer details are currently available on the composition of some of the other PWU bodies. Shortly after the congress, several Western reports indicated that Andrzejewski had been named to one of the union's important committees. (23) This was subsequently confirmed by Tygodnik Literackie (24) which listed the prominent author and critic as one of the new members of the union's arbitration court, which deals with various controversies arising within the writers' community.

(21) Putrament was elected a full member of the CC at the sixth congress, the only writer to be so honored.

(22) See The Times, loc.cit.

(23) See Journal de Genève, 8 February 1972 and Reuter from Warsaw, 11 February 1972.

(24) As quoted by PAP, 11 February 1972.

Changes in the Statutes

At the 17th congress in 1969, the statutes of the PWU were revised so as to increase "the prerogatives of the central board regarding the acceptance of new members and the expulsion from the union of those persons guilty of activity not becoming to a writer in People's Poland." (25) In effect, the changes empowered the party-dominated board to apply disciplinary sanctions against those individuals who were accused by the regime of having been in "open conflict with People's Poland" -- sanctions which the union's relevant bodies had previously refused to take. (26)

At the January 6 meeting of the Warsaw branch of the PWU, Jerzy Ficowski reportedly demanded the abrogation of the 1969 revisions, in order "to prevent the packing of the executive committee with 'officially favored' members, or the unwarranted expulsion of members who are in disfavor with the authorities." (27) A resolution to this effect, as well as one calling for the nullification of the rule that Polish writers with "foreign nationality" cannot be members of the PWU, (28) was adopted at the meeting. It is apparent that these, and possibly other, demands for the revision of the statutes were presented at the congress in Lodz, although at this point it is not known by whom or in what form. On February 5, Radio Warsaw reported that a special nine-member commission had been elected, which, "in six months at the latest, will submit new draft statutes." In his interview with PAP at the conclusion of the Lodz sessions, Iwaskiewicz stated:

For all practical purposes, the congress has not yet ended its debates. According to the resolution adopted, we must meet again this year to discuss changes in the union's statutes. A draft of these changes is being prepared by a special commission.

As yet, there are no details on either the extent of the contemplated changes or the identity of the members of the commission. However, in view of the importance attached to the revisions, i.e., the appointment of a special committee and the envisaged reconconvocation of the congress in several months, they may be of considerable scope. Relatedly, the adoption of this longer-term process may possibly be seen as another sign of moderation on the part of the delegates, or, in other words, as a way of fending off any subsequent regime contention that the statutes had been revised with undue haste.

(25) Radio Warsaw, 9 February 1969.

(26) For additional details, see Polish SR/11, RFER (EERA), 10 February 1969, Item 1.

(27) The New York Times, 5 February 1972.

(28) Neue Zuercher Zeitung, 5 February 1972.

Compromise or Conflict?

The available evidence would suggest that the Gierek leadership has sought to reach a modus vivendi with the intellectuals. In so doing, it has offered certain concessions, including an easing of censorship, less bureaucratic interference and rigidity, increased financial remuneration for writers, and significant improvements in various technical and administrative matters associated with publication. In return, the regime apparently expects the benevolent neutrality, if not the active support, of the literary community in dealing with issues of a "fundamental political nature." The reaction of the writers is not yet clear, but the initial indications are that they have acted in such way as to avoid a conflict with the authorities and that the basis for a compromise agreement has been found. The regime's terms and relatively conciliatory attitude have undoubtedly been viewed by many writers as a welcome change from the stifling anti-intellectualism of Gomulka's latter years in power.

The atmosphere of moderation and conciliation in Lodz notwithstanding, it would be premature to assess any compromise as a panacea for either the regime or the writers. On balance, the latter seem to have made significant gains, as regards both obtaining certain concessions from the leadership and electing authorities that are more representative of the aspirations of the writers themselves. The new central board will certainly exert more pressure on the relevant officials than did its predecessor. Moreover, given the influence of the newly elected liberals, it is less likely to acquiesce to the regime on important issues involving either the writers' community in particular or society in general. For example, six of the new members of the board were among the 17 signatories of the protest letter over the "Ruch" trial. (29) Although the official response in this case was peculiarly mild, the circumstances might quickly change should the writers take upon themselves the role of an "opponent" -- as mentioned by Slonimski.

In the short term, much will also depend on the attitude of the regime, for example, in its fulfillment of the assorted promises made to the writers and the manner in which it chooses to define a topic of a "fundamental political nature." If Gierek's past performance provides any insight, it is possible that the leadership will attempt to compensate for the strictness of this definition by making genuine efforts to improve the material and working conditions of the writers. Although the latter have received comparatively better treatment under him than under his predecessor, the facts remain that the present leadership is a composite of apparatchiks and technocrats, whose pragmatism is not to be confused with liberalism, and that Gierek himself is probably no more positively disposed toward the intellectuals that was Gomulka. Moreover, the party leader must contend with the view from the East, and recent developments in Moscow and Prague are hardly of a nature to encourage him to loosen the reins of censorship. Indeed, the scanty coverage accorded the writers' congress in the Polish press is one measure of official sensitivity on this issue.

(29) See Margueritte, op. cit.

These factors, as well as the regime's demonstrated inclination to keep a tight rein on the substance and the scope of the "renewal" process, and to confine it within certain limits, will be of crucial significance in the subsequent evolution of the relationship between the leadership and the writers. These may have been taken into account by the delegates in Lodz, and the congress might well initiate a period of maneuvering, in which the intellectuals will seek to probe the regime's level and limits of toleration. However, the viability of any compromise will, in the final analysis, depend on the willingness of the writers to accept the cultural guidelines of the Gierek leadership. The conditions for such a compromise are undoubtedly more "reasonable" than in the past, and its cost to the intellectuals, in terms of accommodation, is still undefined. If it is subsequently found to be too high, the implications could be ominous, for it is clear that the regime will have no inclination to recognize the writers as an "opponent" -- no matter how "open and honest" they may be.

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