

RADIO FREE EUROPE *Research*

RAD Background Report/131

(Poland)

11 May 1981

POLISH CC PLENUM SETS THE STAGE FOR PARTY CONGRESS

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Summary: The Polish party's Central Committee set the date of the special congress for July 14-18. It has also established rules for the election of congressional delegates. Those rules provide the rank and file with an opportunity to elect their own representatives without, however, eliminating the possibility that the electoral process could still be strongly influenced by the leadership. On other matters, the CC made some changes in the composition of its executive bodies. The political meaning of those changes remains unclear. The main emphasis of the precongressional campaign is likely to be on the organizational unity of the party.

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Poland's communist party will hold a special national congress in Warsaw between July 14 and 18. The decision to set a precise date for the gathering was made by the party's Central Committee at a plenary meeting held on April 29-30; it marked the end of a long period of waiting for and uncertainty about that decision. Indeed, the first promises to convoke a special congress were made by the leadership and approved by the Central Committee at a plenary CC meeting on 5 October 1981. No specific date was given then, however; and while demands for a rapid convening of the assembly were repeatedly made by rank and file activists and local party bodies, the leadership appeared increasingly hesitant to commit itself to a specific time. Finally, after much vacillation and procrastination, the Central Committee agreed at its meeting on March 29-30 to summon the congress before July 20. The recent clarification of the date should go a long way toward relieving tension within the party and directing its activity toward the preparation of the event.

Besides setting the date for the congress, the Central Committee established rules for the election of delegates to the forthcoming extraordinary congress. Each delegate will represent approximately 1,700 party members and candidates. The delegates are to be elected at provincial, plant, university, and military party conferences. The nominations of candidates for election will be made by special electoral commissions, but all party members attending the electoral conference will have the right to nominate additional candidates; there is no limit on the number of these additional candidates. The election will be held by secret ballot.

This procedure was embodied in a resolution of the 10th CC plenum held on April 29 and 30. (1) It is a compromise between earlier instructions of the party's leadership that gave the electoral commissions a dominant role in the nominating process and the demands of the rank and file for greater participation in selecting the delegates. The resolution provided a much needed, though already belated, clarification of the way in which the delegates to the congress are to be chosen. It applies, however, to the congressional election alone. Its applicability to other aspects of the party's operations will have to be decided by the congress itself, through appropriate changes in the organization's statutes.

The Compromise

The crucial feature of the newly adopted rules is the removal of the restriction on the number of candidates that can be nominated from the floor. More than anything else, this measure introduced a really democratic element into the electoral process in the party by limiting the controlling prerogatives of the electoral commissions, which have traditionally been selected by the party's officialdom, and by providing the rank and file with an opportunity to influence the outcome. In addition, its acceptance has furnished an indispensable element for giving validity to the secret ballot.

There is little doubt that the measure marked a dramatic departure from established practice within the party. Suffice it to say that electoral instructions prepared before the 1971, 1975, and 1980 party congresses gave the electoral commissions the prerogative to nominate a full slate of candidates and limited the number of additional candidates proposed from the floor to a mere 15% of the available seats. It was only after the change in the party's leadership in 1980 and in face of growing ferment in the organization that the official approach toward the issue of the membership's participation in the electoral process has become somewhat different.

(1) Trybuna Ludu, 30 April 1981.

In December 1980, following an official pledge to hold an extraordinary congress in the near future, the Central Committee issued new "Provisional Rules on Electing the Authorities and Delegates." (2) The new rules, while maintaining the electoral commission's prerogatives on nominating the full slate of candidates, increased the allowable number of candidates to be proposed from the floor up to 50% of the available seats. This concession -- the official party press openly admitted that the change was a concession (3) -- proved to be unacceptable to many activists in the party's reform movement.

Indeed, shortly after the new instructions had been distributed to local party organizations, considerable and widespread criticism of the "provisional" rules developed in many sectors of the party. In part, this criticism was related to the centralistic manner of selecting the electoral commissions. There were, for instance, reports that both the Central Congress Commission and all the provincial commissions, with the significant exception of the commission in Gdansk, were "elected" without any participation of the rank and file members or their representatives. (4) If nothing else, this was seen by many activists as just another example of attempted manipulation of the party's membership by the leadership and the officialdom.

The main brunt of the attacks, however, was directed at the prerogatives of the commissions in nominating the candidates and, in particular, at the restrictions in proposing additional candidates from the floor. Some party activists were reported to have sarcastically remarked that the new rules merely provided "35% more democracy" in the party's internal life, and numerous local party bodies demanded official recognition of their right to "nominate candidates . . . without any formal limitation on their numbers." (5) To support those demands, the common and frequently repeated argument was that "any other solution would lead to a violation of the electoral principles as formulated in the party's statutes," and particularly, "the principle of a secret vote" in all party elections.

Here it must be said that while the matter of electing the congress delegates has not been dealt with in the party statutes, the very principle of secret election of all party authorities has always been included in the statutory rules. Indeed, the current version of the statutes solemnly proclaims that "election of party authorities is secret. The vote is taken separately on each candidate, and all party members (delegates) have a right to nominate candidates as well as to question and oppose the already nominated candidates" (Article 27).

(2) The text is in Zycie Partii, February 1981, pp. 9-12.

(3) Ibid., p. 8.

(4) Bernard Walenski, "The Party Is the Property of Its Members," Trybuna Opolska, 23 March 1981; Dorota Terakowska in Gazeta Krakowska, 5 February 1981.

(5) Piotr Moszynski, "The Matter of Elections," Polityka, 7 March 1981.

There has always been serious doubt, however, about the actual implementation of the principle of secret elections. There could be no denial, for instance, that a system of control by the higher authorities over all activities of the lower party bodies, a system sanctioned in the statutes as exemplifying democratic centralism, severely undermined the secrecy of the elections. Furthermore, the long-established practice of limiting the number of candidates for any elective posts to the number of seats turned the electoral proceedings into a mere formality. It is therefore against those abuses of practice rather than the absence of the principle of secrecy that the wrath of the activists has been directed.

More important still, there have been indications that some of the largest party units in industrial centers were ready to undertake the necessary practical steps to change the situation without so much as waiting for the leadership's permission. In several party bodies the rank and file members have organized their own elections, with an unlimited number of candidates and secret ballots in open disregard of the Central Committee's instructions. (6) In Gdansk the party organization in the shipyard even went as far as to adopt its own resolution which specified that its conference would adhere to the principle of "secret and direct elections, without any limitations on the number of candidates nominated from the floor." (7)

Faced with the real prospect of a breakdown in the party's discipline, in March the Central Committee accepted new changes in the electoral rules. Those changes were generally described as geared to reinforce the principle of secret elections. More specifically, they introduced a rule that "the conference decides by itself how many candidates for [the positions of] party authorities and delegates [should be] nominated by an electoral commission and [how many] from the floor." (8) In other words, while stopping short of an explicit acceptance of the rank and file demands for an open process of the candidates' selection, the Central Committee provided the local party bodies with an opportunity to satisfy those demands by themselves. This decision was formalized through a resolution of the Central Committee at its meeting on April 29-30.

Other resolutions dealt with decisions to present a draft of the CC program of changes in the party's statutory rules for discussion by the membership and to set up a special commission to streamline the investigation of former party leaders and activists charged with abuses of power. In addition, the Central Committee decided to accept "the possibility" that local party control commissions could be elected directly by provincial and plant conferences provided that those conferences "were prepared to follow that procedure." (9) The party control commissions are charged with the supervision of "the ideological and moral purity" of the organization, their political role has been limited, and they have had little or no impact on party policies.

(6) See Zycie Warszawy, 13 March 1981.

(7) For the text of the resolution, see Glos Wybrzeza, 16 March 1981.

(8) Trybuna Ludu, 2 April 1981.

(9) Ibid., 30 April 1981.

Personnel Changes

On other matters, the CC approved several changes in the composition of the Politburo and the CC Secretariat. Four men resigned from their positions in those bodies: Jozef Pinkowski, the former prime minister, resigned as a full member of the Politburo; Emil Wojtaszek, the former foreign minister, resigned as a deputy member of the Politburo and as a CC secretary; Jerzy Wojtecki gave up his post as a CC secretary; and Zbigniew Zielinski resigned as a member of the Secretariat. Following those resignations, party leader Stanislaw Kania proposed, and the committee accepted by a secret vote, Gerard Gabrys and Zygmunt Wronski as full members of the Politburo, and Jozef Masny as a deputy member of the same body. In addition, Kazimierz Cypryniak was elected a CC secretary.

The political meaning of these changes is unclear. While the resignation of Pinkowski was widely anticipated -- after losing the post of prime minister his role in the leadership had been undefined -- the functions of the three other departed officials, who occupied "technical" positions in the central party apparatus, were basically bureaucratic. Indeed, one could even question whether their departure should be regarded as a demise. There is a strong possibility that they will be transferred to other posts in their areas of competence; in fact, Wojtecki already occupies the position of Minister of Agriculture and is likely to stay in that job.

The manner of advancement of the newcomers is equally ambiguous. While it is clear that the elevation of Gabrys and Wronski, two industrial workers with long membership in the CC, is a gesture toward the worker contingent in the party, neither of these men can be identified with the currently active masses of working class rank and file militants. As for Masny and Cypryniak, they are first secretaries of the provincial party committees in Opole and Szczecin, respectively. It is still difficult to evaluate their positions with respect to the ferment in the party; their roles have been relatively passive and they have not distinguished themselves by either "hard-line" or "liberal" orientations.

Indeed, both the placidity of the resolutions and the ambiguity of the personnel changes suggest the political caution and operational timidity of the plenum. No major departures from the established political strategies were announced, nor were any organizational changes proposed at the gathering. The main emphasis was on a basically conservative assessment of the current difficulties, both in the party and in the country at large, and on repeated appeals for organizational unity within the party as well as for public cooperation in the task of revitalizing the country.

Kania's Address

The tone of the meeting appears to have been set in Kania's opening address. His speech concentrated on two closely related themes: the insistence on the need to preserve the "leading" role of the party in the country's political life, and the need to maintain the existing structures of the party's organization and its hierarchical distribution of power.

Here it is necessary to note that Kania neither rejected, nor condemned the changes that have taken place in Poland during the last several months. Yet he also failed to indicate even a modicum of approval for either their scope or their direction. Instead, while frankly admitting the need for potentially far-reaching innovations in the methods of exercising power by the party and for providing party members with additional forums for political involvement, Kania repeatedly affirmed that those changes would have to be instigated and approved by the party's leadership. Indeed, his address amounted to little more than a restatement of the views he had first expounded in his speech at a Central Committee meeting on 5 October 1980. The main lines of his approach then were the preservation of the party's "leading" role in all organized activities and the need for all party members to rally round the leadership (10); the same lines were repeated now as though nothing had happened since. Kania's choice of expressions has certainly become more moderate and politically milder; the essence, however, remains the same.

The crucial point in his speech was an assertion that "the key to overcoming the current crisis is in the party fulfilling its leading role in the construction of a socialist society." (11) This provides the basis for defining the party's relations toward other social forces and groups. Kania expressed his party's willingness to cooperate with almost all existing groups, such as rural associations (he failed to mention Rural Solidarity in this context), women's leagues and clubs, youth organizations, and the trade unions -- here he emphasized the party's interest in supporting the branch labor unions, which are nothing but a reincarnation of the old trade unions, although he also expressed readiness to work with Solidarity. Kania also said that the party would work to increase the importance of elective bodies, such as the Sejm or the people's councils. Yet in all these cases he made clear that the essence of this support would be to enhance the positions and to improve the work of the party members active in those organizations. It was not, therefore, a willingness to strengthen the positions of those organizations and groups as such that seemed to motivate Kania's assurances, but rather his desire to use them to streamline and redefine the role of the party operating through them. "The role of the party in the state," he said, "imposes upon it the obligation to show the initiative in the process of broadening democracy, of expressing and implementing social aspirations in all areas of life, and of participating in all actions of decision making, government, and management."

In general, Kania said, "the mission of the party is to shape socialist reality, socialist convictions, and socialist relations between people." More specifically and practically, this "mission" would imply, in Kania's view, party control over the policy of recruitment to important posts in the state and control of mass communications. Kania frankly admitted that there was an "urgent need to change existing personnel policies," but he was equally frank about the party's determination "to preserve its influence

(10) See J. B. de Weydenthal, "The CC Plenum in Poland -- Continuing Uncertainty," RAD Background Report/241 (Poland), Radio Free Europe Research, 10 October 1980.

(11) Radio Warsaw, 29 April 1981.

over appointments to key posts in agencies" administering public order in the country. Similar determination to preserve the basic framework of control was apparent when Kania spoke about the public functions of the mass media. "The party will never abandon its right to inspire and to control the mass media and agencies of propaganda," Kania asserted, while speaking about the need for party members to become more active in shaping the work of the press and of the radio and television networks.

Kania appeared to realize that the task of preserving a dominant position for the party would not be easy. "Our line," he said, "is a line not only of cooperation but also of struggle." He then went on to decry the activities of opponents of "socialism" in various organizations, saying that they were "supported by foreign centers of diversion." Describing the activities of these opponents as aimed at fostering disillusionment in the population and thus providing the ground for social apathy and "creeping counter-revolution," Kania said that "all opponents of socialism are pinning their hopes on the influence of Solidarity and trying to use that organization" for their own purposes. Kania seemed convinced that those hopes would fail to bring about any change in the position of Solidarity which, he said, was "defined in terms of its statutes as a labor union . . . recognizing the leading role of the party and our international alliances."

At the same time, Kania deplored the influence of KSS "KOR" upon the union. He also attacked a recent Solidarity statement in which its role in the current process of renewal was defined in terms of "the main guarantor of the renewal and a force that is irreplaceable in that process." Kania's criticism of some aspects of Solidarity's activities, however, should not be taken as indicative of the leadership's refusal to cooperate with the labor organization in shaping the nature of the country's public life. Indeed, one must note here that in recent days serious negotiations have been undertaken by the unions and the government with a view to settling outstanding problems and preparing the ground for possibly lasting cooperation between the two sides. There is no doubt that those negotiations would not have been possible without the express approval of the party authorities. One can, in fact, argue that it is the nature of the prospective agreements with the labor movement and their implementation that will define the future policies of the party more precisely than any programmatic speeches and appeals.

Turning to the problems of the party itself, Kania said that the most important task facing both the leadership and the masses of rank and file party members was to ensure the unity of the organization. He promised that the forthcoming congress and the current proposals for changes in the party's statutes would be major steps toward achieving such unity. At the same time, Kania recognized the existing obstacles to the fulfillment of that task. Specifically, he addressed himself to the recent phenomenon of so-called "horizontal links" between various basic bodies of the party. Apparently realizing the popularity of those structures among the party's rank and file, Kania stopped short of criticizing their development; but then he also failed to endorse them.

"We [the leadership] regard those commissions and discussion groups as indicative of the vitality and activism within the party," he said. He went on to add, however, that "it must be stressed that this type of activity must not lead to the weakening or the replacement of the Leninist structure of the party [or] to the undermining of its cohesion. This would lead, in turn, to the creation of a basis for divisions and factions."

In Kania's opinion, while the existence and the activities of the "horizontal structures" could generally be regarded as a "positive phenomenon," one should also be aware of "all the possible dangers created by activity that is not defined in the statutes." There was no indication in Kania's speech, however, that the new form of horizontal cooperation between various party bodies would be acceptable for inclusion in the party's rules. Instead, he spoke at length about the possibility and the need to "restrict" the role of the party's apparatus, to "enhance" the position of elective party bodies within the organization, and to forge close links between the leadership and the rank and file members. Kania failed, however, to provide specific examples of those changes and improvements. Instead, he vaguely promised that "we will have to search for realistic and constructive solutions [to those problems]" and said that those issues should be taken up at the forthcoming party congress.

It is too soon to know how Kania's address was received by the party at large. The discussion at the plenum, during which some 40 speakers were reported to have taken the floor, brought no indication of any serious opposition to or criticism of Kania's basic pronouncements. It is true that some of the speakers defended the validity of the "horizontal structures" (for example, Deputy Prime Minister Mieczyslaw F. Rakowski), but their opinions failed to find expression in the resolutions issued after the meeting.

As for the local activists who were instrumental in increasing the internal ferment in the party, their reactions have not yet been registered. It is known that some of the local party organizations, particularly in Torun, Gdansk, and Lublin, were monitoring the plenum's debates. It is also known that a group of representatives of rank and file activists tried to gain access to the CC building to listen to the debates; their demands were, however, refused by CC officials.

One is inclined to argue, nonetheless, that in view of the long-lasting and widespread ferment in the party, the approach maintained by Kania, an approach suggesting continuity rather than innovation, will meet with little enthusiasm in many sectors of the party. This should not, however, be taken as an assertion that the ferment will increase, but rather that the internal diversification is likely to continue. At the same time, one cannot dismiss the possibility that the energies of local activists will concentrate more on the preparation of the future congress and less on current policies.