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MOVEMENT OF DISCUSSION CLUBS EMERGES IN POLAND

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Summary: A new movement, The Clubs for a Self-Governing Republic: Freedom, Justice, Independence, has emerged in Poland. Founded by a group of activists associated with Solidarity's Warsaw chapter, the movement was conceived as a network of discussion clubs that would provide a forum for nationwide debates on the possible evolution of Polish politics. The idea took off despite the authorities's attempt to prevent the founding meeting from taking place. This paper describes the initial official reactions to that development and summarizes the movement's founding declaration.

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The Raid in Warsaw

On the afternoon of November 22 police raided the apartment of Jacek Kuron, a former leader of the recently dissolved dissident organization KSS "KOR" (Committee for Social Self-Defense "KOR") and an adviser to the national leadership of Solidarity since September 1980. According to a statement subsequently issued by the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the purpose of the raid had been to prevent a meeting, which the authorities described as "illegal," from taking place. (1)

Claiming that the meeting was about to set up a new organization, "The Clubs for a Self-Governing Republic: Freedom, Justice, Independence," the ministry charged that

this organization would aspire to play the role of a political party and, acting along the programmatic lines that had been formulated by Jacek Kuron and his associates, would undertake activities directed against the Polish constitutional system.

(1) Radio Warsaw, 22 November 1981.

The ministry also said that during the raid the police had seized several documents, including the founding declaration of the organization, and checked the identities of "several dozen" individuals attending the gathering, some of whom were said to have belonged to the Warsaw leadership of Solidarity.

The authorities' allegations were promptly rejected by the Warsaw chapter of Solidarity, which released a statement of its own claiming that the would-be participants in the gathering at Kuron's apartment had merely intended to discuss issues related to the recently adopted Solidarity program. The statement went on to say that the discussion was to focus on the concept of a "self-governing republic," a programmatic notion concerned with the possible evolution of the institutional management of the country's public life. Prominently featured in Solidarity's program, that notion has never been sufficiently clarified and has provoked considerable controversy both in the movement's press and among its activists. (2) The intended gathering was to debate a proposal to create a permanent discussion forum, "Clubs for a Self-Governing Republic: Freedom, Justice, Independence," and in this way to facilitate the eventual implementation of the movement's programmatic ideas.

On November 23 Kuron was summoned by the police for questioning about the plans to set up the new organization. Kuron himself was reported to have implied that "nothing interesting" transpired from the session and that "no charges" were made against him in connection with the gathering. He was also said to have rejected all allegations that the gathering had intended to establish a political party, stressing instead that its main purpose was to organize a discussion club. (3)

In another development, the Prosecutor General's Office released a statement on November 22, in which it strongly objected to the convocation of a national congress of the Committees for the Defense of Prisoners of Conscience; the congress was held on November 21 and 22 in Radom under the auspices of the regional chapter of Solidarity. The committees emerged in the first months of 1981 in circles close to Solidarity and the Confederation of Independent Poland (KPN), whose four leaders are currently on trial. The activities of the committees were praised at the recently held Solidarity congress, which passed a resolution supporting their existence. (4)

(2) See, for example, a series of interviews with Solidarity's activists published under the title "Self-Governing Republic" in Tygodnik Solidarnosc, 30 October 1981.

(3) AP, 23 November 1981.

(4) See J. B. de Weydenthal, "Solidarity's National Congress: Stage Two," RAD Background Report/291 (Poland), Radio Free Europe Research, 19 October 1981.

Asserting that the committees had never been registered and, therefore, remained illegal, the Prosecutor General's Office decried the action of Radom's Solidarity as "directed against the socialist state." (5) It also denied that "anyone in Poland was imprisoned for political convictions" and implied that the work of the committees, in general, as well as the holding of the congress, in particular, were aimed against the current efforts "to strengthen and develop the idea of the front of national accord." Local representatives of the Prosecutor General's Office were said to have warned the participants in the congress about possible legal consequences arising from their action and to have opened a formal investigation into the matter.

Tense Situation

These two developments, although apparently unrelated, are symptomatic of what remains a tense situation in Poland. While the country appears to be increasingly engulfed in severe economic difficulties, with new problems and potential troubles clearly looming ahead, there is a perceptible danger of a potential disintegration of social cohesion and a weakening of public order. Evidence of such trends has been noticeable everywhere, in repeated localized strikes, in continuing student protests, and in mounting activism on the part of the dissatisfied peasants. In most, if not all, cases, the brunt of social agitation has been directed against the authorities, who, in the eyes of many, seem incapable of any action that would improve the situation and are merely lagging behind events.

Exposed to growing public pressure for a major change in policies, but also hesitant to undertake actions that might make the situation even more difficult, the authorities appear increasingly sensitive and prone to overreaction when faced with any event that could conceivably adversely affect their institutional role and political prerogatives. Both the raid on Kuron's apartment and the protest against the Radom congress exemplified such a reaction.

Indeed, when reading some media commentaries on recent developments in the country one might gain the impression that at least certain domestic observers have become persuaded of the imminent danger of a major conspiracy mounted by various groups against the Polish state, its political system, and its power structure. This was particularly apparent from a nationally broadcast commentary on Poland's current politics that focused on the possible implications of Kuron's allegedly "subversive" activity. Presented by two frequent contributors to Radio Warsaw's programs, the commentary implied that "ever since the party came forward with a proposal to set up a front of national accord, strange things have been happening in the country." (6) Expanding on that theme, the commentary mentioned some "strange strikes," and "certain strange initiatives" that, taken together, "produce a specific atmosphere, an atmosphere of psychological pressure upon society, which is already so tired by the crisis." The effect of those "strange"

(5) Radio Warsaw, 22 November 1981.

(6) Ibid.

developments had been serious, the commentary said, adding that "it has prevented the realization of the concept of unity of all patriotic forces." Needless to say, the commentary concentrated on Kuron's past activities in KSS "KOR" as well as his current allegedly political aspirations to play a major role in the country's affairs, implying that he and his "associates" carried the major responsibility for the tension in Poland.

Aside from this tendentious line of comment, there has been no clear indication, however, that the raid on Kuron's apartment signaled a new and tougher government policy on dealing with social activism. It is, of course, true that the raid marked the first instance since September 1980 of any large-scale police action against the prominent former dissident and current influential advisor to Solidarity. In this sense, it could be regarded as an important development.

At the same time, however, it has not escaped public attention that the authorities might have already undertaken steps to minimize the potential political impact of the raid. This, at least, may be gathered from an authoritative statement on the development, released alongside the statement by the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Justifying the raid as "a preventive measure, undertaken in accordance with legal regulations on actions against the establishment of a new and illegal political organization," the statement was quick to point out that this measure "was not intended to discriminate against or suppress any innocuous discussion club and was not aimed at limiting the freedom to express different political opinions. The authorities' action," the comment said, "was only a measure to prevent the creation of a new party that would be programmatically opposed to the existing constitutional order." (7)

Under these circumstances, the question arises whether the police raid on Jacek Kuron's apartment on November 22 will prove to be a political blunder on the part of the authorities or whether it will strengthen their position in dealing with the various social groups operating in the country, particularly with Solidarity. The obvious intention behind the raid was to disrupt a meeting to be held in the home of one of the movement's most active advisers, who has long enjoyed a reputation as a prominent dissident, and by suggesting that the purpose of the gathering was to set up a new political party, something that Solidarity has always refused even to consider, to discredit Kuron as a political schemer who is using the movement for his own interests.

The success of that objective is far from clear. Indeed, if anything became apparent in the immediate aftermath of the police action, it was that the raid focused public attention on the issue of political management of the country's affairs and ways of approaching it in the manner proposed by Kuron and his friends. It is true that the raid effectively prevented the meeting from taking place in Kuron's apartment, but after the police had ended their search, the participants moved to the regional headquarters of

(7) Ibid.

Solidarity and continued their discussion there. As a result, the proposal to set up the "clubs" was approved and the concept of organized and periodic discussions on key issues in Poland's politics was accepted.

The Declaration on Discussion Clubs

The proposal to set up the discussion clubs was said to have been presented in the form of a founding declaration, which combined an assessment of the current situation in the country with a call for a coordinated effort by various social groups to find solutions to the social, political, and institutional crisis.

The declaration opened with a statement that "one year has passed since great hopes for the Polish nation were born /as the result of the Gdansk and Szczecin Agreements of August 1980/, but these hopes have begun to be replaced, more and more frequently, by doubt and disappointment." (8) Then, arguing that the authorities had been both unable and unwilling to develop new policies and methods of government so as to contribute to the resolution of the crisis, while the repeated negotiations between Solidarity's leadership and the government had merely produced confusion and enhanced frustration, the declaration warned about the possibility of "violent outbursts of public dissatisfaction."

To prevent this from happening, the declaration said,

there is an urgent need to create a new basis for the exploitation of public energy. Spontaneity must be supported by political thinking . . . that is why . . . the creation of /new/ ideological and political bodies has become a necessity; they will provide the foundations for future political parties.

Admitting that the country's public life had been characterized by a proliferation of opinions on what should be done to improve the quality of government, the declaration strongly supported continuing discussions on programmatic differences among various groups. Such discussions should contribute to a better understanding of the issues and reinforce the "public resolve" to create a new pluralistic society in the future, it said.

The ultimate goal of all those activities would be to establish a "self-governing republic, . . . a form of social order, in which everyone participates in both the production and the distribution of values, in shaping political and public life," the declaration said, adding that such a republic would have to be formed through "the active participation of the whole of society . . . through a democratic social movement. Only with such a movement would conditions be created for free elections /to political bodies/."

(8) Excerpts from the declaration appear in AP and UPI reports of 23 November 1981.

Expanding on this concept of a "self-governing republic," the declaration envisaged an eventual development of political and social relations in which

human rights would be fully respected, . . .
the rights of minorities would be protected, . . .
the state would become the servant of the public, . . .
the parliamentary system would become the basis
of political operations, . . . /and/ all state
activities would be subjected to public
control /exercised by/ territorial and
occupational self-management bodies as well
as other public organizations.

a. Polish-Soviet Relations. Acknowledging that the future evolution of the country's internal politics would have an inevitable effect on its foreign policy, the declaration pointed to the urgent need to draw the public's attention to the issue of international relations, particularly relations with the Soviet Union. "Polish-Soviet relations were formed during Stalinist times," the document said, and added that "this provides the foundation for the /communist/ party's rule." It then stated that this situation created grounds for the assumption that "any change in internal conditions could provoke Soviet military intervention," an assumption that has been repeatedly opposed by those who "rule out any possibility of such an intervention." The declaration appeared to have taken a middle position, merely stating the belief that "Soviet intervention could be avoided."

At the same time, the document said that "August 1980 . . . has already undermined the model of Polish-Soviet relations" to such an extent that they would have to be renegotiated and put on a different basis. "In future negotiations with the Soviet Union, negotiations in which the Polish side would be represented by authentic representatives /of the Polish nation/, a new relationship would have to be established, a relationship in which the necessary self-limitations would not interfere with the principle of national sovereignty, that is, the principle through which the nation would have the right to self-determination." This statement was accompanied with formal assurances that in future Poland would maintain a "real friendship with the Russian nation," that it would "strive for the demilitarization of Central Europe," and that it would contribute to "world peace."

b. Discussion Clubs. Finally, after arguing that the concept of the movement toward internal changes was rooted in the political traditions of various socialist organizations of the past as well as in the activities of more recent dissident groups, the declaration appealed for the establishment of a nationwide network of discussion clubs that would "facilitate the development of political and social concepts, . . . contribute toward the definition of ideas related to the notion of the self-governed republic, . . . implement those ideas in practice, particularly through the formation and expansion of self-management bodies, . . . /and/ work for the improvement of legal norms and labor regulations."

More specifically, the declaration proposed that the clubs be established both in factories and offices as well as in cities and towns. To become a member of a club, it would be sufficient to sign a formal declaration; all members, in turn, would determine the structure and forms of activity of the organizational body. To coordinate the work of the entire network, the declaration envisaged the creation of a national "center for social thought," a body that would serve as a forum for debates on the clubs' program and activities as well as a center for disseminating information for the network. The declaration stopped short of defining the internal organization of the "center," but said that its participants would meet on a monthly basis; the first meeting was set for January 1982.

Concluding Remarks

It is still too early to speculate about the potential impact on Poland's politics of the proposal to establish the new movement of discussion clubs. It is also impossible to say what, if any, will be the reaction of Solidarity's national leadership in face of that development. This reaction will be important, since the possible emergence of the clubs, a sui generis horizontal structure within Solidarity, could affect the work of the movement and its relations with the authorities. At the same time, one has to remember that Solidarity has already facilitated the emergence and the development of another specific movement of "horizontal" bodies, the so-called "network." Operating within the larger organization of Solidarity's local chapters, the "network" has been active in setting up local self-management bodies in factories and has recently become involved in work on future changes in the country's electoral regulations. There is a distinct possibility that the new discussion clubs, providing that they take off the ground in the near future, could conduct activities comparable to those of the "network."

It is equally difficult to assess the significance of the declaration. There is little doubt that the document included statements that were both politically sensitive and potentially damaging to the authorities's role in the country's public life. Most of those statements, however, lacked conceptual clarity and practical application. But then, the declaration was only intended to provide a basis for discussion about the future establishment of the clubs. The police intervention changed the character of the document by endowing it with the rather unexpected importance of a major political statement. This may well turn out to be a mistake on the part of the authorities.

In any case, it seems obvious that a major and sustained effort will have to be made by both the authorities and various social groups operating in the country to alleviate their mutual suspicions and overcome at least some of their differences. Since the authorities claim the right to control the country's public life and to ensure peace and order, it remains primarily their obligation to define policies and develop methods of activity that would be acceptable to society and could be approved by the

autonomous social movements. There is no doubt that this is still an exceedingly difficult task; but it is a task that must be achieved if the country is to preserve its internal cohesion.

It might be possible to approach this task in the negotiations with Solidarity, since the movement has long enjoyed considerable respect from all sectors of the public. The process of negotiation between representatives of Solidarity and the government started two weeks ago, with the primary attention focused on means of ensuring the effective working of the economy. Further talks on that subject, as well as on several other issues of great importance in Poland's public life, were scheduled for the following week. Following the developments of the last few days, it has become more obvious than ever that success in resolving some of the differences between the authorities and the mass social movement is likely to have a profound impact on the potential stabilization of the country's politics in the future.

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