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THE GIEREK PROBLEM

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Summary: The Polish party leadership has finally undertaken to investigate former First Secretary Edward Gierek's responsibility for past political mistakes and failures. There are grounds to believe that some party leaders would welcome the chance to charge Gierek with personal responsibility for the current crisis. It is also clear, however, that Gierek not only refuses to accept the role of political scapegoat, but is apparently ready to mount an effective defense by charging others, including perhaps some of the current party leaders, with a measure of guilt. This has emerged from the first round of conversations between the party commission, charged with determining the political failures of the former leadership, and Gierek himself. There are reasons to assume that the question of Gierek's responsibility could develop into a major problem for the current party leadership.

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The leadership of the Polish party has finally undertaken to tackle the "Gierek problem." The long awaited announcement on the matter indicated that a specially selected Central Committee commission, presided over by Politburo member and CC secretary Tadeusz Grabski, "had conducted a conversation with former First Secretary of the Central Committee Edward Gierek." (1) During that conversation Gierek was said to have presented his views on "the accusations made about his responsibility for an autocratic approach to economic and social policies, for the disregard of economic laws, and for the failure to take into account critical opinions" about his policies. Gierek was also said to have "expressed his views on the past performance of the party's Politburo and the CC Secretariat as well as that of the government."

Edward Gierek's role as the top party leader during the 1970s has long been considered, in Poland and among foreign observers, a crucial issue for the country's current politics. In the eyes of some, Gierek was mainly responsible for the collapse of Poland's economy, the disintegration of the party, and the social disorder. This view has been particularly strong among some members of the current party leadership. At the same time, because Gierek symbolized to many people the embodiment of party rule in Poland, his performance is seen by others as merely indicative of the weaknesses and the imperfections inherent in the power system itself. Whatever approach one takes, it is clear that any assessment of Gierek's past activities that would be fully acceptable to the public presents the party leadership with major difficulties.

If the current party leaders were to fulfill public expectations in determining Gierek's role in and his responsibility for the developments of the past decade, they would have to reveal the full record of the party leadership's activities in recent years. This, in turn, would require the full cooperation of both Edward Gierek and many other officials, a development that could be politically explosive and, therefore, seems unlikely. Suffice it to note that most of the current officeholders in the party, including some of its most powerful leaders, owe their position either to Gierek himself or to his former associates. It is not difficult to see, therefore, that any detailed investigation of Gierek's past actions would necessarily involve questioning these people also. Such questioning would inevitably turn what is now known as the "Gierek problem" into something akin to "the party problem."

By the same token, no one can expect that the investigation of Gierek's role will be rapidly either terminated or abandoned. Such attempts, if they were to be contemplated and there is no evidence for that, would undoubtedly bring adverse consequences

(1) Radio Warsaw, 19 May 1981.

for the party and its current leadership. This is particularly true given the present ferment in the party and the fact that the investigation itself is taking place against the background of a massive campaign of preparation for the forthcoming extraordinary congress. Indeed, the "Gierek problem" might well develop as one of the most sensitive and important issues in Poland's current politics.

The Issue of Responsibility

Edward Gierek was removed from all positions of political responsibility in the party on September 5, during a special session of the Central Committee. Ever since, his past performance as the top party leader has been subjected to constant criticism within the organization. On December 2, at the conclusion of another session of the Central Committee, Gierek was formally charged with "serious personal responsibility" for mistakes in social and economic policies. The CC said then that

Edward Gierek's most important mistake was to have created a pattern of interrelations in and methods of work for the leadership of the party that were contrary to the party's principles. This mistake brought about an atmosphere of underhand plotting and replaced true democracy with its appearance. (2)

The CC also charged Gierek with "responsibility for serious mistakes in personnel policy at the central level." Having made those charges, the CC excluded Gierek from its membership.

Even before the public release of those charges, albeit of anticipation of them, Gierek himself took a position on some of the possible allegations. On December 1 he sent a formal letter to the new first secretary, Stanislaw Kania, with a request that the letter be read to the entire CC. The letter included a promise that Gierek would explain the rationale behind his activities during the 1970s and apologize for some of his past mistakes; no details of those mistakes were provided. The most important and significant feature of the letter, however, was Gierek's statement that

I feel personally responsible for the majority of decisions crucial for the country that were taken during the 1970s. Were those decisions correct? To answer that question is difficult, it depends on one's point of view -- the point of view taken at the time of making those decisions as well as that at the present. One thing is certain: those decisions were implemented, either well or badly, by specific people, people whom we trusted and who acted within the framework of structures that were not always the best for the task. (3)

(2) The text of the CC's statement appeared in Nowe Drogi, December 1980, p. 57.

(3) Gierek's letter was published in ibid., pp. 65-67.

This exchange of statements on the issue of Gierek's responsibility for the party's past policies, in which the CC had charged the former leader with "personal responsibility" for past failures and mistakes and Gierek had pointed to the fact that responsibility for the "bad or good" implementation of his policies rested with others as well, set the stage for the further evolution of the issue.

There is no indication that either of the sides has changed its views on the matter since that exchange. Indeed, while the Polish media failed to report the details of the official charges against Gierek, merely repeating the accusations already made by the CC, they indicated that the former first secretary had reiterated before the CC commission that he had simply been "jointly responsible for the problems of the party as well as those of the socioeconomic development of the country during the 1970s." (4) Furthermore, while Gierek was said to have adopted a "self-critical posture," he was also reported to have said that his actions had been dictated by concern over "the welfare of society, the need to create new places of employment, and the need to modernize the economy."

More important still, Gierek was said to have argued that "the cause of many economic problems was the improper operation of key government bodies, the prevalence of regional and branch specific interests, and the lack of sufficient control." These factors were seen by Gierek as "making it impossible to assign specific responsibility for making decisions."

Gierek was said to have accepted responsibility for the failure of the Politburo to streamline the party's recruitment policies as well as its failure to supervise some of the government's economic programs such as the investment program or credit policies. He was firm, however, in defending some elements of the past strategy of rapid economic development and, in particular, some major investment programs undertaken by the party and the government during the 1970s.

No response to Gierek's statements from the CC commission has been registered. (5) Instead, an announcement was made that the "conversations" with the former leader would continue following

(4) Radio Warsaw 19 May 1981.

(5) Two days later, on May 21, Radio Warsaw strongly criticized Gierek's statement to the commission, saying that it consisted of nothing more than "a few generalities devoid of any attempt even to evaluate Gierek's personal responsibility." More significant still, the radio accused Gierek of having failed during the conversations with the commission to take upon his own shoulders the blame for past mistakes and to facilitate the work of "those who did not sow the seeds but are now reaping the bitter harvest while laboring to pull Poland out of its present misery." It is, of course, difficult to ascertain whether that comment was instigated by the current leadership, yet it is clear that its principal message could not be conceived as contrary to the leadership's wishes and desires.

similar talks with other officials who had held prominent positions in both the party and the government during the 1970s. If nothing else, this clearly suggests that the process of investigation of past mistakes and failures will continue for some time, probably providing both domestic and foreign observers with a glimpse at the operations of the system as well as at the institutions and the people charged with its maintenance.

Broader Implications

There is still another element of this development, an element going beyond the immediate significance of the Gierek case in the context of Polish politics. Indeed, irrespective of the eventual resolution of the Gierek problem, it has already created a precedent in East European politics. Granted, some prominent communist leaders have been both accused of and tried for political "mistakes" in the past: for example, in Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Romania during the late 1940s and the 1950s. Yet those trials were explicitly political, conducted according to Stalinist rules and methods, and amounted to little more than public spectacles of forced self-incrimination by the accused. In no instance were the already discredited leaders allowed to present arguments in their defense or dispute the accusations leveled by their successors. The Gierek case offers strikingly different possibilities. It could produce a genuine exchange of views between the true insiders of the system on their roles and functions within the hierarchy of power. It could also throw some light on how decisions are made and implemented in a communist system as well as on what serves as justifications for those actions. This development has been made possible by the changes that have already taken place in Poland, but it could contribute to still further changes and political as well as institutional transformations.