

RADIO FREE EUROPE *Research*

RAD Background Report/109
(Poland)
23 April 1981

THE POLISH CC PLENUM REVEALS DIVISIONS IN THE LEADERSHIP

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Summary: The Central Committee of Poland's communist party held a plenary meeting on March 29, in which the debate revealed serious differences of opinion among the members of the party's leadership about how to deal with the political problems in the country. A particularly important aspect of the plenum was the emergence of a group of hard-liners, who are a minority, but a powerful minority, within the Central Committee. Some of the leaders of the hard-line group submitted their resignations from the leadership. Those resignations were not accepted for explicitly political reasons. This paper discusses some of the implications for Poland's politics arising from that development. It is part of a series of papers dealing with the current political crisis in Poland.

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The leadership of Poland's communist party is still either unwilling or unable to define precisely, or at least to announce publicly, its policy toward the existing social movements and their activities within the country. Although it has long been obvious to both foreign and domestic observers that organizational and political diversity, prompted by but not limited to the emergence of autonomous labor unions, has already become a permanent facet of Poland's public life, no steps have yet been taken by the political authorities to accept lasting adjustments in the country's political system and its methods of operation. The party leadership's reaction to this development appears still marked by hesitation rather than resolve to act, as if procrastination and immobility could somehow bring about social and political appeasement.

The CC Declaration

The latest meeting of the PUWP Central Committee, held in Warsaw on March 29 and ending in the early hours of March 30, seems to have confirmed this. The meeting, presided over by First Secretary Stanislaw Kania, concluded with a solemn but also surprisingly vague declaration. Focusing on two closely related themes, the growth of social tension in the country and the ferment within the party organization, the declaration proclaimed that

It is the profound duty of the party and all social forces that stand on the ground of socialism to do everything to pull the country out of the crisis and to ensure conditions of peace, order, and national as well as civil security. The CC reiterates that the line of party activity remains oriented now, as it has been in the past, to the normalization of life, the continuation of efforts toward agreements and dialogue, and the resolution of conflicts by political means through negotiations and clarifications that take public opinion into consideration. (1)

The CC admitted that

efforts undertaken by the party and the government to implement the tasks which, having been defined by the party, aimed at socialist renewal and fulfillment of social agreements leading toward the stability of political, social, and economic life, have been undermined by a new wave of social tension.

The CC then declared its particular concern about the possibility of new strikes. Pointing to the adverse impact of the strikes upon social and economic life, the CC called upon "all workers and millions of other people, the members of the unions, to end the chain of strikes and support in the name of civil responsibility the line of dialogue and agreements."

The declaration stopped short of placing the blame for the current state of social agitation. It clearly intimated, however, that this blame rested on the Solidarity labor unions, and particularly on those elements within the workers' organization that "push it toward developing political activity and interfering with the prerogatives of the state bodies." Specifically, the declaration charged that

groups opposed to socialism, different forces of the social Right, influence Solidarity by inspiring activities that are contrary to its statutes and developing broad propaganda efforts that are aimed at instigating distrust toward the state authorities; this is directed particularly against the police and the security services.

The CC repeated its established view that "the party's main task . . . is to struggle for the political unity of the entire labor movement." Proclaiming that "the party needs a strong labor movement and will support its constructive initiatives that would serve the working people," the declaration also appealed to party members "to oppose the influence of all opponents of socialism on the separate bodies within Solidarity." Here, it is important to note that considerable numbers of party members took an active part in the recent warring strike on March 27; they did it in spite of the earlier Politburo instruction that party members should refrain from any participation in the strike.

(1) Trybuna Ludu, 30 March 1981.

Indeed, the situation within the party appears to have preoccupied the Central Committee even more than the problems with the unions. The declaration clearly admitted the existence of "lively and frequently controversial discussions" within the organization, seeing in them "a proof that a creative process, indicative of the will to carry on with the socialist renewal, permeates the entire party." Nothing was said in the declaration about either the content or the direction of those discussions. The declaration admitted only by implication that the ferment within the party was related to its internal political and structural problems.

At the heart of the matter, it appears, are the issues of democratic centralism (the principle that provides for the leadership's dominance over all party activities) and elections to party offices. The CC firmly declared itself in opposition to any changes or alterations in the traditional ways of hierarchical decision-making. Instead, while defending the need for democratic centralism as the crucial Marxist-Leninist principle of all communist organizations and attacking the tendencies toward "ideological pluralism," the CC said that "the party must counteract all attempts to weaken its ranks and any divisiveness or factionalism and must defend the principles of socialism." Furthermore, the declaration went on, "the party must consolidate itself internally to take up new tasks arising from the current social and political needs."

Those exhortations about the need for discipline were somewhat neutralized, however, by the CC's pledge to introduce changes in electoral instructions and statutes. The declaration indicated that those changes would concern the acceptance of a secret ballot for elections to the party bodies as well as approval for an unlimited number of candidates for both party offices and positions of delegates to congresses and conferences. At the same time the CC stopped short of introducing those changes immediately into the statutes. Instead, the declaration merely provided an assurance that proposals for appropriate statutory modifications "will be presented for the approval of the forthcoming party congress." As for the date of that congress, which has been repeatedly called for by numerous local organizations, the CC said that "it should take place before July 20 of this year." The congress is to be preceded by a partywide electoral campaign, which should be concluded before the end of June.

The Politburo Report

The declaration was the conclusion of the meeting's debates, which involved some 40 or more speakers. The discussion centered on a lengthy Politburo report delivered by Central Committee Secretary Kazimierz Barcikowski on the current situation in the country. The report, replete with complaints about the recurring waves of social tension, allegedly fomented by "irresponsible action by individual activists of Solidarity as well as clearly anti-communist publications," did not introduce any new elements that could suggest a change in the existing party policies toward social and political developments in the country. (2)

Barcikowski's address concentrated on a defense of official performance, both economic and political, combined with repeated warnings against new social protests and strikes. Barcikowski strongly decried all strikes, particularly the last warning strike on March 27. Stressing that such actions were essentially political events, Barcikowski implied that the strikes had been instigated by "rightist elements within various branches of Solidarity, who are trying to push the country toward creeping counterrevolution." He appeared particularly alarmed by the prospect of a general strike, which had been threatened by Solidarity for March 31 unless the authorities accept the workers' demands and open up true negotiations with the unions. Barcikowski warned that a general strike would "test the very structures of our state and even its very existence." He then went on to suggest that the strike would "constitute not only an element of pressure upon the authorities, but would mark the opening of an open struggle against our party and the people's power, against socialism; it would be a struggle for power."

Those warnings were not followed, however, by any declaration of the authorities' willingness to adopt new policies that could diminish tension. In Barcikowski's opinion, which presumably reflected the views of the entire Politburo, a way out of the crisis in Poland would be possible only if social agitation gave way to peace and "normal work," if society provided Prime Minister Jaruzelski with an opportunity to fulfill his program of rule, and if the government received full support, "broad and real," from the working population and "from the party itself."

The discussion that followed Barcikowski's statement was stormy, with many speakers, particularly from large industrial centers, criticizing the leadership's performance. (3) A vast majority of the speakers declared support for some form of change in the operations of the system, change that would take into consideration the already existing social organizations and forces. The other theme frequently mentioned during the discussion was an appeal to the leadership, both in the party and in the state, to adopt a more decisive position toward the changes taking place in the country. It does not mean that all speakers supported the emerging pluralization of institutions and political forces; indeed, many of them were clearly alarmed by that development. Rather, the accent in the debate was on the need to take a stand and then to stick to the chosen position with will and determination.

Nonetheless, the discussion fully demonstrated the existing diversity of views in the party on the methods of dealing with current political problems. At first glance, there was nothing new about that development. Evidence of differences within the organization, and even of actual dissension, on those matters has been noticeable for months. Until recently, however, the attention of both domestic and foreign observers was focused primarily on cleavages between the party's rank and file and its officialdom as well as between the local and the central bodies of the organization. (4) The debate at the plenum drew attention to the deepening splits within the highest bodies of the leadership as well.

(3) For details on the discussion, see Ewa Celt, "The CC Plenum Discussion: The Issues at Stake," RAD Background Report/105 (Poland), Radio Free Europe Research, 13 April 1981.

(4) See J. B. de Weydenthal, "Ferment Continues in the Polish Party," ibid., No. 65, 6 March 1981.

Indeed, the most striking aspect of the plenum was the clear emergence of a hard-line group within the leadership, a group capable not only of openly stating their preferences at the meeting but also prepared to challenge any criticism of their positions. In many respects, this development was almost inevitable in view of the broad changes in the Polish politics and the continuing ferment within the ranks of the party itself; the plenum debate merely brought it into the open. This, in turn, appears to have been prompted by the public release before the CC plenum of an "open letter" by Chairman of the Journalists' Union Stefan Bratkowski, in which he discussed the role of the hard-liners in the leadership and called upon the committee to remove them from power.

The Bratkowski Letter

Stefan Bratkowski, a veteran party member with some 25 years in the communist organization, issued his "open letter to all members of the party" on March 23, a day after the Politburo had formally approved the police's handling of the Bydgoszcz incident. The letter warned all rank and file members of the party against "those who would like to drive our party from the path of social agreement and push our state and society to the brink of an inevitable catastrophe." (5) Bratkowski stopped short of giving any specific names, but he said that they include "comrades among those men who occupy the highest positions in our party; they are supported by a group of comrades active in the Warsaw party organization as well as by various people in the apparatus of power."

Bratkowski was much more specific in describing "the hard-liners'" activities:

Those are the men who do not seek agreement, even with their party grassroots. They are afraid of them. They avoid the test of honest elections and use all available means to postpone the extraordinary congress. Those are the men who want to instill fear in the party apparatus -- fear of their own party and the people -- pointing to themselves as the only ones capable of protecting the apparatus from the loss of position and influence.

Those are the men who try to set the forces of public order in conflict with their own society so as to preclude all ways of coexistence but confrontation. Those are the men who present themselves to our neighbors as being the only force capable of guaranteeing the durability of our alliances and of the state system.

Bratkowski was clearly contemptuous of the "hard-liners," arguing that they "do not constitute any real force and cannot guarantee anything to anyone, not even to themselves." He asserted that

(5) The text of the letter was published in Gazeta Robotnicza, 25 March 1981; see also PAP Maritime Service in English, 29 March 1981.

it is impossible to govern this country in conflict with a couple of million members of one's own party rank and file, with several million workers, with millions of peasants, and only with the support of no more than a part of the apparatus of power because the preponderant majority of that apparatus, even if partly disoriented, also supports the task of restoring the republic.

Charging that the hard-liners "do not represent any program except the concept of confrontation and misinformation and do not promise any prospects except that of a drama," Bratkowski said that he could not "discern even a single proposal that goes beyond the protection of their own positions, beyond the ambition to reach out for still higher ones." He then went on to say that "virtually everything the hard-liners do increases tension and mutual distrust." Referring implicitly to the Bydgoszcz incident and the Politburo's statement about it, Bratkowski noted that

today they the hard-liners are trying to involve the entire party leadership and the government in a clash with the whole society. Embarking on a path marked with incalculable consequences, they try to provoke society to behave in a manner justifying the use of force.

After having thus presented the activity of the hard-line groups, Bratkowski said that their continuing presence in the party's leading bodies will result in tensions similar to, or even worse than at present." Then, making it clear to the recipients of his letter that he was not opposed to all members of the current leadership, Bratkowski stated that

we have counted on Comrade Stanislaw Kania, on Kazimierz Barcikowski. We also do not see any alternative to the government of General Jaruzelski. These men could have won and can still win acceptance by the majority of the nation for the policy of social agreement. . . . I do not see any other way for our party. A different road leads to a political cemetery.

The letter ended with an appeal to all rank and file party members and all party bodies "to proclaim loudly what our choice is, to make it clear both to the Central Committee and society."

Any doubts about the impact of Bratkowski's letter on the plenum were dispelled when Barcikowski discussed the document in the opening speech. Calling the letter, "which was broadly disseminated through extra-party channels," an example of "negative and even extremist tendencies within the party," Barcikowski admitted that it "introduces deep dividing lines within the party and its leadership."

The Hard-Liners' Response

Many observers paid particular attention to speeches by Politburo members Stefan Olszowski and Tadeusz Grabski, who have sometimes been described by both foreign and domestic observers as representative of the most hard-line positions within the current leadership. Their names have been associated in the minds of many with a tendency within the party's establishment to restrict the activity of the unions and other social groups and to impose a system of central control over the implementation of all changes in the public life.

Both men were reported by the Polish media to have taken a tough stand during the debates. Olszowski, in particular, claimed that "Poland has become a country with a weak system of state power which undergoes constant deterioration, a country suffering from economic problems of catastrophic proportions, a country that has become a fragile link in the socialist community." (6) Turning to his personal performance in the leadership, Olszowski admitted that he had been responsible for control over the media. This aspect of his activity has recently provoked protests and complaints from many journalists and other social groups. Olszowski dismissed those complaints by firmly stressing his conviction that the "party press should serve to propagate the party's policy, and I have indeed tried to influence the press to act in this direction." Any attempt to criticize his performance, Olszowski said in mentioning the letter by Stefan Bratkowski, in particular, would amount to "factional activity."

Such allegations of factional and diversionary activities were also supported by Tadeusz Grabski. While presenting his views as indicative of the position toward "further dialogue" between the authorities and various social groups, Grabski made it clear that he would oppose any concessions or compromises. "There is a line that one cannot cross," he said, "and this is a line defined by socialism, the supreme goals of the system, our alliances, and our membership in the family of socialist states." (7) He then went to say that "a duality of power has become a fact in current Polish politics, adding that "the most difficult and sharp political struggle now goes on" in the country. Grabski did not leave any doubt about who was the main opponent of the party when he said that "the violence, the anarchy, and the chaos and adventurism perpetrated by some bodies within Solidarity have directly and indirectly affected the foundations of the economic existence of the state."

Both Olszowski and Grabski emphasized that the leadership of the party was not divided, hence implying that all members of the Politburo remained in basic agreement on the fundamental political questions. Indeed, they repeatedly insisted that all decisions "on crucial political matters" have been made by the leadership "collectively and all members of the leadership are collectively responsible for them." In this context, both men explicitly

(6) Trybuna Ludu, 30 March 1981.

(7) Ibid.

reiterated their continuing support for the Politburo statement of March 22, which had fully exonerated the police actions in Bydgoszcz as both justifiable and lawful. (8)

Yet, in a direct reference to Bratkowski's letter, both Grabski and Olszowski admitted their hard-line inclinations. Grabski was particularly explicit in saying that "to be included by Bratkowski among the hard-liners, particularly when the defense of socialism is at stake, is not a disgrace." He then went on to declare that "the true disgrace for me, and I do not hide it, is to belong to the same party . . . as Bratkowski. Olszowski then argued that to impute that someone took a hard-line position amounted to nothing less than "an attack against the party and against the Communists." Olszowski firmly stated that his activity "has always been to oppose attacks undertaken by some activists of Solidarity against the party cadres." Indeed, he even regretted having made some mistakes in being "too liberal at times" in dealing with the party critics, particularly among the press.

The Issue of Resignations

One of the most dramatic and politically important developments at the plenum was a formal submission by Olszowski and Grabski of their resignations from the Politburo. Those offers were made separately, at the conclusion of each man's speech. They were joined in that action by deputy Politburo member and CC secretary Roman Ney. The reasons for their resignations are still not clear. One might, of course, argue that these actions represented nothing more than the recognition of the lack of support, both in the Central Committee and in the Politburo, for their views. Indeed, the tenor of the plenum debate was openly critical of the hard-line positions. This was quite apparent in the majority of speeches by the CC members and could be perceived in the Politburo's report.

There are also some grounds, however, for suggesting that by tendering their resignations the allegedly hard-line politicians challenged the predominant view of the leadership rather than recognized their own isolation. In support of this argument, one might suggest that the proponents of the hard line had secured enough support both within the party organization and from other sources to make it impossible for their critics to remove them from their positions in the leadership. (9) If one were to accept that possibility the proffers of resigning would amount to nothing less than a calculated tactical maneuver by the hard-liners to

(8) For details on the Politburo's March 22 statement, see J. B. de Weydenthal, "Poland's March Crisis: The Initial Stage," RAD BR/98 (Poland), RFER, 8 April 1981.

(9) A clear, albeit speculative, indication of such a possibility was provided in a report from Poland by John Darnton in The New York Times (14 April 1981). Darnton quoted some Polish sources in support of a hypothesis that "the Soviet Union interceded at a CC meeting . . . to ensure that hard-liners in the Politburo were not purged." On March 19 Olszowski met with Boris Aristov, the Soviet Ambassador to Warsaw. They reportedly talked about "contributions /to be made by Poland/ to the strengthening of the community of socialist states" (Radio Warsaw, 19 March 1981).

dramatize their views on the current situation in the party and in the country. In addition, this maneuver would conceivably have demonstrated to the moderate groups in the party the limits of their power to affect changes in the leadership while reminding them of the politically important support given to the hard-line views by other bodies and forces in the communist movement.

Finally, there is also a strong possibility that because of mounting criticism of the leadership's performance, criticism demonstrated by the actions of numerous local party bodies as well as during the debate at the plenum, all members of the Politburo intended to resign. In that case, the actions of Olszowski, Grabski, and Ney could merely have been the first steps in the process. This explanation acquires a certain degree of plausibility considering the resignation of Ney. A member of the party leadership since early October 1980, Roman Ney has not been regarded as an exponent of hard-line politics. Indeed, Ney's position within the leadership has been relatively insignificant owing to his occupational duties -- he is the president of Cracow's Academy of Mining -- and his pre-occupation with problems of scientific policy.

The intention of the entire Politburo to resign at the plenum was subsequently confirmed by Kazimierz Barcikowski, who said at a meeting with local party activists in Mielec on April 2 that

all members of the Politburo were to submit their resignations. If all of them did not do so, it was because doubts had emerged in the meantime, in the Central Committee itself about whether this [the resignation] was the best method of resolving the problem of the party's leadership, particularly at the time of the pre-congressional [campaign] and of serious internal difficulties in the party and in the state, difficulties that must be resolved [first]. (10)

This could, of course, have been correct; but Barcikowski's explanation would hardly preclude any of the aforementioned possibilities.

In any case, the CC plenum refused to accept the resignations and formally affirmed its confidence in the entire Politburo. This was done in the form of a special resolution, proposed by "a group of full and deputy members of the Central Committee" and presented by First Secretary of the PUWP Committee in Wloclawek Edward Szymanski. The resolution affirmed that

changes should take place in the composition of both the Politburo and the Central Committee Secretariat. In view, however, of the developments that we [the party] will have to face in the coming hours and weeks, it is not appropriate to adopt [those] changes at the present meeting. (11)

(10) Nowiny (Rzeszow), 6 April 1981.

(11) The text of the resolution was published in Sztandar Molodych, 7 April 1981.

Expanding on the reasons for the postponement of such changes, the resolution made the following five points:

1. The party is entering the preparatory period for the convocation of the 9th Congress. . . ;
2. We are in the process of starting accounting and electoral campaigns in all bodies of the party;
3. We the CC have just made a critical evaluation of the work of the Politburo and the Secretariat;
4. We have just heard the report of the Politburo and listened to the views of some of its members;
5. Above all, on the most important issue . . . of the method of solving social and political conflicts in public life, the Politburo takes a collectively accepted position to support unequivocally the political means of solving conflicts; this position corresponds to the expectations in the party and in society.

The resolution then called upon the Politburo members to "withdraw their resignations" and expressed the CC's "vote of confidence" in the leadership. At the same time, the resolution imposed an obligation on all members of the Politburo and the Secretariat "to take part . . . in meetings with rank and file members of the party in the country's major industrial plants and in all voivodships."

If nothing else, the resolution appears to have struck a balance between the realities of the current situation in the leadership, which remains not only affected by different views and preferences but is also exposed to powerful cross-pressures, and the demands of the mass members and local party bodies for change in the organization's role and its methods of operation.

Indeed, there is little doubt that there are many groups within the communist organization that would accept and even support a major redirection of the role of the party away from exclusive dominance of the system and toward some form of more democratic coordination. Those groups are particularly active in the lower level of the organization, but their opinions have already made some impact upon the operations of the party's leadership itself.

Evidence of that impact was obvious during the recent Central Committee debate. It has also been formally admitted by First Secretary Stanislaw Kania, who specifically mentioned in his concluding remarks at the plenum that "more than 350 resolutions and letters had been sent to the CC expressing anxiety about the worsening of the situation" in relations between the authorities and society. (12)

Kania's Concluding Remarks

Yet, while declaring the leadership's determination to do "everything to ensure that all conflicts are resolved by /the Poles/ alone," Kania also insisted that "the crucial condition /for improvement/ is the consolidation of the party's ranks, its understanding of the /current/ dangers, and the determination to counteract anything that creates tension, anything that threatens our socialist state." He then went on to castigate the activity of "antisocialist forces which not only fight against the people's power, but also undertake the struggle for power itself." Here Kania repeated the frequently made accusations that those "anti-socialist forces" have been motivated by "counterrevolutionary objectives" and that they have used the labor unions to foster their own "political goals."

Kania also declared himself opposed to tendencies within the party's membership to introduce greater democracy into the organizational structures. "We must not allow our party to be transformed into a social-democratic /body/, since such a party has never constructed socialism anywhere," Kania said, "and /social-democratic/ principles could help only those who wish to dismantle socialism, to undermine it." Then, as if to remind his listeners what constitutes the model of communist organizational life, Kania described his feelings and experiences at the recent Soviet party congress. "During the /CPSU/ congress, one had to be impressed by the cohesiveness of the /Soviet/ party, the faith in its general line, the line of the communist construction. We should use that great heritage in our own activity."

These remarks show how difficult it remains for members of the leadership, regardless of their views on how the current conflict should be dealt with, to come to grips with the notion of greater mass participation in Poland's political life. But one might be tempted to suggest that nothing short of such an expansion of legitimate participation by the public in politics could pull the country out of its current predicament.

There is little doubt, indeed, that the problems and difficulties that have plagued the country's political and social life for several months will not go away easily. It is enough to note that on the very day the plenum ended, a meeting between the government and the unions began to discuss, for the fifth time, the ways to avoid a continuation of the crisis and avert a general strike.

The plenum failed to address itself to the real causes of that crisis. It is true, of course, that the CC declaration "obliged the Politburo and the government to explain the incident in Bydgoszcz in full and to draw the full consequences from that development." Nothing else was said about the crisis, however, and the absence of both comment and clarification was a major surprise. This does not, however, dismiss the possibility that the party's hierarchy was under so much pressure, arising from domestic or foreign sources or both, that any distinct indication of a clear policy line might have been perceived as counterproductive under the current conditions.