
Polish Party System

MIREES' Open lecture

On April 8th and 15th 2016, prof. Małgorzata Kaczorowska, assistant professor at the Institute of Political Science, University of Warsaw, held two Open lectures in front of the MIREES students on the history and current status of the Polish party system. In these lessons, she illustrated the nature and composition of the political system of Poland, dealing with the history of the elections from 1989 onwards and the political discussions and reforms that have characterized the recent history of the country.

In her first lecture, prof. Kaczorowska began by recounting the events and circumstances that brought Poland to democracy in the late 80s and beginning of the 90s. During the last years of socialist Poland, no change of leadership was possible. The legal parties of the time were PZPR (Polish United Workers Party), ZSL (United Peasant Party) and SD (Democratic Party). Solidarity movement was declared illegal in 1981 with the martial law. Still, the movement has played a very important role in recent Polish politics.

The Polish party system until 1989 was characterized not only by the hegemony of the Communist Party, but also by a huge bureaucracy and the “conservatism” of the communist ideology. Nevertheless, the tables turned in 1989, when Poland was in deep crisis and the socialist camp was falling to pieces. As professor Kaczorowska mentioned, between February and April of 1989, the Communist elite had to call for round table negotiations. In these consultations, Solidarity was the main interlocutor. The result was the April Amendment published on Apr. 7th 1989. The April Amendment was based on values such as pluralism, freedom of competition, respect for democratic rules and the organization of free parliamentary elections.

What Małgorzata Kaczorowska highlighted at this point was that 62% of the population took part in the first free electoral round. She confronted this figure with the 2015 electoral participation, which saw only 50,92% of the population voting. Even though the data for 1989 show a greater participation, both years' percentages demonstrate how Poland suffers a great disaffection for politics and a huge abstention. Major factors for such a phenomenon, as individuated by the

researcher, are a weakly developed culture of political parties, an extremely diversified political scene (during the 90s), a diffused very low trust in politicians and a general disappointment and lack of motivation.

During the second Open lecture, professor Kaczorowska talked about the general trend in the evolution of the party system. During the 90s, Polish democracy was characterized by multiparty disintegration. As she explained, already in 1991 the fragmentation of the political scenario and the novelty of the democratic system provoked a very unstable situation. Between 1991 and 1993, six governments followed in turn. Finally, in 1993, the Hondt electoral system was introduced, to avoid the entrance in the parliament of tiny minority groups.

Polish party system has been restructured according to the principle of moderate pluralism, with the aim of having few, more comprehensive and important parties. Despite the changes that occurred over the years, Kaczorowska pointed at some flaws and problems that parties are still facing. The first is their weak internal structure: they usually have only one leader and no broader participation in the decision making process. Secondly, most party programs and manifestos are still vague and unclear, mixing elements of heterogeneous political extraction. The third issue is that the coalitions for government are based on historical connections between parties, rather than unity of ideas and similarity of agenda.

The defects just mentioned add up to the high level of electoral volatility and disaffection for politics that the country is still facing. As Kaczorowska found out in her research, voters in Poland are confused and seem to be lacking experience of active participation in democracy. Moreover, most of them do not identify with parties' ideals and therefore there is no loyalty to a faction when voting. During the lectures, she showed the strikingly low rates of participation of voters in the elections. For the last three turnouts – 2007, 2011, 2015 – the voters were only 53,88%, 48,92% and 50,92% of the population. According to her, all these stand among the major problems of the Polish party and political system.

In conclusion, the workshops held by Professor Małgorzata Kaczorowska provided the students with a vivid picture of the Polish party system and the limits of political participation that the country has to face. She managed to provide a broad picture from 1989 to the present. Eventually, particularly interesting was the final discussion on the current trends in Polish politics and the much-debated attacks on freedom by the current government.

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