

By JOHN MICHEWICZ

“The examples of vice at home corrupt us more quickly and easily than others, since they steal into our minds under the highest authority.” — Juvenal, Roman satirical poet

Approaching the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the 30th anniversary of the Solidarity strikes, corruption is still very much a part of Polish life.

The Truth of Taxi Drivers

“The moment a politician gets elected, he becomes a VIP and his efforts to please people stop,” said one Warsaw taxi driver.

Another driver made this comment: “Salaries are too low for politicians; they make so much less than business people that the temptation to enrich yourself from political connections is nearly irresistible.”

When in need of an opinion, ask a taxi driver. Battered by steady waves of political corruption scandals, combined with visible signs of flagitiousness in everyday life, the Polish citizen is disheartened and doesn't trust the political elites, the business community, the media and society at large.

A famous example of mass hype around scandals revolved around the US\$17.5 million attempt to “buy a law” by Lew Rywin, the executive producer of the Oscar-winning movie “The Pianist.” The monumental scandal in 2003 involved allegations against even the president and prime minister, and coverage of it was watched nightly for months by millions of Poles. The social reaction was best summed up by a member of the investigating panel, Jan Rokita (popularly dubbed “the Inquisitor”): “Poles hate their own state; it is perceived as unjust and governed with hidden mechanisms, and if we don't change that, the average Pole will give power to the populists.”

Only a year later, another titanic corruption scandal hit the media when it was alleged that the national oil company, PKN ORLEN, had been at the center of a money-making scheme for party members of the Democratic Left Alliance (SLD — *Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej*, a post-Communist party) and Russian businessmen, again possibly reaching the very heights of the political elite. Whether those officials were guilty or not, the Polish general public seemed disillusioned to find out how many

senior politicians seemed to have some knowledge of high-level corruption.

(Corrupt?) Ghost Hunters

It is no secret that the Communist system was corrupt from top to bottom. It is a mystery for many Poles, however, that no serious attempts at trials or justice for corruption from that era happened until recently. Furthermore, in a scenario familiar to other countries in Central and Eastern Europe, the former elites visibly increased their status and wealth during the transition. The inherited setup from before 1989 was still important when the majority of current elites were formed, a status quo that is harder to shake off than it might appear.

The first shake-up came as a thundering earthquake. The Law and Justice party (PiS — *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*) was elected on a wave of immense social optimism in 2005-2006, on a platform to clean up the corrupt government. The platform was quickly joined by a large coalition of other parties that echoed their sentiments and enthusiasm. Mere weeks before the inauguration, the PiS failed to form a government, with its major supporters, Civic Platform (PO— *Platforma Obywatelska*), the current majority party in the Polish government, jumping ship to join the opposition. As a result, the now-famous, enigmatic twin brothers Jaroslaw and Lech Kaczynski were left to carry out the promised reforms with a coalition that overnight slid considerably further right. Soon they were swimming in their own corruption scandals, ardently launched at them from the trenches of the opposition.

Lustration resulted in something of a mass carnage in Poland, reminiscent of a Robespierrean terror. While a reunified Germany managed to carry out its lustration processes with strict legal supervision and fully established procedures, in Poland not until 2006 did an existing body, the Institute of National Remembrance (*Instytut Pamięci Narodowej*), receive the right to complete the process. However, there was no reason for high hopes because the institution became highly politicized and its members were often accused of being witch hunters.

Full of countless high-level sex scandals and drunken revelries, the period counted many political casualties, including numerous ministerial resignations. Needless to say, PiS not only lost popularity but gained a degree of infamy, giving way to the PO in the next election.

Allegations Against a National Hero

What greater blow to the thin strand of national identity and self-understanding than to have your internationally recognizable hero, already defeated and battered in the savage politics of the 1990s, maligned? Lech Walesa is accused in a recent book by Slawomir Cenckiewicz and Piotr Gontarczyk of having been an agent working for the Polish security service (SB — *Slużba Bezpieczeństwa*), the Polish counterpart of the KGB, during the height of his Solidarity days. Walesa, who famously appeared before the U.S. Congress appealing to the higher moral authority of a democracy over Poland's totalitarian regime, stands accused of being the SB agent Bolek.

The free market capitalism of the media, combined with their hidden but popularly known political loyalties, has accentuated the political war, with Walesa collecting medals in one hall and being booed in the next. Reassuring, however, may be the fact that when this debate appeared in 2008, people seemed so tired of endless digging into the past, as evidenced by their impartiality in several opinion polls.

Against Moral Authorities

One of the most shattering effects of lustration has been the implication of a great number of priests in collaboration with the secret police. One such major spiritual leader was the Rev. Mieczyslaw Malinski, a personal childhood friend of Pope John Paul II and a prolific author and Solidarity supporter, who was accused of extensive cooperation with the SB under the code name Delta. In January 2007, a much greater scandal compromised the Polish church when the new archbishop of Warsaw, Stanislaw Wielgus, admitted to having collaborated with the SB and resigned during his inauguration Mass.

... and Football

Poland and Ukraine were awarded the honor of co-hosting the 2012 European Football Championship. This investment-generating opportunity, capable of harnessing colossal funding for infrastructure and sports development, is already in the spotlight for inept and corrupt business practices. The tournament's sanctioning body, the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA), twice threatened to move the tournament elsewhere because little has happened for an entire year since the announcement.

Some believe Poland should exploit the event as much as possible. "If there is a pyramid of investment available for Euro 2012, I wish 'they' would pillage all that they want, leaving just enough bricks so that the pyramid doesn't

collapse,” a cab driver said recently. “Usually there is nothing left.”

The worry that a corrupt behind-the-scenes feeding frenzy was underway does not come as a surprise to Poles. Every year for the past three seasons, teams have been relegated from the *Ekstraklasa* (premier league) of Polish football for match fixing. The corrupt and nepotistic environment that surrounds international football as a whole has remained untouched.

Pessimism of the Cold War Generation

Lack of trust toward political elites unfortunately often leads to lack of trust toward all institutions, especially external ones. An educated elderly woman gave the following statement after hearing about the goal of this Global Integrity project: “These are our national matters that we have to deal with ourselves! You are selling [important information about] Poland out to the foreigners who only want to divide and conquer here!”

Indifference of the Younger Generation

Youth in Poland, or at least many of them, are doing what youth do best: not caring. In a shiny new football stadium constructed with matching EU funding, surprisingly free from graffiti or other damage, Poles from their early teens to their mid-20s gave a different perspective on the emotional crises a corrupt society can bring. They’re tired of the absurdity of the political battles over who is more corrupt than whom. For them, cronyism is just a reality:

“You have to know someone to get a good job.”

“Yes, society is not clean of corruption, but which country is better off than Poland?”

A Light at the End of a Long Transition Tunnel

According to the Transparency International Corruption Index, Poland ranked 61st in the world, next to Cuba. Furthermore, in 2008, for the first time since communism, Poland has witnessed the drop of unemployment figures into single digit percentiles. According to the Office of the National Police Commissioner (*Biuro Komendanta Głównego Policji*), crimes related to corruption have plummeted a staggering 22 percent since Poland’s 2007 accession into the Schengen border-cooperation zone.

How much faith one can have in the accurate measurement and analysis of the corruption situation is difficult to gauge. But with crime and corruption slowly but visibly decreasing, salaries increasing, and politicians learning that corruption as a political tool is a double-edged sword, hopefully Poland is on an upward trend. Combined with the tenacious work of civil society for accountability and transparency nearly two decades after the fall of the Berlin Wall, a real social debate around corruption may truly be under way.



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