polish 3(195)'16
sociological
review
ISSN 1231 – 1413

Rejoinder

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The Singularity of Poland or the Common Historical Trajectory in ECE?

Abstract: This paper argues that the five East-Central European states have a common historical trajectory as a region, in which Poland fits to both the conceptual framework and to the average data, being on some issues somewhat better, on some other issues somewhat worse than the ECE average. Therefore, the paper denies the thesis of Poland's "singularity" that presupposes the special situation of Poland, very different from the ECE region based on a particular success story in the last Quarter-Century and/or during the EU membership. It means also that the latest developments in Poland can push the country to more divergence from the EU mainstream as it has been the case in the 2010s with Hungary.

Keywords: common historical trajectory, social deficit, innovation driven economy, developmental challenges.

First of all, I would like to thank Józef Fiszer to pay attention to my paper in *Polish Sociological Review* 1(193)2016 and to raise some vital issues in the discussion of the ECE developments. In general, my impression is that some Polish experts still consider that Poland has been a singular case in the East-Central European (ECE) region, although due to the latest events since the October 2015 elections some other experts have begun to realise the opposite, namely that in the last 25 years Poland has covered more or less the same historical trajectory as the other ECE states (Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary and Slovenia). In my short answer I will present some further arguments and data against the thesis of "singularity of Poland" and for its common ECE historical trajectory. At the same time I try to make clear that based on the data of the international ranking institutions—including OECD, IMF and likes - a very long paper could also be written to support my argument on the common ECE developments. [1]

The statements of Józef Fiszer have been the most evident case of the singularity thesis on Poland,

> where transformation, democratization and Europeanization produced much better social, political and economic effects than in the Czech Republic or Slovakia, not to speak about Hungary, Bulgaria or Romania. Constitutional construction of state, separation of powers, rights and freedoms of citizens have been respected in Poland. Over the last 25 years all our neighbours, the European Union and the whole world have highly assessed and presented Poland as an example of successful transformation and democratization.

[1] I have continued my analysis of the PSR paper in some other current publications with special regards to the latest EU developments as the refugee crisis and the securitization of the EU affairs (Ágh, 2016a, b, c).

Well, the data and the evaluation of the EU experts—including some well-known Polish experts—have not confirmed this thesis at all. It would be enough to mention the serious deterioration of the press freedom in the last decade in Poland (see Table 1), which is indicative also for the basic human rights. It demonstrates that "the whole world" may have serious worries about the decline of democracy in Poland, and in the other ECE states. This has been confirmed to a great extent by the latest Report of the Council of Europe on Poland (2016). The recent negative evaluations go so far that some eminent statesmen like Javier Solana questions Poland's EU capacity under the incumbent PiS government (Solana 2016).[2]

In general, both the large datasets and the international evaluations have presented a picture, in which the Polish performance varies a lot, in some cases worse than the ECE average and in some other cases better than that. Actually, the main argument for the singularity of Poland is its rapid GDP growth (until 2013), but the basic fact is that those ECE countries that were below the ECE average increased their GDP more between 2005 and 2014—Poland: 50–68% and Slovakia 60–76% of the EU average—and those above the ECE average increased their GDP less, like the Czech Republic (80–84%). But the other ECE states in many other fields have performed better, even in the economic dimension that might have given them better perspectives in the "new economy" of the "innovation driven" developments with less "innovation gap," and therefore with less competitiveness gap (see Veugelers 2016).

Overestimating the GDP growth is seriously misleading, since the global competitiveness after the 2008 crisis has been based in this human investment oriented "new economy," in which Poland and Slovakia are not better at all than the ECE average. The two main drivers of the new economy are the socio-economic factors as (high) education, health care, research and social policy on one side and the political factors as the good governance, transparency of government and participatory democracy. I have presented some Tables about these factors in my former PSR paper. I have added some new Tables in this short answer, and I can add new and new ones "ad nauseam." All these Tables demonstrate that Poland fits to the ECE frame because in some respects it is worse, while in some other respects it is better. It can be seen clearly on the Table 2, since in social cohesion Poland is better than the ECE average, in labour market access it is around the ECE average, but in health care and severe material deprivation it is worse than the ECE average. In one world, however, Poland is vulnerable as all the other ECE states are. Thus, mistaking the increased role of Poland in the EU for the economic success and for the consolidation of democracy in Poland itself is a false "argument" for the singularity of Poland, in which the external success has been simply translated to internal success as domestic strength. The Polish experts have to decide themselves whether they buy this "argument" against all data in the international scholarships.

A closer analysis of the new drivers of the innovation driven and human investment based economy gives a rather gloomy picture about the ECE developments in the EU, and it applies also to Poland to a great extent. The data of the Table 3 demonstrate again that

[2] See BF (2016) and FH (2016) current country reports on Poland. For the discussion of the Polish development is general, see e.g. some other Freedom House papers (https://freedomhouse.org/country/poland).

Poland does not excel in the innovation driven development, and in this respect the "laggard" Czech Republic performs much better, although not running ahead in the GDP growth like Poland, but being better prepared for the new growth model. The same situation appears in the Table 4, when focusing on education and innovation with special respect to retain and attract talents, and capacity for innovation, including the company spending for R&D. It has to be noticed than according to the latest OECD data, Poland is the last among the OECD member states in the computer supported production (OECD 2016: 25). No wonder that Polish youngsters "go to the West" in hundred thousands, as they do from the other ECE countries.[3]

The denial of the Fiszer thesis can also be found in the recent Polish literature. As a properly balanced approach argues that "the developmental model that has been in place in Poland for the last 25 years, and generally worked quite well, which is evidenced by many major achievements and several and social indices, is just exhausting its potential." In this statement there is no sign of "singularity of Poland," even more it can be applied with some reservations to all ECE states. It is even more balanced in the following analysis, since the author adds immediately that "There is an increasingly marked presence of what we may call a social deficit." (Aniol 2015: 40). This is a complete picture indeed, not just about Poland but about all ECE states with the statements that (1) despite the many achievements in the last 25 years serious problems and disadvantages have been cumulated in Poland that generated an obstacle to the further development and the improvement of global competitiveness, (2) Poland has arrived at the critical juncture with the new "key developmental challenges" that have been deeply analysed in his paper, and (3) by implication the author suggests a critical re-evaluation of the last 25 years and reconceptualization of socio-political model in order to elaborate the new strategy for the period of "new economy." All in all, in harmony with my references and data above, Aniol identifies for Poland the key developmental challenges as "the poor innovation of the economy and society," "the underdevelopment of civil society" with a low level of participative democracy and "the poor state efficiency," and he concludes that Poland needs a "pro-innovative" concept for the further development (Aniol 2015: 47–50). No doubt that these features characterise all ECE states and by offering a realistic picture of the Polish situation, this analysis gives refutes the statement of Fiszer on the excellence and singularity of Poland.

The history of Visegrad Four (V4) would also deserve at least a short reference, since Poland has plaid a leading role in this security framework. No doubt that V4 has been an important organization—including even Slovenia in a "V4+1" formation—but the negative side of the common historical trajectory of the ECE states with all of its ambiguities comes back also in the V4 case. No wonder that the EU authorities have not been satisfied with the behaviour and statements of the V4 leaders in the current refugee crisis that prompted *The Economist* (2016) to call V4 as the "Bad, bad Visegrad" in an "illiberal Central Europe." In this respect the same contradiction appears between the achievements and the cumulated problems, in which the tensions between the mainstream EU efforts have collided more and more with the self-centred behaviour of the V4 governments. Although there is no place

[3] As usual, the latest IMF report groups together the five ECE countries—Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia—as one region, and it has identified their competitive weaknesses first of all in the quality of institutions and in the investment of human capital (IMF, 2016: 21, 45, 50).

to elaborate this issue here at length, a warning is still necessary, since the Brexit case will aggravate more and more the conflict of the V4 governments as an "Unholy Alliance" or "Authoritarian Alliance" with the rest of the EU.[4]

Finally, the concept of Józef Fiszer as "Poland is OK in all respects" has been first of all voted down by the Polish citizens themselves. At the October 2015 parliamentary elections 63% of voters aged between 18–29 years voted for the Eurosceptic parties (Pienczykowska 2016). In the same vein, the Report on the Youth in Poland (The Millennial Dialogue, Poland 2015) has indicated 77% of young people think that they have been ignored by the politicians, and therefore only 14% of them has interest in politics. Accordingly, after the October 2015 elections there has been a widespread discussion on Poland in the international media, with the participation of many Polish authors as well. This literature is very critical, but it does not deal only with the political issues of democracy decline, it covers also the cumulated socio-economic problems. Of course, the political issue has still dominated the debate on Poland and it has peaked—with reference to the ex-president Bill Clinton—in the statement that the new Polish political regime has been "Putin-like" (Chadwick 2016), which is an over-exaggeration, but the fully democratic character of the new government has mostly been questioned in the international media.

After 13 January 2016, when the European Commission initiated a Rule of Law procedure about Poland, the question "How Will The EU's 'Rule of Law' Investigation Affect Polish Politics" (Szczerbiak 2016) will figure for sure high on the agenda of Polish politics and on that of the relationship between Poland and the EU. On 1 June 2016 the European Commission adopted the Rule of Law Opinion on the situation in Poland, which means entering the second phase of the Rule of Law Framework (see Kochenov and Pech 2015) for the first time in the EU history. Even more so, in general terms, on 7 April 2016 the European Parliament (2016) began a procedure on the Democracy, Rule of Law and Fundamental Rights (DRF) scoreboard document, which concerns all member states, but this new procedure has been generatedby the Polish and the Hungarian situation violating the EU rules and values.

Against this populist and xenophobic tide in ECE, Lubomir Zaorálek, the Czech Minister of Foreign Affairs has rightly noticed recently with a big empathy (2016: 2) that

> In today's jarred climate, no member state is immune to the temptations of inward-looking populism, though it may feed off different sources and manifest itself in different forms. In Central Europe, the legacy of communist rule casts a long shadow—but so do the mistakes of the transition period, with its overreliance on technocratic modes of change, often at the expense of social cohesion, inclusive development and democratic accountability. It has left too many of our citizens on the losing side of economic transformation, alienated from what they perceive as a closed system shot through with corruption. In today's time of distress and uncertainty, past failures are coming back to haunt us, empowering far-right extremists, polarizing our societies and undermining trust in Europe's liberal order.[5]

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[4] Strangely enough, even the self-styled and megalomaniac Viktor Orbán has also declared that "If we want a Central European cooperation, this has to be led by Poland" (Orbán 2015). In this short paper I do not deal with Viktor Orbán as a "light dictator," I refer only to the EPC (2016) analysis about this kind of "troublemakers" in ECE.

[5] I have dealt with the ECE regional crisis in my recent paper, "Cohesive Europe or Core-Periphery Divide in the EU28: The regional challenge of dual crisis in the New Member States" (forthcoming in the *Journal of Comparative Politics*, 2016/4, December 2016).

Altogether, like all the other ECE states, Poland has had big achievements and big failures in the last Quarter-Century, including the long decade within the EU. Still the Euro-Atlantic integration, and first of all the EU membership, offers a safe haven in this troubled world and the best opportunity for the socio-economic development and democratization. Facing the new development challenges, the ECE states have to change course with a strong self-critical approach to their own previous developments in order to complete their catching up process to the developed economies, societies and democracies of the EU.

Tables on the continental New Member States (NMS-8)

Table 1

Freedom House
NIT Independent Media ratings, 2005–2016 (1 best)

	2005	2007	2009	2011	2013	2014	2015	2016	Rank
BG	3.50	3.50	3.75	3.75	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00	78
CZ	2.00	2.25	2.25	2.50	2.50	2.75	2.75	2.75	28
HR	3.75	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00	84
HU	2.50	2.50	2.50	3.25	3.50	3.50	3.75	3.75	78
PL	1.50	2.25	2.00	2.25	2.50	2.50	2.50	2.75	51
RO	4.00	3.75	3.75	4.00	4.25	4.25	4.25	4.25	74
SI	1.50	2.00	2.25	2.25	2.25	2.25	2.25	—	33
SK	2.25	2.25	2.75	3.00	2.75	2.75	3.00	3.00	38

Rank: global rank in 2016
Freedom House (2016) Nations in Transit 2016, https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/FH_NIT2016_Final_FWeb.pdf

Freedom House (2016) Freedom of the Press 2016, https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/FH_FTOP_2016Report_Final_04232016.pdf

Table 2

Bertelsmann Foundation
Social Justice Index 2015 on the rankings of NMS-8 (28 countries)

	Rank	PP	LA	SC	HE	MP
BG	26	28	20	26	25	28
CZ	5	1	10	14	5	12
HR	22	23	25	26	18	22
HU	23	24	18	24	23	26
PL	15	16	19	14	26	18
RO	27	27	21	25	28	27
SI	9	11	17	9	14	11
SK	17	6	26	20	21	15

Rank: EU ranking in 2015

PP—poverty prevention, LA—labour market access, SC—social cohesion, HE—health, MP—severe material deprivation

BF, Bertelsmann Foundation (2015a) *Social Justice in the EU—Index Report 2015, Social Inclusion Monitor Europe (SIM)*, http://www.social-inclusion-monitor.eu/social-justice-index/

Table 3

World Economic Forum
Rankings of NMS-8 countries in the innovation-driven development 2015

	institutions	health and education	higher education	innovation
BG	107	53	64	94
CZ	57	27	29	35
HR	89	63	51	92
HU	97	72	57	51
PL	58	40	31	64
RO	86	83	59	75
SI	67	15	22	33
SK	104	50	53	66

WEF (2015) The Global Competitiveness Report 2015–2016, http://www3.weforum.org/docs/gcr/2015-2016/Global_Competitiveness_Report_2015-2016.pdf

Rankings in the 1st, 4th, 5th and 12th pillars.

Table 4

World Economic Forum
Rankings in education and innovation in 2015

	education	talent-1	talent-2	innovation	R&D
BG	93	133	132	79	78
CZ	60	58	85	26	30
HR	103	134	135	122	85
HU	99	123	121	131	97
PL	73	116	126	72	84
RO	90	131	113	63	94
SI	50	98	118	41	39
SK	121	127	129	77	63

(1) quality of the higher education system (in 5th pillar), (2) country capacity to retain talent (in 7th pillar), (3) country capacity to attract talent (in 7th pillar), (4) capacity for innovation (12th pillar) and (5) company spending on R&D (12th pillar).

The Global Competitiveness Report 2015–2016

Table 5

World Economic Forum
Rankings in selected government fields in 2015 (in 1st pillar)

	public funds	favouritism	transparency
BG	104	122	120
CZ	92	94	88
HR	84	100	113
HU	119	125	119
PL	48	69	106
RO	97	111	84
SI	70	97	71
SK	127	138	79

(1) Diversion of public funds, (2) favouritism in decisions of government officials, (3) transparency of government decision making

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Since both Authors have clearly presented their stances, we consider the discussion closed unless some new ideas are presented and supported by sociological analysis.

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