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Poland: Its Transformation from Communism to Capitalism

By CASIMIR ZABLOTSKI
STAFF WRITER

This past summer I studied at Jagiellonian University in Kraków, Poland. It was founded in 1364 by King Casimir III and is the oldest university in Poland, the second oldest in Central Europe, and one of the oldest surviving universities in the world. But as soon as I arrived at my dormitory, a firm sense of consternation took hold of me. The dormitory was a Soviet bloc-style building that had been converted into a hotel, affectionately dubbed “Piaśt” after an important dynasty in Poland’s history.

Despair reigned in the building. Its concrete prevented WiFi from reaching past the lobby, the laundry machines and ovens did not work, and the concierge could

offer little to improve the situation. The dining service was extremely limited and lackluster, and the *biedronka* (convenience mart) next to the hotel was underwhelming. I immediately realized that I was in the middle of a post-Soviet experience, witnessing some lingering effects of the communist ideology.

The dormitory was a far cry, however, from Kraków’s Stare Miasto (Old Town). There I was filled with awe. Gothic architecture, enthusiastic street performers, and an abundant selection of pubs and restaurants made Kraków proper feel lively and welcoming. A couple of streets over, Jagiellonian University’s brick buildings, some of which have existed for centuries, stood as a testament to traditional Polish culture. The laughter of young adults filled the air wherever I went, and a preponderance of stores catered to one’s every need. The sights, sounds, and smells of Kraków almost made me forget

the horrors that Poland experienced during the twentieth century.

The dichotomy between these two areas of Kraków highlights a tension in Polish society: the reconciliation of a communist past with a capitalist future. Communism has undoubtedly left an indelible mark on Poland, and many Poles view their country as the foremost victim of modernity, due to their country’s experiences of Soviet rule, Nazi rule, and the destruction of World War II. The cheap concrete apartment

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buildings built during the more than four decades of communist rule dot the city’s outskirts. The interiors are often painted bright colors, or plastered with tacky wallpaper,

in an attempt to humanize the monolithic and inorganic structures. As a Westerner, I found these buildings both an affront to my sense of beauty and a reminder of the damage that communism did to whatever it touched. One needs only to look to Nowa Huta, a district of Kraków that was largely made into a Socialist Realist architectural dystopia, to recognize how devoid of humanity certain ideologies can be, and how awe-inspiring traditional Polish culture really is.

Poland has certainly been making strides in eschewing its dark past and emerging as a strong force in Europe. Historically it has been a regional power, but the past 20 years have brought a global level of development and sophistication, especially in economic terms. Many eateries in Kraków often put up signs saying they have run out of food halfway through lunch time. While this may suggest a problem with

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The Dangers of the Military-Industrial Complex

By CARTER BRIGLIA
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In today’s polarized American political process, it seems like the Democrats and Republicans are deadlocked on every topic. What they can agree on, however, is the defense budget. When it comes to issues such as infrastructure, health care, raising wages, and more, the question we often hear is: “How can we pay for that?” Yet each year, both sides of the congressional aisle vote for military budget increases with little hesitation. Our one area of bipartisanship is these increasingly reckless amounts of money given to our military.

U.S. defense spending is astonishingly wasteful. In 1990, Congress passed the Chief Financial Officers Act, which mandated that all federal agencies be audited regularly. However, the Pentagon was not audited until November of 2018. The result? As then-Deputy Secretary of Defense Patrick Shanahan said: “We failed the audit, but we never expected to pass it.” In true Pentagon fashion, the audit cost a grand total of \$972 million.

Despite the fact that we’re already spending more on our military than the next ten nations combined (six of which are our close allies, including Britain and France), President Trump sent Congress a request in March for a defense budget of \$750 billion for the 2020 fiscal year. “We love and need our Military and gave them everything - and more,” he tweeted the previous month. Republicans in the House of Representatives agreed with Trump, pushing for the full \$750 billion. In July, the House Democrats voted to appropriate \$733 billion for the 2020 defense budget. In other words, on the largest piece of discretionary spending in the federal budget (which accounts for more than half), Democrats and Republicans were divided by a mere 2.3 percent.

In his farewell address to the

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distribution chains after the collapse of the Soviet-style planned economy, it is also indicative of a demand that continuously outpaces supply. Poland is growing on all fronts, and anyone with the ability to seize this opportunity benefits from its free-market policies. Its strong sense of nationalism also drives forward an international competitiveness.

This pride in the nation is rooted in both Poland's historic achievements and its successful rejection of communism, most notably through the *Solidarność* (Solidarity) movement. This love of country is not merely latent in Poland; it is active and clearly visible. I was present in the Stare Miasto on August 1 at 5

p.m., when hundreds of Poles gathered in silence as the most patriotic among them popped red flares and played a siren in commemoration of the start of the doomed 1945 Warsaw Uprising against the occupying Germans. This sight profoundly affected me as I realized how devoted people could be to their country.

At the same time, many Poles share the fear that too much political correctness has been imported from the West, both through foreign students at universities and through Poland's increased involvement in European affairs and/or increased European Union involvement in Poland's (and other nations') affairs. Poland is wary of any possible regression toward any policy

that seems related to communism. This tendency has elicited many unfair judgments by people in the West, but has also led to a strengthening of Polish-American relations. Many Poles seem to love President Trump, primarily for his rejection of socialism, and they speak ill of him only when they hear the English word "Russia" uttered alongside his name.

Regardless, Poland's new post-communist future appears to be much more promising than its experience under Soviet "leadership." One day, I will return to the country and witness again its stunning transformation from communism to freedom and democracy. Until then, I offer a toast to Poland and its people: *Na zdrowie!*

American people, President Dwight Eisenhower warned about the dangers of the military-industrial complex. He said: "We have been compelled to create a permanent armaments industry of vast proportions . . . yet, we must not fail to comprehend its grave implications. We must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military-industrial complex . . . The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist. We must never let the weight of this combination endanger our liberties or democratic processes." Eisenhower, the same man who had served as the supreme commander of the Allied forces in Europe during World War II, saw the dangers of coupling our military with our democratic processes. He recognized that when military influence affects our economic and political systems, it can lead to inflated military spending and excessive military power. Now, almost 60 years later, Eisenhower's nightmare is quite real. In 2019, all 50 states have defense industry jobs. This is no accident, but a matter of politics. As a result, nearly all members of Congress are incredibly hesitant to cut back (and/or oppose growth in) military spending, due to the political ramifications of cuts

in their constituencies. They recognize that when military spending increases, it can lead to new defense-related jobs, and even newly-located industries, in their districts and states. Our economy is so heavily intertwined with the military-industrial complex that if we were ever to cut back on military spending,

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a significant number of Americans would be out of work. Instead, we simply push the issue further down the road, and cut from other government spending or borrow unsustainably.

The establishment and growth of the military-industrial complex in America is a grave development. Since the 1990s, the United States has served as the world's largest weapons exporter, with some exported weapons going to less-than-savory actors. Saudi Arabia is our largest arms partner; the U.S. signed an arms deal worth an advertised \$110 billion with the country in 2018. These weapons, in turn, have been used recklessly in Saudi Arabia's conflicts. Horrifically, a 2018 Saudi attack on a school bus in Yemen that killed 29 children was carried out with

an American-made bomb. The size of our military-industrial complex should not be allowed to preclude us from controlling our arms exports tightly.

Minimizing our reliance on the defense industry requires us to retool our economy. Much-needed investments in domestic infrastructure and clean energy sources could accomplish this. But the significant influence our defense sector wields in our politics makes change difficult. In 2006, more than a quarter of Congress held shares in major

defense contractors, and the CEOs of these contractors regularly contribute to political campaigns. In the 2012 cycle, individuals and political action committees associated with the defense sector gave more than \$27 million for campaign purposes. Because of their essential status in our economy (due to the continuous increases in defense spending) and their financial connections to our politicians, defense contractors are highly resistant to political change. Until we elect representatives who are willing to suffer the short-term political consequences of reducing such spending, we should expect the cycle of increased defense spending and cuts to other programs, or rising national debt, to continue.

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#PolandTransformation
2. *The Dangers of the Military-Industrial Complex*
#DangerMilitaryComplex