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Dismantling communism. The external determinants of systemic change in the USSR

Introductory remarks

In the year of the thirtieth anniversary of the collapse of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, in the light of the strongly changing political reality of today, it is worth returning to the subject of the current systemic transformation. It was a very complicated process, comprehensively covering all aspects of political life in the Soviet state. This article will outline the external premises of this mechanism. The relevance of these premises provides a broader background for presenting a picture of intra-state transformations, which must first be situated in a certain historical narrative and presented in the context of the dynamics of events in the international arena. The reflection of such an evolution, its consequence or even a kind of reaction were the subsequent transformational changes that led to the emergence of the Russian Federation as the heir to the USSR, with all its consequences¹.

¹ Many researchers do not consider external conditions to be important for the occurrence and dynamics of the transformation process. The biggest opponents of this approach include Philippe C. Schmitter and Guillermo O'Donnell. As proponents of the processual model of describing transformation, they concluded that internal factors and actors are the most important in the transformation process, and international influence can only play a secondary role.

The geographical and historical context.

The genesis of the post-communist systemic transformation in the USSR in the external context should begin with a discussion of the situation in the so-called “bloc of communist states”, which undoubtedly had a significant impact on the condition of the communist system as such in a universal and institutional dimension. The creation of this bloc after the Second World War was in its essence burdened with the “original sin”. The system was based on a (communist) ideology, which until then had been marginal in the political system of Central and Eastern Europe, and this was reflected in a strong sense of dissonance in the societies of those countries, which assimilated it in organizational and institutional terms, but found it rather difficult to accept in the axiological and ideological sphere. This very aspect constituted the main backdrop for later “revolts” within the bloc countries and became one of the most important factors weakening the system’s central state – the USSR – from the outside.

The countries of Central and Eastern Europe, which formed a bloc of communist states after the Second World War, were for the entire time of their existence in this system closer in their world outlook to the Western world than to Russia, and more so to the USSR. Anna Applebaum has stated: “All these countries were linked to Western Europe by complex economic and cultural ties in the 1930s that were much stronger than their ties to Russia. Nothing in their history or culture indicated that they were destined for totalitarian dictatorships. [...] In retrospect, it sometimes seems that history could not have turned out differently; for several decades after the imposition of communism, post hoc rational justifications for the existence of Eastern European regimes were sought. It has been said that the eastern part of the continent was poorer than the western part (with the exception of Germany, of course); that the countries there were less developed (Hungary and Poland were more developed than Spain, Portugal or Greece) and less industrialized (the Czech Republic was one of the most industrialized regions in Europe). Looking ahead in 1945, however, it was hardly foreseeable that Hungary, with its longstanding ties to the German-speaking West, Poland with its fiercely anti-Bolshevik tradition, or East Germany with its Nazi past, would remain under the Soviet political domination for nearly half a century. But at the time they fell under that domination, hardly

G. O'Donnell, P. C. Schmitter, *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Tentative conclusions about uncertain democracies*, Baltimore/London 1986, p. 39–40.

anyone outside the region was aware of what had actually happened and why”². The Soviet-style ‘real socialism’ was perceived by the Eastern Bloc countries as a foreign regime imposed by an external hegemon. In the public perception, this created a subjective image of their own statehood, dependent on the Soviet empire. In principle, the very association of this dependence with a totalitarian system already undermined the foundations of the latter.

The weight of historical experience with which the countries of Central and Eastern Europe entered the treaty (mainly the interwar period) and their democratic practices against the background of their socio-economic development were significant in this context. None of these states was actually fully democratic in the period before the outbreak of the war, but all of them, at a certain stage of their history, went through the experience of political pluralism, free elections and constitutional rule. In all of these countries, the economy was once based on free market principles and (very significantly!) there were laws protecting private property. In the social sphere, an important element of the functioning of these countries was the activity of civic institutions, such as youth organizations, trade unions, etc. Moreover, religion and the Church as an institution uniting the faithful played an essential role in the life of the societies of these countries. The existence of a pluralistic press, printing and publishing was also important.

The system of communist governance imposed from above by the USSR after the Second World War had therefore a very fragile basis for its functioning in the countries of the so-called “Eastern Bloc”, and those on which it was actually based were force-based solutions, consisting of terror, repression, intimidation, and so on. Nevertheless, this was the only possible way of actually creating this bloc of communist countries, but in its essence it constituted a great weakness of this system, and, from the very beginning, it created an absolutely dysfunctional element. Andrzej Friszke, describing political opposition in the PRL, has pointed to the dilemmas functioning in the social consciousness of Poles throughout the history of communist statehood. He has written: “[...] in the consciousness of probably every citizen clashed: dissatisfaction with the lack of freedom, insufficient satisfaction of material needs; fear of political repression, accompanied by the conviction of the universality of surveillance (“walls have ears”) and the fear of a powerless individual falling into conflict with the all-powerful organization of the state; a sense of helplessness (“you can’t change it anyway”, “the West sold us out”, “Soviet tanks guard the status quo”); conscious acceptance (“it’s better

² A. Applebaum, *Za żelazną kurtyną. Opowieść o Europie Wschodniej 1944–1956*, Warszawa 2013, p. 217.

than before the war”, “only thanks to this system we have... “); a strong fear of war for many years, the destruction of the foundations of everyday existence, of the Germans, of the Russians, which forced us to persist in passive acceptance of the existing state of affairs, as the so-called lesser evil”³. Such ambivalence of sentiments was shared to a greater or lesser extent by all societies of the so-called “demoluds” and created the climate for future transformational shifts.

The shortcomings of the communist system, forcibly imposed on the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, had their permanent expression in events defined as crises in the history of those countries. The following should be mentioned among others: mass protests of workers in the German Democratic Republic in June 1953, workers’ protests in Poznan in the People’s Republic of Poland in June 1956, the period of liberalization in Czechoslovakia (the so-called “Prague Spring”) and Poland (“March events”) in 1968 and also in Poland – “December events” on the coast in 1970, All the above-mentioned events were a testimony of the system’s inefficiency and obviously weakened the position of the communist decision-makers in the Kremlin, because, in a way, they were also aimed at them⁴. However, they were not sufficient fuel for a fundamental change of the system. The USSR’s military interventions in the GDR in 1953, Hungary in 1956, Czechoslovakia in 1968 and the martial law in Poland in 1981–1983 strongly delineated the boundaries of possible changes, while unambiguously emphasising the Soviet Union’s declaration of the right to use force in order to maintain the existing systemic model in the countries of the communist bloc. The message was emphatic and clearly indicated the possibility of small concessions, but within the existing system.⁵

The Polish component in the discussed structure of political events, influencing the “fermentation” of the system as a whole and in the countries of the bloc and in the USSR itself, cannot be omitted. It is worth mentioning the opinion

³ A. Friszke, *Opozycja polityczna w PRL 1945–1980*, Londyn 1994, p. 585.

⁴ Andrzej Walicki has pointed to the diminishing of the significance of the transformations taking place within the “communist bloc” in favor of the anti-communist policy of the West. He believed that the internal weaknesses of the communist countries and the permanent crisis of “actually existing socialism” played a crucial role in the process of the subsequent transformation. In fact, according to Walicki, it was the unforeseen consequences of M. Gorbachev’s reforms, including the absolute reduction of the socialist system in the West, that played a crucial role. Gorbachev’s reforms, including the absolute out of control policy of glasnost, led the USSR to withdraw from the doctrine of maintaining communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe. See: A. Walicki, *Zniewolony umysł po latach*, Warszawa 1993, p. 290–293.; id., *Marksizm i skok do królestwa wolności. Dzieje komunistycznej utopii*, Warszawa 1996, p. 509.

⁵ A.D. Rotfeld, *Zmiany w systemie bezpieczeństwa europejskiego*, „Sprawy Międzynarodowe”, 1990, nr 7–8, p. 7.

of Jerzy Holzer, who, discussing the causes of the disintegration of communism as a movement and a system of power, has pointed to the special significance of the Polish events of 1980–1981. The significant aspects of these events included: firstly, the breakdown of the basic element holding the system together – the class ideology, because “workers became the main force opposing the system”; secondly, the shaking of the communist monopoly on organized public activity and directing the mass media; thirdly, the revealing of the weakness of the steering capacity of the communist party, whose members succumbed to public sentiment, “while demoralization and the temptations of a comfortable life led other members or even activists to take little action”⁶. Holzer also emphasized the strongly divergent line and the apparent lack of firmness in the ranks of the Polish communists during martial law. Moreover, he emphasized the dependence of this vacillation on the unstable situation in Moscow, especially after Brezhnev’s death in November 1982⁷. The situation in Poland at the beginning of the 1980s clearly demonstrated the weakness and fragility of the system externally from the USSR, within the communist bloc. It had its impact (albeit more indirectly) on the policies of other countries in the communist bloc, but above all it pointed to a destabilizing element within the entire system, including the Soviet Union. The significance of the events in Poland can be summed up by a very apt and blunt observation by Richard Pipes: “Poland’s Solidarity was a movement that shook the communist world to its foundations, showing that communism is not a system that represents the working class”⁸.

The communist authorities in any of the countries of the communist bloc did not realize that they were unstable by definition⁹. They functioned from crisis to crisis not because they could not work out political strategies, but because the communist project itself was flawed in many dimensions. Paweł Rojek has written about the internal antinomies of communism: “The contradiction of the

⁶ J. Holzer, *Komunizm w Europie. Dzieje ruchu i systemu władzy*, Warszawa 2000, p. 141–142.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 144.

⁸ R. Pipes, *Ankieta 1991–2011. Dwadzieścia lat bez Wielkiego Brata. Nikt nie chciał bronić systemu*, „Nowa Europa wschodnia” 2011, nr 1 (XV), p. 31.

⁹ A symptom of the misunderstanding of this thesis was the policy of perestroika and glasnost proclaimed by Mikhail Gorbachev, which meant democratization of the system. By allowing any manifestation of democratic processes, the communists denied the essence of the communist system because it was, in principle, unreformable. Gorbachev’s experiment was doomed to failure, because the only effect of introducing democratic elements could be (which in fact happened) the collapse of the system. И.М. Клямкин, *Посткоммунистическая демократия и ее исторические особенности в России*, „Полис. Политические исследования” 1993, № 2, p. 6–7.

system consisted in the fact that the full realization of the principles of ideology prevented natural social life, political activity and rational economy. As a result, the system's survival was conditioned by limiting its realization by allowing uncontrolled 'second circuits' in these areas: informal groups compensating for the inadequacy of the institutions of social life, a political opposition not officially recognized, and the operation of a semi-legal market for goods and services"¹⁰. Rojek believed that the very form of communist ideology was one of the basic sources of paradoxes of real socialism. He has also pointed out that the attempts to implement the communist ideology led to an inevitable crisis, and that the collapse of communism resulted from the very content and form of the communist ideology¹¹.

Adam Przeworski has also written about the reasons for the collapse of the communist regime in the context of the fragility of ideology: "The reasons that the communist system crumbled so quickly and, as they say, 'quietly', lie in the realm of ideology [...] For me personally, the most amazing feature of this process was that the party bureaucrats had nothing in store to somehow justify their power. They simply remained silent: they did not say a word about socialism, about progress, about a bright future, about material prosperity, about the rationality of socialism, about universal equality and the proletariat. They only meticulously calculated how many people would have to be destroyed to maintain their power, how many ministerial posts they would have to compromise, how many bureaucratic seats they would retain if they had to leave at all. They could only afford to make statements in a patriotic spirit, but the sincerity of these statements was more than questionable"¹².

Beyond the aforementioned, Russian researcher, Dmitry Furman (Russian: Дмитрий Фурман), has mentioned the bankruptcy of the communist idea in the context of the reasons conditioning the transition to a new political system in Russia after 1991. In doing so, he stated: "Communist ideology over the years of its absolute domination in political life has completely lost its life force. It could neither in its 'reform' version become the basis of Gorbachev's perestroika, nor create real resistance to the rising tide of anti-communism"¹³. Furman has pointed out that the development of the new system in Russia after 1991 was conditioned primarily by the circumstances of the collapse of the previous one,

¹⁰ Zob. P. Rojek, *Kulturowe sprzeczności komunizmu*, „Kultura i Polityka” 2008, nr 2/3, p. 170.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 185–186.

¹² A. Przeworski, *Democracy and Market: Political and Economic Reforms in Eastern Europe and Latin America*, Cambridge 1999, p. 22–23.

¹³ See: Д.Е. Фурман, *Движение по спирали: Политическая система России в ряду других систем*, Москва 2010, p. 17–20.

which took place surprisingly quickly and generally without bloodshed. Among the main determinants of this perspective of events, he mentioned the bankruptcy of the communist idea and the failure of Gorbachev's vision of a renaissance of Lenin's ideas in the conditions of a global departure from utopian, quasi-religious ideologies. According to Furman, a factor that aided this process was also the federal character of the Soviet state: in the period of perestroika, this manifested itself in a significant increase in the independence of local elites and in the emancipation aspirations of individual union republics¹⁴.

In an attempt to control all the aspects of social life, the authorities have turned each of them into a potential form of protest, while the communist ideology itself and Marxist-Leninist economic theories carried an inherent element of destruction. Martin Malia was remarkably accurate in defining this thesis, pointing out that the reasons for the collapse of communism stemmed from its essential, and therefore inviolable, characteristics. He has written: "[...] there is no such thing as socialism, and the Soviet Union built it. So when the results of disastrously uncompetitive economics made this paradox obvious, the institutionalized fantasy of 'real existing' Marxism ceased to exist"¹⁵. With regard to the Eastern Bloc countries, Anna Appelbaum has defined this phenomenon as "the inherent weakness of totalitarianism in the Soviet fashion"¹⁶. The gap between the reality and the proclaimed ideology was expressed by the constant recitation of political slogans by the communists, with full awareness of their utopianism and nonsense. It seems very appropriate in this context to quote the statement of the British philosopher, Roger Scruton, that Marxism had become so immersed in Orwellian newspeak that there was no longer any room for argument: "Facts were no longer relevant to theory, which had risen above the facts to the clouds of nonsense, a bit like a theological system. It was no longer a question of believing in a theory, but of repeating it ritually in such a way that both belief and doubt became irrelevant [...]. In this way, the concept of truth disappeared from the intellectual landscape and was replaced by the concept of authority"¹⁷.

A fundamental issue should be emphasized, which is important from the standpoint of presenting the weaknesses of the system based on the ideology of Marxism-Leninism. In communist countries, the political system was not formed in an evolutionary way, through the consolidation of customs and in-

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 17–20.

¹⁵ M. Malia, *Sowiecka tragedia. Historia komunistycznego imperium rosyjskiego 1917–1991*, Warszawa 1998, p. 534.

¹⁶ A. Applebaum, *Za żelazną kurtyną...*, p. 518.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

stitutions that were created by the organizing societies within the framework of activities that were significant for them. The constitutive foundations of the systems of communist countries were the result of top-down reorganization that sought to radically transform society from the moment it assumed power. These transformations were carried out against the will of the people and the system was built and maintained by the means of force. Violence was a constitutive feature of communist regimes. In turn, the foundation of social change was the process of drastic destruction of the existing ways of organizing people and the existing institutions of public life. It is worth noting here that the systemic features of particular communist regimes presented themselves in different ways: sometimes as a model, in an extreme form, and sometimes as variable, which manifested themselves to varying degrees in different countries during particular periods. However, these variable features characterized the communist system, and the differences in their intensity constituted the degree of difficulty for the functioning of society in a given country and ultimately influenced the pace and manner of departure from communism¹⁸.

The economic aspect

The majority of analysts have concluded that the collapse of communism in Central and Eastern Europe was historically inevitable¹⁹. The utopian nature of the communist idea was verified by reality and proved to be the primary factor of top-down detotalization. This abstractness of the vision manifested itself unconditionally in the impossibility of applying communist postulates in various spheres of society. This was manifested by a number of elements indicating the inefficiency of the communist system, of which the structural inefficiency of the economic system based on the assumptions of the communist ideology was an absolutely fundamental component²⁰.

The communist system was economically uncompetitive in the face of Western challenges and the growing social expectations of its own citizens. In con-

¹⁸ See: J. Karpiński, *Ustrój komunistyczny w Polsce*, Warszawa 2005.

¹⁹ See: R. Sakwa, *The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Union 1917–1991*, Londyn 1999; R.V. Daniels, *Russia's Transformation. Snapshots of a crumbling system*, Oxford 1998; M.A. Weigle, *Russia's liberal project. State society relations in the transition from communism*, Pennsylvania 2000; S. Kotkin, *Armageddon averted. The soviet collapse, 1970–2000*, Oxford 2001; R. Pipes, *Komunizm*, Warszawa 2008; A. Walicki, *Od projektu komunistycznego do neoliberalnej utopii*, Kraków 2013; T. Snyder, *O tyranii. Dwadzieścia lekcji z dwudziestego wieku*, Kraków 2017.

²⁰ Por. J. Schlesinger, *New Instabilities, New Priorities*, „Foreign Policy” 1991/1992, vol. 85, p. 3–24; *Why the Cold War Ended: A Range of Interpretations*, red. R. Summy, M.E. Salla, Westport 1995; F. Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, N.Y. 1992.

trast, the global economic system, striving for globalization, hardly tolerated the closed communist enclave²¹. Richard Pipes, among others, has written about the “atrophy of the Soviet regime” in the economic dimension: “The Soviet Union was incapable of keeping up with the rest of the world in economic terms, and its backwardness became clearer with each passing year. No one believed any longer that communism could provide the country with the incredible progress that would allow the idea to spread throughout the world. Furthermore, no one cared about defending the system – it only persisted through inertia”²².

It would be worth mentioning that after the Second World War, the USSR did not agree to the participation of the countries of the communist bloc in the so-called „Marshal Plan”. The aim of such action was to isolate these countries in the economic sphere from the West: a ban on establishing economic ties with the West and on joining any international economic institutions. This policy of isolationism was to be compensated by common socialist economic integration. The countries of the communist bloc repeatedly tried to abandon the command and administrative model in the economy, for example, by introducing a number of free market stimulators in addition to the planned methods. The basic reason was the difficulty of introducing and functioning of an economic system completely different from that which had functioned in those countries before the war (departure from capitalism), breaking the accepted system of social bonds (social structure, relations between village and town, etc.). Also of importance was the much closer distance, than, for example, in the case of the USSR, from Western countries in the literal sense, but also in terms of mentality. This was very noticeable, for example, in the socialist German Democratic Republic (GDR), whose inhabitants most often encountered a higher standard of living in the capitalist Federal Republic of Germany.

Furthermore, the implementation of reforms in the GDR became a matter of course after the leader of the state, Walter Ulbricht, went to Moscow in 1961 to obtain loans for the next five years and was turned away empty-handed. The USSR authorities decided that they had already lent generously enough to the GDR, whose inhabitants were living much better than the Soviet citizens, and suggested that they should solve their own problems themselves. The leader of the German Communists was forced to look for other solutions. A package of

²¹ J. Kaufman, W. Roszkowski, *Transformacja gospodarcza państw Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej w latach 1989–1994*, „Studia polityczne”, 1995, nr 4, s. 61–62; W. Marciniak, *Rozgrzanie imperium. Upadek Związku Sowieckiego i powstanie Federacji Rosyjskiej*, Kraków 2001, p. 101.

²² R. Pipes, *Ankieta 1991–2011. Dwadzieścia lat bez Wielkiego Brata. Nikt nie chciał bronić systemu*, „Nowa Europa wschodnia” 2011, nr 1 (XV), p. 31.

economic reforms was created to better manage the economy, introduce new forms of industrial organization and stimulate technological progress. After 1963, when these reforms began to take effect and the first positive results were visible, the GDR leadership, led by Ulbrich, organized a seminar for party and industry activists from other socialist countries to share their experiences. Significantly, in his speech, Walter Ulbricht very boldly argued the need to depart from some of the dogmas of socialist political economy and called for the adoption of Western solutions, e.g. in the area of organization of work and trade. These statements were for many representatives of the authorities in the USSR, highly controversial from the perspective of the dogmatic communist assumptions, and even more so with regard to the author of these statements. Ulbricht was famous for his ideological radicalism, which strongly emphasized the „only right” solutions of communism²³. These first steps of economic liberalization in the GDR, as earlier in Yugoslavia and later in Czechoslovakia and Hungary, challenged the communist dogmatists in the USSR and undoubtedly undermined the foundations of the communist system.

Russian economist, Oleg Bogomolov (Russian: Олег Богомолов), has written: “By the end of the perestroika period, the USSR had completely lost its influence over the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. They were increasingly under the ideological, political and thus military influence of the West. Simultaneously, the opposite tendency became strongly apparent: the course of market and democratic changes in Central and Eastern Europe, which preceded the USSR and, after its collapse, the new independent states, initiated transformations in the post-Soviet space”²⁴. Bogomolov has indicated the correlation of influences between the USSR and the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. According to him, they had a two-way character: not only did the countries of the communist bloc feel the Soviet influence, but the USSR was also influenced by a number of processes in some of these countries that introduce separate elements of freedom of thought and democracy, which manifested themselves, for example, in independence aspirations towards Moscow. In this context, he wrote, among other issues, about the attitude toward the “independence” of Yugoslavia: “It is interesting that while constantly criticizing the Yugoslavs for ‘going away,’ Soviet dignitaries enjoyed going to this country on business trips and vacations. The market for consumer goods and services was booming here, the

²³ P. Grieder, *The East German Leadership, 1946–73: Conflict and Crisis*, New York 2000, p. 14.

²⁴ О. Богомолов, *Влияние Советского Союза на страны Центральной и Восточной Европы (до и в ходе „перестройки“)*, „Russian History”, Vol. 29, No. 2/4, p. 218.

shelves were full of quality products, and the attitude towards people from the USSR was friendly. One could dress well and enjoy the warmth and sunshine of the picturesque and well-equipped Adriatic coast”²⁵. In conclusion, Bogomolov affirms that the situation in Yugoslavia and the shy reform ideas and practice in other communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe deprived the socialist model of its exclusivity, and, consequently, the search for another way in those countries gave many experts and some representatives of power in the USSR to think about the need for reforms at home.²⁶

American scholar, Padraic Kenney, drew similar conclusions, identifying the inefficiency of the centrally planned economy as one of the primary reasons for the collapse of communism, he explained that it had a “fatal flaw” within it. He indicated that the communist economy, based on political demands (desires), representing the superiority of the communist system over the capitalist system, and based on a “rigorously centralized, inflexible planning system” in fact did not respond to social needs, nor did it follow technological development²⁷. In turn, the growing orientation of Central and Eastern European citizens to the functioning of the Western world increasingly pointed to the reality of the advantage of Western markets. Kenney concluded: “The economies of the socialist countries tried to meet these needs, but they eventually went bankrupt under such a burden, and people simply chose a system by which they could improve their standard of living”²⁸.

It should be emphasized that the economic perspective, in terms of scope and multifacetedness of the subsequent transformation process in Central and Eastern Europe, was unprecedented, because it created a holistic dimension. In the case of other transformation processes (e.g., the reconstruction of Western European countries after World War II or the decolonization processes in

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 220.

²⁶ Note that Gorbachev visited Yugoslavia in March 1988, where he declared in Belgrade that “no one can impose his model on anyone.” The Yugoslav side interpreted this in one way, that Moscow had finally come to terms “with the principle of unconditional respect for the separate, specific paths of socialist development and the different, international position of socialist countries.” It was the lack of this reconciliation that caused the Yugoslav state to be attacked by Moscow for decades. In line with Gorbachev’s policies, Moscow gradually relaxed its control over its satellites in Central and Eastern Europe, which only proved that the entire region was no longer an indispensable element of the Soviet foreign policy. R. Dizdarević, *Od smrti Tita do smrti Jugoslavije. Svjedočenja*, Sarajewo 2000, p. 179.

²⁷ P. Kenney, *Rewolucyjny karnawał. Europa Środkowa 1989*, Wrocław 2005, p. 19.

²⁸ Among the factors indicating the economic failure of the system, Kenney cited: the speed of the “surrender” of the communist leaders (except in the Balkans) in an ideological sense to the process of so-called “nomenclature” of the economy (Poland, Hungary) and mass emigration for economic reasons. *Ibidem*. p. 20.

Third World countries or the economic successes of Japan and the “little tigers” in the Far East), the temporal and spatial scope was incomparable. They took place over a longer period of time and did not take place simultaneously in as many areas of social life as the systemic transformation in Central and Eastern Europe (including Russia, of course). As a consequence, the scope of changes in this area simultaneously encompassed in the same very short period of time, radical transformations of the political system, economic reforms, and related changes in social structures and cultural patterns²⁹.

Significantly, political transformations in most European post-communist countries began in conditions of deep recession or economic crisis comparable to the Great Depression of 1929–1933, which manifested itself in a decline in national income and mass unemployment. The whole set of factors, such as technological backwardness, outdated structure of production and trade, together with very limited possibilities of carrying out structural reforms based on own resources, caused that the countries of Central and Eastern Europe entering the transformation process were defined as peripheries or semi-peripheries of the global economic system³⁰. In this situation, the countries of the region were forced to implement modernisation strategies based on internalisation, which made them significantly dependent on external actors, and consequently (especially in Russia) led later to a radical policy of retreat³¹. However, the transition from a command economy to a market economy was in many ways more difficult than similar reforms in countries that had not undergone related processes. First of all, with regard to the destruction of private property and market institutions, in countries departing from communism, where the state sector was predominant in the economy and its structure was based on the domination of large, unprofitable enterprises, in the initial period of change the difficulty of introducing market reforms was enormous³².

²⁹ Por. C. Offe, *Kapitalizm jako projekt demokratyczny? Teoria demokracji w obliczu potrójnego przejścia w Europie Środkowowschodniej*, „Studia socjologiczne” 1992, nr 3–4 (126–127), p. 15–32.

³⁰ A.S. Janos, *Continuity and Change in Eastern Europe: Strategies of Post-Communist Politics*, „East European Politics Societies” 1993, vol. 3, nr 1, s. 1–31; I.T. Berend, *Od bloku sowieckiego do Unii Europejskiej. Transformacja ekonomiczna i społeczna Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej od 1973 roku*, Kraków 2011, s. 23; M. Bąk, *Europa Środkowa i Wschodnia wobec wyzwania transformacyjnego*, Gdańsk 2006, p. 74.

³¹ K. Jasiecki, *Wpływ instytucjonalizacji powiązań międzynarodowych na procesy transformacji ustrojowej w Europie Środkowej i Wschodniej*, „Studia Europejskie” 1997, nr 1, p. 62.

³² L. Balcerowicz, *Understanding post-communist transitions*, [in:] *Transformations of Post-Communist States*, ed. W. Kostecki, K. Żukrowska, B.J. Góralczyk, London 2000, p. 225–242.

Summing up the discussion of the reasons for the weakness and destructiveness of communism as a system, which manifested itself (with varying degrees of intensity) in the countries of the so-called 'communist bloc', the following factors should be mentioned as the evidence of this systemic failure: the ideological bankruptcy of the utopian communist vision and the structural inefficiency of the economic system based on the assumptions of communist ideology. All other phenomena weakening that system resulted from these two processes that are significant from the perspective of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, which were strongly echoed in the USSR. These include: the progressing crisis of political power manifesting itself in the decline of its legitimacy; the political opposition was organizing itself, supported by society; social resistance was growing, visible in the determination and aspiration for systemic changes; national consciousness was reviving; the process of verifying the system of values consistent with the state's own interest was progressing.

In the background of international events

In many respects, the genesis of the post-communist systemic transformation was determined to a very large extent (perhaps decisively) by international events: the efforts of the West to weaken and consequently transform the USSR, the policies of the Republican administration in the USA and the transformation of global East-West relations. The presentation of these factors, which accelerated the process of the collapse of the communist system, should be done in a chronological and factographic manner, as each successive one was a result of the previous one and contributed to the next one.

Among the first of such events was the convening of the CSCE (Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe). Negotiations within the Conference spanned the years 1972–1975 and concerned three very important issues: security, economic cooperation, humanitarian cooperation and human rights. It should be noted that the CSCE agreements, signed on August 1, 1975, initiated an entirely new type of international cooperation in Europe. The Western democracies, through the involvement of the socialist countries, whose leaders primarily wanted to pursue their own (mainly economic) interests, forced them to make compromises regarding human rights and freedoms. The effects of the signed agreements began an arduous and long-lasting process that began to germinate and consequently contributed to the process of "implanting" democratic ideas in this part of Europe. One could say that the West used the CSCE, through various concessions, for the recognition of numerous democratic

standards by the socialist countries³³. This was frequently used in the future by the political opposition of the Eastern Bloc countries, which motivated further activities with the agreements signed by the communist authorities within the framework of the CSCE³⁴.

Central to the process of change in the Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) countries described above was the turn in American policy seen in the late 1970s and consolidated in the following decade. U.S. President Ronald Reagan's new policy was a challenge to Moscow on both identity and action levels. First, in an ideological and axiological context, he portrayed the USSR as an „Evil Empire” and thus denied it the moral right to be an equal partner in international relations. Second, in a strategic sense, he intensified foreign policy efforts in favor of the doctrine of rollback, abandoning the doctrine of containment³⁵. Challenging the USSR's sphere of influence beyond its borders, the United States undertook a series of efforts to reduce it. This was to lead to economic and military exhaustion and, in the long run, to the final defeat of the enemy³⁶.

Assuming the impossibility of coexistence with a system based on the ideology of evil, the new direction of American strategy focused on conducting activities leading to changes in the communist bloc, attacking its basic, and, at the same time, weakest economic and political points. It acted in multiple layers: 1) a series of actions were taken to intensify operations in Central and Eastern

³³ In the opinion of Russian historians Mikhail Heller (Russian: Михаил Геллер) and Alexander Nekricz (Russian: Александр Некрич), who compare the provisions of the CSCE to the Peace of Westphalia, which ended the Thirty Years' War in Europe (1648) between Catholics and Protestants, according to which the principle *cuius regio, eius religio* (whose rule, his religion) was adopted – the religion of the ruler determined the religion of his subjects, the Helsinki conference recognized a similar rule, but in a unilateral way. The West undertook to respect the Soviet „religion”, while the USSR refused to accept any obligations. See: M. Heller, A. Nekricz, *Utopia u władzy. Historia Związku Sowieckiego: od potęgi do upadku*, Poznań 2016, p. 513.

³⁴ Por. J. Stańczyk, *Przeobrażenia międzynarodowego układu sił w Europie na przełomie lat osiemdziesiątych i dziewięćdziesiątych: analiza uwarunkowań i mechanizmów w kontekście bezpieczeństwa międzynarodowego*, Warszawa 1999, s. 95; A. Jach, *Akt końcowy KBWE i jego wpływ na instytucjonalizację ruchu praw człowieka w krajach Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej w perspektywie porównawczej 1975–1991 (wybrane aspekty)*, „Nowa Polityka Wschodnia” 2017, vol. 13, nr 2, p. 157–175.

³⁵ See. H.A. Jamsheer, *Doktryny administracji USA w systemie bezpieczeństwa państwa okresu „zimnej wojny”: wybrane zagadnienia*, „Zeszyty Historyczne” 2013, t. 12, s. 615–637; Z. Mazur, *Containment – amerykańska polityka powstrzymywania*, „Przegląd Zachodni” 1992, nr 2, p. 39–67.

³⁶ W. Paruch, K. Trembicka, *Wspólnota czy rozbieżność doświadczeń. O historycznych zewnętrznych uwarunkowaniach przebudowy w Europie Środkowo-Wschodniej po 1989 r.*, [in:] *Europa Środkowo-Wschodnia. Region, państwa i społeczeństwa w czasie transformacji*, red. J.A. Rybczyńskiej, Lublin 2000, p. 29.

European countries to support the opposition, 2) financial and military support was given to the resistance movement in Afghanistan and a series of actions were taken to destabilize the Soviet part of Central Asia, 3) a high-tech arms race was reinigorated to ruin the Soviet economy, 4) cooperation with Saudi Arabia was established in order to lower the price of oil on world markets, which in turn was to lead to a drastic reduction in the inflow of hard currency to the USSR, 5) measures were initiated to severely restrict the Soviet Union's access to the latest technology and credit, 6) democratization efforts were intensified through information advocacy – rallying the Voice of America, Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty³⁷. Such a broad US policy externalized the greatest weaknesses of the communist system and forced changes. In a dimension relevant to the subject under study, it should be recognized that the U.S. policy became a contribution to making Soviet policy makers aware of their limited options and took on a dimension of real change after 1985.

Subsequent to 1968, the relations between the countries of Central and Eastern Europe and the USSR were formed on the basis of the Brezhnev Doctrine (also known as the “limited sovereignty” doctrine). This doctrine provided for the Soviet Union's right to intervene in any country of the bloc that sought secession³⁸. Gorbachev presented a different approach to the relations with the bloc countries, justifying it both on economic and political grounds. At a Politburo meeting on July 3, 1986, he had stated: “We have all realized that relations with the socialist countries have entered a different stage. As it was – it cannot go on. The methods that were used against Czechoslovakia [in 1968] and Hungary

³⁷ S.P. Huntington, *Trzecia fala demokratyzacji*, Warszawa 1995, s. 100–102; P. Schweizer, *Victory czyli zwycięstwo. Tajna historia świata lat osiemdziesiątych. CIA i „Solidarność”*, Warszawa 1994, p. 16–17.

³⁸ This doctrine was developed to justify the Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia. It was published in September 1968 in the newspaper “Pravda” in an article by the editor of the propaganda department Sergey Kovalev (Russian: Сергей Ковалёв) entitled „Sovereignty and International Obligations of Socialist States”. „Sovereignty and international obligations of socialist countries (Russian: „Суверенитет и интернациональные обязанности социалистических стран”). Anyway, authorship in this case was a pure formality. The memo formulated the official course of the Soviet leadership: „The sovereignty of individual socialist countries cannot be set against the interests of world socialism and the world revolutionary movement.” The main theses of the adopted concept were presented by the General Secretary of the Central Committee of the CPSU, Leonid Brezhnev (Russian: Леонид Брежнев), during his speech at the Fifth Congress of the Polish United Workers' Party on 12 November 1968. In Warsaw, the Soviet leader said that „defending the cause of socialism is a common problem of all socialist countries”, which are entitled to provide „military assistance to the brotherly country in order to reduce the threat to the socialist system”. He mentioned the existence of general laws of socialist construction, deviation from which „may lead to deviation from socialism as such”. See: Л.И. Брежнев, *Ленинским курсом*, Москва 1970, Т. 11, p. 329.

[in 1956] are unacceptable. [...] We cannot imitate the relics of the Comintern [...] “administrative methods of directing” friends. We [...] do not need it – such “management”. It means taking them on our backs. Above all – the economy”³⁹.

Such otherness of the USSR’s policy in relation to the countries of the communist bloc necessitated placing it in the broader context of Gorbachev’s foreign policy. The main elements of Gorbachev’s plan were his successive disarmament proposals, his efforts to withdraw Soviet troops from Afghanistan, his image offensive in the West, and his efforts to strengthen ties between the Comecon countries and the European Economic Community (the predecessor of the current Union)⁴⁰. In turn, all these elements were linked by a basic theme: the dire state of the Soviet economy. Rescuing it from total collapse required, on the one hand, relief from huge military expenditures and, on the other hand, huge investments and new technologies, which could only be provided by the West.

The policy of self-determination of the Central and Eastern European states announced by Gorbachev appears to be completely contrary to Brezhnev’s “limited sovereignty”⁴¹. However, Gorbachev did not stake in these solutions the genuine independence of the satellite states, did not consider solutions other than their further socialist path, and probably hoped for a milder and more evolutionary course of events⁴². The USSR’s rejection of the policy of ideological messianism and its upholding of the defence of the interests of its allies in the name of class solidarity in favour of its own state interest led to cardinal changes. The greatest of these was the perception that this was Moscow’s permission for the allies to decide their future⁴³. The collapse of the socialist system subsequently occurred with almost fantastic speed and ease. The “snowball” or “avalanche”

³⁹ *Заседание Политбюро ЦК КПСС 3 июля 1986 года*, <https://www.gorby.ru>, access 12.10.2019.

⁴⁰ See: A. Stępień-Kuczyńska, *Michail Gorbaczow a idea i praktyka pierestrojki*, Łódź 2016, p. 253–345.

⁴¹ Gorbachev’s new policy towards the Central and Eastern European countries was commonly referred to as the Sinatra Doctrine. The term was used by the spokesman of the Soviet Foreign Ministry, Gennady Gerasimov (Russian: Геннадий Герасимов) on 25 October 1989, during the popular US television programme Good Morning America. Referring to a speech delivered two days earlier by Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze (russ. Эдуард Шеварднадзе), in which he announced that the USSR respected the freedom of choice of all states, specifically mentioning the Warsaw Pact states. Gerasimov said: „[...] we now have the Sinatra doctrine. He sang such a song, ‘I Did It My Way’. So let each country decide for itself what path it will take”. „Sinatra Doctrine’ at Work in Warsaw Pact, Soviet Says”, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/>, access 13 X 2019.

⁴² W. Paruch, K. Trembicka, *Wspólnota czy rozbieżność doświadczeń...*, p. 30.

⁴³ D. Petrescu, *Rewolucje 1989 roku. Schemat wyjaśniający*, „Pamięć i Sprawiedliwość. Pismo naukowe poświęcone historii najnowszej” 2011, v. 2, p. 71.

effect, namely, the developments in 1989, had a decisive role in creating a special “state of mind” for both members of the communist ruling elite and ordinary citizens. This process began in Poland – the Round Table and the formation of a government with the participation of the former ruling elite and part of the opposition. It was also modeled in other countries of the bloc, because it in a way stimulated and showed a model for future systemic changes⁴⁴.

Worth mentioning is the fact that this extraordinary ease of disintegration of totalitarian socialism in Central and Eastern Europe would have been impossible if not for the actions of the reformer, Mikhail Gorbachev. Such radical events, in such a short period of time, were not imagined by anyone either in the USSR or in the countries of the bloc. The very content of Gorbachev’s policy – glasnost, perestroika, democratization – was, from the perspective of the USSR, a destabilizing factor for the process of political leadership in the dependent countries. In fact, by withdrawing from forcibly keeping the satellite countries in its sphere of influence, the USSR gave an unprecedented opportunity to the opponents of the ruling regimes in the socialist countries, and it was seized by them immediately. Gorbachev’s new course created preconditions essentially sufficient for the collapse of the socialist world, and, in turn, the changes in the countries of the bloc naturally accelerated all the processes of change and the collapse of the USSR. There was a feedback loop, the consequence of which was the collapse of the communist system in Europe.

Among other factors of an external nature, which influenced the process of political transformation in the USSR through changes in Central and Eastern Europe, one should mention the election of the Metropolitan Archbishop of Krakow, Cardinal Karol Wojtyła, as the Pope on October 16, 1978. The validity of this event should be considered by pointing out several of its characteristics: the role of the Catholic Church in opposition to the communist authorities; the authority of John Paul II; the timeliness and accuracy (from the perspective of the reality of the time) of the teachings, which contained social and political content and strongly influenced the attitudes of Polish society in particular; the open confrontation of Marxist ideology with Catholic social teaching as a way of interpreting phenomena in the modern world⁴⁵. Both the Pope’s and the Holy

⁴⁴ S.P. Huntington, *Trzecia fala...*, p. 107.

⁴⁵ See: G. Węgiel, *Ostateczna rewolucja. Kościół sprzeciwu a upadek komunizmu*, Poznań 1995; M. Kempisty, *Znaczenie pielgrzymek Jana Pawła II dla Polski i Polaków*, [in:] *Spółczesność – Państwo – Kościół (1945 – 2000), Materiały ogólnopolskiej konferencji naukowej*, Szczecin, 15–16 VI 2000 r., ed. A. Kowalecki, A. Kubaj, Szczecin 2000; P. Buhler, *Polska droga do wolności 1939–1995*, Warszawa 1999; H. Stehle, *Tajna dyplomacja Watykanu. Papiestwo wobec komunizmu*, Warszawa 1993.

See's actions were a well-thought-out policy aimed at weakening the position of atheism in socialist countries, directed first of all at the country of its origin (Poland) and following the general trend of Western policy towards the USSR and the bloc of communist countries.

Conclusions and closing remarks

Concluding the reflections on the external factors that significantly accelerated, gave dynamism to and often initiated the process of the system's decomposition, it is worth emphasizing two aspects. First, all the factors mentioned above – the ideological weakness of the system; the dysfunctionality based on divergences resulting from the historical experience of Central and Eastern European countries; the inefficiency of socialist economies that weakened the potential of the USSR; a number of events in the international space setting the tone and character of future transformational changes, etc. – had not only to exist, but also to be followed by the process of decomposition of the system. – The result was an unquestionably new and challenging situation in which the new political system was created. The result was undoubtedly a fresh, unique, and in many ways contradictory process, which (paradoxically) did not always lead to the goals set at the beginning of the road, and often, on the contrary, was their absolute negation.

Secondly, despite its closure, the communist system nevertheless operated in an international environment, and individual countries differed in their degree of isolation. Thus, external events created an influential factor in either the policies of the ruling elites or the attitudes of citizens in the USSR and other communist states, but to different degrees in individual countries. The policy of withdrawal from active support of the bloc countries initiated by Mikhail Gorbachev, which in essence was supposed to allow the USSR to concentrate on its own problems and ills, "hit it with a ricochet" and gave birth to popular revolutions "which swept away the communist governments". The change of power in favor of the opposition in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, which in its essence was an expression of hostility to communism, both at the level of nations and elites, actually gave Gorbachev no choice – he had to accept the sequence of accomplished facts. In turn, all these events fundamentally accelerated the transformation processes in the USSR itself and, most importantly, further polarized political and ideological attitudes at the social and elite levels.

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Summary: The article outlines the external conditions for systemic change in the USSR: the ideological weakness of the system; the dysfunctionality based on divergences resulting from the historical experience of Central and Eastern European countries; the inefficiency of socialist economies that weakened the potential of the USSR; a number of events in the international space setting the tone and character of future transformational changes. These factors had to not only exist, but also create a certain configuration of events, where each piece of the puzzle had its causes and consequences. As a result of this process, there were the subsequent transformational changes that led to the emergence of the Russian Federation as the heir to the USSR with all its implications.

Keywords: USSR, system transformation, external causes

Demontaż komunizmu. Zewnętrzne przesłanki zmian systemowych w ZSRR.

Streszczenie: W artykule zostały przedstawione przesłanki o charakterze zewnętrznym zmian systemowych w ZSRR: ideologiczna ułomność systemu; dysfunkcyjność oparta na rozbieżnościach, wynikających z doświadczeń historycznych państw Europy Środkowej i Wschodniej; nieefektywność gospodarek socjalistycznych, osłabiająca potencjał ZSRR; szereg wydarzeń w przestrzeni międzynarodowej nadających ton i charakter przyszłych zmian transformacyjnych. Czynniki te musiały nie tylko zaistnieć, ale i stworzyć pewną konfigurację zdarzeń, gdzie każdy element tej układanki miał swoje przyczyny i konsekwencje. W rezultacie tego procesu doszło do zmian transformacyjnych, które doprowadziły do powstania Federacji Rosyjskiej jako spadkobiercy ZSRR ze wszystkimi tego konsekwencjami.

Słowa kluczowe: ZSRR, zmiany systemowe, przyczyny zewnętrzne