

Poland 2001: The Tiger Stumbles

Poland 2001: Poland's reputation as post-Communism's tiger economy has been dented of late. This report covers the parliamentary election held on 23rd September, 2001 and, at the same time, examines some of the issues that continue to plague the country's transition to a market economy and functioning democracy

Poland 2001: Background to the 23rd September election

Twelve years after the peaceful collapse of Communism Poland is still stuck in the stage of transition to a market economy and democracy. Expectations of a rapid convergence with the West and an early entry into the European Union have been repeatedly dashed since 1989. In the four general elections since 1989, political power has migrated backward and forward across the political spectrum as the voters grapple with the choice of finding a political elite capable of solving their economic and social problems.

On 24th September, 2001, Poland's general election to both parliament and the senate saw a shift of power away from the right-wing, Solidarity Alliance government (AWS) elected in 1997, back to the former Communist, Democratic Left Alliance (SLD). It was anticipated that the SLD could gain an overall majority in the Polish parliament (Sejm) but this failed to materialize. Instead, new parties gained support while older formations – including the Solidarity bloc- failed to surmount the 5% threshold for entry into parliament. The turnout was low – 45%.

In the pre-electoral period BHHRG visited Krakow, Wrocław and Warsaw to try to discover why politics now has such a bad name in a country that ten years ago was heralded as the best candidate in the region to transform into a vibrant democracy and which has since been regularly praised for its tough, pro-market economic policies. The Group's representatives talked to politicians and political activists many of whom were campaigning in the streets; this also presented the opportunity to hear what members of the public felt about their policies. They also visited the steel works at Nowa Huta and met union representatives, talked to businessmen about the economic problems facing entrepreneurs and to farmers' representatives.

On 23rd September itself BHHRG representatives monitored the poll itself in the north-eastern port of Gdynia and the surrounding region.

Introduction

Poland has long captured the imagination of people in the West. It has had a long history of resistance to tyranny and foreign occupation from the doomed revolts against Russian rule in 1831 and 1863 to the Warsaw uprising against the Nazi occupiers in 1944. The long, post-war period when workers rose periodically against the Communist regime in 1956, 1970, 1976 and 1980 especially, to the time of martial law in 1981 when the Solidarity movement was suppressed, Poles have been viewed as a courageous and romantic people. Large diasporas in Western Europe and the US have helped to cultivate this reputation – often helped by a dose of snobbery as many exiles are from grand Polish families like the Potockis, Lubomirskis and Zamoyskis who have played significant roles in European history over the past 400 years and whose ancestors now mingle with native aristocrats and members of the intelligentsia all over the West. Many émigré Poles used to boast that no one was ever a Communist in Poland, meaning that the formal withdrawal of the Party from control of public life in 1989 was a mere technicality after which people effortlessly embraced democracy and market reforms. Whatever people believed in 1989, the resilience of the former Communists since then suggests that at best this view was naively patriotic and at worst it was a form of disinformation. Today all the key offices in the Polish state are held by men who were high-ranking or up-and-coming servants of the Communist martial law regime after 1981. Their acceptability to a majority of those Poles who vote and to Western governments and opinion-formers is one of the most startling of the post-Communist realities.

Communism in Poland didn't collapse violently. A round table of intellectuals, party members and representatives of Solidarity met early in 1989 to effect the transition until elections were held in June that year. Since then, Poland has been ruled by governments of both the right and the left – the SLD was last in power from 1993-7. Yet the alternation in office of right and left has had little discernible effect on the iron grip of a single general line in policy. In particular, the economic policies pursued by both right and left have been virtually indistinguishable and marked by the strict monetarism formulated by Harvard economist, Jeffrey Sachs and implemented - with little room for manoeuvre - by Leszek Balcerowicz, governor of the Central Bank and former

leader of the Freedom Union party (UW). While these policies have been consistently praised by Western governments for bringing inflation down to single figures they have become increasingly unpopular with ordinary Poles who have seen unemployment climb to 21/2m. However, unofficially, that figure is more likely to be 5m. A complicated system of 'signing on' means that many of the unemployed don't bother to register with the authorities. On top of this, ordinary Polish entrepreneurs are trapped by high interest rates (around 17%) and other taxes, including income tax at c.40%. In this climate it is near impossible for them to pay their workers let alone invest in future growth. Cynics point out that it is strange how the US is able to lower interest rates to combat recession whereas countries like Argentina (and Poland) are constrained by the international financial institutions from doing anything similar to kick-start their economies.

Meanwhile, much of Polish industry is on the block. Economists, like Balcerowicz and foreign investors are urging that key telecommunications and banking sectors be sold a.s.a.p. Buyers are also being sought for seemingly hard cases like steel and coal. The government recently announced (no doubt, to assuage public disquiet at the 'fire-sale' of Polish businesses to foreigners) that future bank sales will only be made to Poles. However, it is unlikely that many of them will be involved in the auction for these businesses or for the land that the EU has urged Poland to sell to foreigners before the country can be admitted to the Union. Large tracts of agricultural land, particularly in the north of the country, have already been sold to Dutch and German buyers with local Poles acting as 'straw men' to circumvent the present ban on such sales. Official Poland looks to Europe to find economic salvation not to the efforts of its own people. It also cultivates markets in the West not, as previously, in neighbouring countries like Russia, Belarus and Ukraine.

It also turned away from the East when it became a member of NATO (in 1999). But the geopolitical aspects of this new security architecture are less meaningful to ordinary people than the economic costs of membership. Like other new and prospective NATO members Poland is obliged to increase its defence expenditure and buy defence equipment from Western manufacturers. President Kwasniewski has announced the purchase of 60 multi-combat aircraft at a cost up to 3.5 billion dollars. In August, former Defence Minister, Bronislaw Komorowski signed a contract with Spain's CASA military aircraft manufacturer, for the purchase of eight C-295 transporter planes for \$211 million.

The failure to have any kind of serious 'closure' with its Communist past (a lustration law only came into existence in 1997) has left many Poles disenchanted as they strongly suspect that former members of the party have profited both financially and politically from their privileged position. There have been several large financial scandals since 1990 – again, involving those in the higher reaches of the Party and the security services. The FOZZ scandal involving massive fraudulent dealings in Polish debt and the BIG bank affair are the most egregious to date. The large amounts of money involved have soured people's perception of the political elite and contributed to the low participation in elections and faith in politicians across the board.

Poland Today

A very successful propaganda campaign has been waged over the past 10 years to convince outsiders that Poland is a kind of 'tiger economy' which has a standard of living approaching the West. No doubt, this impression has been deliberately fostered to lure foreign investors to the country but also to mollify those concerned about its suitability for EU and NATO membership. Maybe, the chickens are coming home to roost as newspapers that once heaped plaudits on Poland now have to accept that its finances are in chaos: the budget deficit will reach 11% of GDP next year, which could cause the country's finances to implode. Attempts to show that things are not as bad as they seem and that exports have risen over the past 12 months hardly bears examination: 'exports' in this context often refers to fees for services, like the transit of natural gas from Russia via Poland to the West. With the Euro-zone economies slowing fast, Poland's "flight into exports" will also become much less tenable and in 2002 the Polish economy is likely to be caught between the scissors of domestic cutbacks and Euro-zone recession.

Confrontation with the reality that large tracks of Poland are an economic and agricultural wasteland comes as a shock to observers whose picture of the country has been derived from the Western press. The area around the industrial town of Katowice - a huge conurbation - is blighted by empty factories and bleak housing. Field after field lie untended, infested with weeds. There isn't an animal in sight – not a horse nor a hen. A BHHRG representative who visited Poland in 1980 and 1981, at the height of the Communist crack-down on Solidarity, remembers a flourishing land with families bringing in the harvest. No doubt, it was all very unsatisfactory from a macro-economic point of view but it did mean that in a crisis (there was little food in the shops at this time) the country could feed itself through the powerful networks that existed between family, friends and the church.

Now, Poland depends more and more on cheap, imported goods. Even the smallest town boasts several giant, Western-owned hypermarkets like Tesco and Géant. As with other Western investors these stores operate tax free in Poland and, as their merchandise will be part of the surplus produced in the EU, they will also be subsidized by Brussels to off-load goods on Poland. Former food manufacturers now get by through leasing their buildings for the storage of (imported) goods from Europe whose businessmen are delighted with the new markets while Polish farmers and manufacturers are forced out of business.

On top of this, after 12 years of 'reform' next to nothing has been done to improve the country's infrastructure. There are a handful of motorways - according to *The Economist*, 186 miles in the whole country. Most traffic has to contend with single lane, crumbling highways; a 40 km. journey can take 2 hours to complete. It seems strange that Poland could have been permitted to enter NATO with this level of infrastructure – stranger still that the Alliance has not compelled Poland to put road building at the top of its agenda rather than the purchase of (expensive) military hardware.

As the reforms have bitten harder, large swathes of the population have seen their wages lose value while health and social security reorganization has cut into the former state - sponsored social safety net. Nurses, doctors anaesthetists, and teachers have periodically gone on strike and the authorities have resorted to violence against them on more than one occasion. In 1999, *The Guardian* reported that "police forces brutally attacked workers of the Lucznik factory in Radomsk who were engaged in a peaceful demonstration. The workers were demanding the immediate payment of unpaid wages and protesting against the economic policy of the government which was ruining their enterprise. Many of the factory workers were injured as well as a journalist reporting on the demonstration".

Andrzej Lepper

Farmers have also staged industrial action to demand a fair price for their produce in the face of cheap imports from the EU. They, too, have faced brutal police action to put down their protests. The main farmers' leader Andrzej Lepper heads a movement, Samoobrona (Self-Defence), which not only enjoys a serious level of support among farmers but also among growing numbers of the general public. The more mainstream Polish Peasants Party is perceived as being weak and too close to the structures of power to be interested in protecting the agricultural sector.

Lepper is ridiculed in the mainstream media and attacked for everything from opportunism to membership of the former Communist Party. It is ironic that he is something of a hero to the animal rights lobby, especially in the United States where he won the Albert Schweitzer Prize for his sympathetic methods of pig rearing. This was particularly galling as US agribusiness, Smithfield Foods Inc., Virginia, is keen to establish its type of "heavy hog" intensive rearing of pigs in Poland.

But despite the negative propaganda in his native Poland, Lepper's popularity has continued to increase based, in part, on his opposition to the conditions demanded by the EU for Poland's entry. The election results have shown that concerted attempts to marginalize him have failed – Samoobrona got 10% of the vote, over 1% more than the mainstream Peasants Party in the September election. If only to provide a safety-valve and deflect popular unrest, Andrzej Lepper himself was appointed a deputy chairman of the Sejm by the prime minister in October 2000. The signs that the party might be breaking into mainstream politics were already there in the summer. In August 2001 Samoobrona came second to the SLD in a primary poll conducted in southern Poland. This result was dismissed by Lepper's critics due to Samoobrona's alleged 'treating' of voters. In a straw poll organized by the Election Research Center (OBW) in Bystrzyca Klodzka in south western Poland on 12 August, the opposition Democratic Left Alliance was backed by 33.44 percent of voters, the radical farmers' trade union Self-Defence by 15.96 percent and the Polish Peasant Party by 11.25 percent. Turnout was 21 percent.

According to *Radio Free Europe* "The mock elections showed unexpected support for Andrzej Lepper's Self-Defence which, according to surveys by different polling agencies, is below the 5 percent support threshold required to win parliamentary representation. OBW head Marcin Palade on 14th August called off a similar poll planned in Klodzko (south western Poland) for 25 and 26 August, saying his decision was caused by the events that took place during the mock elections in Bystrzyca Klodzka. According to rumours reported in the Polish media, members of two election committees bought votes in Bystrzyca Klodzka by offering them free alcohol and providing them with rides to the polling stations." In fact, after Samoobrona's surprising showing in this mock poll, primaries in Poland were suspended. However, no one spoken to by BHHRG in the pre-election period thought that Lepper's party had a chance of entering parliament and all opinion polls either ignored Samoobrona or gave them c.5% of the vote.

BHHRG's Polish representative who monitored the media in the pre-election period said that *all* media coverage of the farmers' leader was negative - treating Lepper either as a buffoon and/or a rabble-rouser. In fact, it is instructive to look back at the press's treatment of Lepper since he appeared on the political scene in Poland. On 30th May 1999 Sławomir Majman wrote in the English-language *Warsaw Voice* "Poles have seen eggs and firecrackers being chucked at politicians with impunity, presidents insulted and cries of "to the gas chambers" thrown at successive ministers. The sight of certain politicians trying to win favour from a man who keeps on breaking the law and preaching hatred and racism is a hopelessly sad spectacle. ... Why do government members receive a man who calls them "stinkers"? ...Is there any limit beyond which Polish politicians will finally remember the feeling of shame?" And in the *Warsaw Business Journal*, May 1999 commentator Marek Matraszek wrote "Defeating Lepper will not only be a political victory for the government, argue its supporters; it will be a reaffirmation of fundamental principles around which all political forces in the country should rally. Those who do not will - finally - have revealed their true colours." It isn't only the Polish media that attack Lepper. In a recent survey of Poland *The Economist's* correspondent didn't miss the opportunity to label Lepper a "coarse populist".

While remarks about "gas chambers" are denied by Lepper and his supporters, one has to wonder about the moral compass of journalists in Poland who denigrate those who insult politicians and hold demonstrations while accepting at face value the bona fides of former Communists turned capitalists like Polish president, Aleksandr Kwasniewski, who came to prominence under the martial law regime. Aleksandr Olechowski, co-leader of the Civic Platform was called "a quintessential post-Communist who has admitted passing on information to the old Communist secret police" by Peter Finn in the *International Herald Tribune* (3rd July 2001), and former Polish Politburo member and today's prime minister, Leszek Miller,. None of them are never treated as figures of fun or the objects of scorn. On 12th November, 2001 the new deputy justice minister and deputy prosecutor-general, Andrzej Kaucz was forced to apologize to the Solidarity movement for his former involvement in the trials of opposition activists after complaints from some of his victims. Leszek Miller refused to replace him. However, on 14th November he handed in his resignation.

The official response to Lepper is similar to that directed at the former president and Solidarity leader, Lech Wałęsa, who was dispatched without much sorrow after losing the presidency to Kwasniewski in 1995. Wałęsa was attacked for his vulgarity, his inability to speak proper Polish, his unsavoury entourage as well as his one-time cooperation with the security apparatus. Some of this is no doubt true – Wałęsa fulfilled a role at a particular time i.e. convincing the world that a small-time electrician from a shipyard in northern Europe could take on the mighty Communist apparatus - while real power moved into the hands of the dissidents and reformed Communists.

The intriguing thing about Poland in 2001 is that, despite the industrial unrest on the part of the nurses and farmers, vast numbers of its disaffected population are so supine. In the Communist past, strikes and demonstrations would break out if the price of a loaf of bread rose by a few zlotys. Now, with low pay, threatened lay-offs and no promise of any improvement in the near future, there is no mass unrest. As the election approached 11 miners at the Baildon SA Steelworks in Katowice went on hunger strike. On 29th August they were visited by prime minister Jerzy Buzek. The men remained on a 38-day hunger strike in protest against layoffs as the company which declared bankruptcy in May and laid off two-thirds of its 1,000-strong workforce. The company's debt amounted to 500 million zlotys (\$118 million). According to *Radio Free Europe*, Buzek "promised the workers that he would help find a strategic investor for the plant". However, none of the strikes or industrial disputes like the one mentioned here have sparked the kind of confrontations with the authorities that became such a regular feature of Polish life in 1956, 1976 and 1980-1.

Why are the losers in post-Communist Poland so apathetic?

One of the reasons is that the Polish trade unions have been effectively smashed as a pressure group and many recently formed businesses, like the ubiquitous supermarkets refuse to allow unions in the workplace. Leszek Kochan, vice-president of NSZZ Solidarnosc (the real as opposed to one of the many splinter groups) and Solidarity Trade Union representative at Nowa Huta explained that a union could now be formed by 12 people. The number of unions listed on the visitors' board outside the factory offices bore testimony to this fact. Needless to say corruption plays its part in this proliferation as a 'union' has tax and other financial advantages.

Another reason for the passivity of the workers is that they now lack leaders interested in using their muscle to embarrass the state. Members of the former dissident group KOR, (which was the intellectual engine behind Solidarity) like newspaper publisher, Adam Michnik, are now either in or around the interstices of power; no one has appeared to replace them. The media which, according to many observers is controlled by the SLD or in foreign hands, also does not give any prominence to the plight of the low paid and unemployed. However, businessmen in Wroclaw told BHHRG in August 2001 that rebellion could break out if there were no

improvements in people's circumstances. Allowing Samoobrona into parliament maybe one way in which the government hopes to control the situation by co-opting the first political force which emerged from outside the Solidarity/dissident – Communist axis. (Of course many of the prominent dissidents had been Communist apparatchiks in the past or were scions of nomenklatura families. Relatively few were ordinary workers like Walesa.)

Politics and the economy

Poland has dozens of political parties most of them small and electorally insignificant. A threshold of 5% for entry into parliament – 8% for coalitions - was imposed after a profusion of parties made the country near-ungovernable in the early nineties. Now only a handful really matter: the Alliance of the Democratic Left (SLD) with its sister parties like the Labour Union (UP), the Polish Peasants Party (PSL), whatever remains of the AWS (defections are underway), the Freedom Union (UW). There are two new formations, Law and Justice formed in June by AWS defectors and a new grouping, the Citizens Platform (PO) which, as yet, refuses to call itself a party. There are also what the mainstream media calls 'populist' movements, the main one being Self Defence) Samoobrona and the League of Polish Families, a conservative, Catholic grouping that gained entry into parliament with nearly 8% of the vote. BHHRG felt that many priests and the radio station Radio Marija had advised churchgoers to vote for the League which is also regarded as being Euro-sceptic as well as socially conservative.

BHHRG talked to representatives of several of these parties in Krakow and Warsaw in the pre-election period. The Citizens Platform (PO) was formed earlier this year from defectors from AWS and the Freedom Union. It is interesting to note that many former Communist countries have small, ultra-free market, pro-Western parties usually controlled by former dissident intellectuals. Despite the fact that these parties have no serious appeal beyond a small, urban elite they always seem, at the very least, to dictate the political agenda or (as in Poland) to be in government. In 2000 one commentator noted the "almost disproportionate power" wielded by the UW in Poland which had only 59 out of 460 seats in the previous parliament. It is as if the politicians from mainstream parties cannot be relied on to tow the party line (despite the absence of 'The Party') and need permanent oversight from their more sophisticated colleagues.

This role has been played to date by the Freedom Union whose leading members include Balcerowicz and Polish Foreign Minister, Borislav Geremek. The Freedom Union (UW) gained 12% of the poll in the 1997 elections. However, it withdrew from the governing coalition at the end of last year leaving the AWS to rule as a minority government. The ultra-free market, pro-Western orientation of the AW has made it very unpopular and in the past few months there have been defections from the party. Like AWS, pollsters predicted, correctly, that it wouldn't reach the 5% level for entering parliament in September 2001.

However, the need for a small, 'party of power' never goes away. It constantly re-invents itself like a political amoeba splitting into something identical. The Citizen's Platform (PO) appeared, conveniently, last January to take its place. Led by three senior politicians, two of whom had defected from other parties – Donald Tusk, (UW) deputy speaker of the Senate, Andrzej Olechowski and Maciej Płazynski (AWS) chairman of the *Sejm*, it is rumoured to be a vehicle for Olechowski to make a future bid for the presidency (he came second in that poll last year). Another new party of the right, Justice and Truth, was formed by former Justice minister, Lech Kazynski in the summer, 2001.

BHHRG talked to representatives of the Platform in Krakow and Warsaw, places where the level of economic decline is less severe and where they hoped to pick up votes. It was impossible to find anything in the movement's programme that differs from the Freedom Union – commentators admitted that its programme was a "duplication" of the UW's. The suspicion must arise that a change of name and cadres is intended to persuade voters it is something 'new'. For such parties, everything in Poland comes down to EU membership – even the sensitive issue of Polish farms (a seemingly intractable problem) can be sorted out because Brussels has, according to Maciej Bialecki, a candidate for the party in Warsaw, "Poland's best interests at heart".

Of course, the main lure of EU membership is a share of the enlargement funds which Bialeski and Marek Strzala in Krakow say helped make countries like Ireland and Portugal prosper. When it is pointed out to them that Poland has a population of 38m. whereas Ireland with 31/2m. and Portugal, 10m. were rather less expensive to underwrite, they answer that there is "no alternative" to speedy accession to the EU – something also agreed to by Leszek Kochar in Nowa Huta. Not one politician spoken to mentioned what Poland's contribution to the EU might be – the traffic is one way.

Since BHHRG was in Poland the main political parties, including the Platform, have agreed to pursue a united course on accession to the EU and Leszek Miller, the new prime minister has also indicated that his party will drop the strictures of the sale of land to foreigners. On 26th October, the leader of its delegation in Brussels indicated that Poland would cease pressing for a transition period on the sale of industrial land to foreigners. EU accession – as BHHRG has pointed out on numerous occasions – is not just a side issue for those post-Communist countries presently in the waiting room. The conditions that are being imposed on Poland and elsewhere are far reaching and, surely, demand some kind of open and reasoned debate. The recent ‘pact’ ensures that such a debate will not be taking place any time soon.

The election campaign

Corruption scandals

Low turn-outs have been the order of the day at Polish elections. And, it is worth remembering that even though all the pundits predicted a particularly low participation level in the 2001 poll, the lowest turn-out of all was recorded in 1991 (43.2%) As if to galvanize the Polish electorate a whole new slew of corruption allegations began to appear in the summer, 2001. On 30th August, RFE reported that “The opposition coalition cited “financial irregularities at the Polish State Railways that led to a loss of 1 billion zlotys” (\$235 million), “many million frauds” at the KGHM Polska Miedz SA copper combine, and the “financing of typically commercial undertakings such as that of TV Plus by state-owned companies.” In July, the Telecommunications Minister, Tomasz Szyszko was fired after corruption charges relating to third-generation mobile phone licences were laid against officials at the ministry. Also, in July Prime Minister, Jerzy Buzek, dismissed Lech Kaczynski, the Justice Minister. Kaczynski had alleged that Buzek had “failed to put an end to activities that question principles of law and order”. In July too, Grzegorz Wierczerzak ex-head of the state-controlled life insurance company was arrested on charges of corruption.

Kaczynski and Szyszko went on to establish Law and Justice which took part in the September election entering parliament with 9.5% of the poll. Their reappearance on the political scene was just one reason why some commentators suggested that many of the corruption allegations had suddenly emerged in time for the poll – to finally discredit AWS and clear the way for new, squeaky clean parties. Law and Justice campaigned on a strong anti-corruption ticket so, Kaczynski and co. managed to save their political skins by reinventing themselves as upholders of the legal order.

Less publicized, but more instructive bearing in mind the rush by the Polish elites to join the EU, was the revelation late in the summer that German funds destined to compensate Polish slave labour in World War 11 had been effectively stolen by the authorities. In a bizarrely miscalculated currency speculation those responsible for the distribution of hundreds of millions of DM to surviving elderly slave labourers under the Nazi Occupation held back the distribution of the funds in the expectation that the DM would rise against the zloty and a neat profit accrue. Instead the DM like other Euro-member currencies fell and the former slaves were left almost 1 billion zloty out of pocket! No-one was punished for this speculation with the Nazi victims’ money. President Kwasniewski apparently asked Chancellor Schroeder to make up the loss at his summit with the German leader in July, but understandably the German government felt it was not their obligation to underwrite currency speculation.

While some members of the public may have been motivated to vote the Solidarity government out the power on the basis of these allegations – many of which were accorded detailed media coverage by investigative magazines like *Wprost* – others merely shrugged their shoulders and declared a ‘plague on all their houses’. It is also possible that low confidence in the political elite makes it easier to manipulate election results in the direction of the favoured ‘party (parties) of power’.

The media

This report has outlined some of the problems facing political parties in engaging Polish voters: no one is interested in voting for ‘more pain, no gain’ which is, after all, what all the main parties are promising. On 28th August, 2001 AFP reported the results of a survey that monitored the public’s attitude towards democracy in Poland. It stated that “ Two decades after launching a democratic revolution that led to the

collapse of communism in Europe, a majority of Poles are indifferent to democracy. Thirty-five percent of Poles believe it makes no difference whether the government is democratic or not, 68 percent say they are disappointed with democracy in Poland. With the spoils of a decade of reform unevenly distributed, nearly one in five Poles unemployed and the economy stagnating, polls regularly show an overwhelming majority of people are unhappy with the situation in the country. Just one month before parliamentary elections 62 percent of Poles believe a strong leader would do more for Poland than the country's political parties, and 72 percent believe conflicts between political parties are the main cause of Poland's troubles".

Other factors contribute to the sense of alienation from the political process. For example, the PR voting system leads to a total failure of communication between voter and party candidate. The problem here is compounded with the regular arrival on the political scene of new parties/movements. On election day itself, BHHRG encountered many voters who had no idea about the identity of most (sometimes all) of the names on local party lists. The problem is not lost on many politicians and academics in Poland. Jerzy Przystawa an academic from Wroclaw heads a movement dedicated to replacing PR with a majoritarian system of voting and Marek Strzala of the Citizens Platform in Krakow told BHHRG in August 2001 that first past the post was preferable to the present voting arrangements in Poland.

On the surface, observers arriving from Mars could have been fooled into thinking that a massive operation was in place to engage politicians with the electorate in the run up to the September poll. In Warsaw, Gdansk and Gdynia – places visited by BHHRG during the election weekend - election posters were plastered everywhere; on the road between Gdansk and Gdynia there must have been thousands of such posters. However, on election day itself we learned that the faces staring down on passers by were unknown to many and remote from the daily concerns of the average voter. Unlike the UK and US, for example, where people put election placards and posters both in and outside their own homes, all the visible election material in Poland was in public places. It came as something of a surprise to read in a post-election report that representatives of Samoobrona couldn't possibly enter any governing coalition because its lawmakers were "unknown to the Polish public" as BHHRG found that most potential 'lawmakers' were unknown to the average Pole.

Canvassing also appeared to be non-existent. The impression created is of a process remote from ordinary people; a jockeying for power between various elites. However, the international community tends to regard the plethora of election materials as a sign of democratic vibrancy rather than the hollow – and expensive- activity that it is.

This general contempt is also illustrated by the hatred expressed by the mainstream media in Poland for any politician who tries to appeal directly to ordinary voters. They are automatically labelled 'populist' or 'Poujadist'. As previously pointed out, Andrzej Lepper was constantly vilified by the press and television, branded at best as a 'populist' at worst as a buffoon. Many members of the Polish elite find it more shaming to have a pig farmer who has brushed with the law stand for parliament than a bunch of former Communists.

Polish TV aired all party broadcasts together at the same time each evening – an hour's worth of airtime with no break between each item. While the CEC was following the letter of the law in allowing the requisite amount of time for each party/movement the format was intensely off-putting. Broadcasters everywhere know that party political broadcasts are a 'turn-off' and the model adopted in Poland where people are already disenchanted by politics was unlikely to engage them any further.

Election Day

The election authorities in Poland were bewildered by BHHRG's request to observe the parliamentary election on 23rd September. Officials repeated the mantra that Poland had long been recognized as an exemplary democracy – the conduct of its elections have obviously been off the weather-chart of international busy bodying organizations for some time. When it came to the point, polling station officials were generally helpful and knew the details of the election law. However, it was obvious that cooperation went so far and no further: for example, BHHRG would usually interview commission chairmen/members in the polling room and have access to the voting registers. In Poland most interviews were conducted outside the voting room and observers were not able to view the registers. This made it impossible to check the figures given for turnout – perhaps the most contentious issue of the whole election process.

Polling stations were well-appointed and manned by mixed election commissions. There were two ballot papers, the first for the Sejm was a book containing the lists of candidates standing in the region in question

– a voter could only chose one name here. On the other hand, a voter was allowed to vote for 3 people in the Senate part of the election. It was all rather cumbersome. BHHRG encountered few voters in the places visited and little enthusiasm for the process. The only (stark) exception was the small town of Bytow where the local castle attracts some tourism, in particular hunting parties from the West, and where the economic conditions are markedly better than in other places visited by BHHRG.

BHHRG spent some time in the town of Lębork visiting polling stations and talking to ordinary people – some of who had voted, others not. Lębork somehow crystallized the problems of modern Poland and while it would not necessarily be a likely place for Andrzej Lepper to attract support neither was there any evident enthusiasm for the SLD. People constantly referred to the corruption and crookedness they perceived at the highest levels of Polish politics and how they had given up on change. There is chronic unemployment in the town since its industries, including wood processing and a power-plant, were closed down as recently as last year. The worst hit are the young people with no hope of future work at home and many of whom now work (legally or illegally) in the West. One elderly woman was typical: she was looking after her grandchildren while their parents worked in Germany.

Everyone spoken to confirmed that there had been next to no pre-election campaigning in the town and that none of the candidates on offer came from the locality – or meant anything to any of them. BHHRG pointed to a silver-haired gentleman whose poster was ubiquitous in the Gdynia region but people in Lębork had no idea who he was. Apart from Bytow, this seemed to be the same everywhere. When candidate-recognition did occur further questioning revealed that the person in question was standing in the Senate rather than the parliamentary elections. While many Poles criticize the Senate and look to its abolition it does, at least, contain politicians who have some relationship with their voters. This is undoubtedly due to less complicated voting system in the Senate part of the poll.

Results

On 26th September the state election commission released the results of the election to the 460 seat Sejm:

Democratic Left Alliance and Labour Union (SLD-UP)	41.04%
Civic Platform (PO)	12.68%
Samoobrona	10.2%
Law and Justice (PIS)	9.5%
Peasant Party (PSL)	8.98%
League of Polish Families (LRP)	7.87%

2 seats are reserved for the German minority.

75 seats out of 100 in the Senate were won by the SLD-UP.

AWS and the Freedom Union failed to gain entry to parliament.

Turn-out: 46.29%

Post-election events

As indicated earlier in this report Polish voting procedures are complicated and polling station officials indicated to BHHRG that the count could take at least 5 hours. Therefore, it came as something as a surprise to see Leszek Miller giving a long and detailed victory speech on Polish TV one hour after the polls closed at 8.00 pm. The whole process gave the impression of a 'stitch up' as though the results had been arranged well in advance.

However not everything went according to plan. The SLD did not gain an overall majority as many had predicted and the respectable showing of parties like Samoobrona and the League of Polish Families who both surmounted the 5% threshold for entry into parliament led many to immediately predict troubled times ahead, particularly for negotiations with the EU. President Kwasniewski was so shocked by the respectable showing of anti-European parties in the election that he actually apologized on behalf of Poland to the bureaucrats in Brussels.

It came as even more of a shock to learn that Andrzej Lepper was to become a deputy speaker of the Sejm. However, this may have been a tactic to marginalize his (possible) disruptive tactics in the future. So far, Lepper has continued to criticize policies he views as harmful to Polish interests. On the 5th November, RFE

reported that he had called on "small shop owners "to wage a war" against mostly foreign-owned hypermarkets and supermarkets. Lepper was speaking to a rally of some 2,000 people protesting plans to build a new hypermarket in Kalisz, central Poland. The protesters claimed that when built, the new hypermarket will cost 800 jobs and eliminate some 140 shops from the region's market. Lepper spoke against tax privileges for foreign capital and pledged to propose legislation that will make foreign investors leave Poland".

However, it is not beyond the bounds of possibility that Lepper and his fellow members of Samoobrona are 'tamed'. BHHRG has witnessed many occasions when 'rogue' politicians find it more expedient to follow the larger political agenda – for example, Slovakia's former prime minister, Vladimir Meciar seems to have abandoned his long-time objection to that country's entry into NATO. And, there are many Poles who while sympathizing with many of Lepper's ideas, maintain a visceral distrust towards someone they consider, at best, to be somewhat mercurial.

The SLD

The SLD's victory on 23rd September was a foregone conclusion, although on the ground it was difficult to see where the enthusiasm for the party's return to power was coming from. Presumably, the former Communist state bureaucracy and nomenklatura, including many of the apparatchik-turned-businessmen so familiar in the post-Soviet world supported the party. BHHRG detected no support for the SLD – or any party for that matter. No doubt, people who might have voted for Samoobrona would refrain from advertising the fact in front of Westerners.

The election results followed a pattern that has emerged across Eastern/Central Europe in the past two years in which time voters in both Romania and Bulgaria have ejected ultra-free market, right-wing governments. Bulgaria elected a new 'softer' centrist government which promised benefits for all while cracking down on corruption. The new regime in Sofia came to power largely on the back of Bulgaria's ex-King Simeon who was enthusiastically received on his return from exile in Spain. Romania re-elected its former Communists to power. The standard of living had fallen so badly for most Romanians that they had put aside their disappointment with that party's previous rule from 1991-6.

The same scenario has unfolded in Poland. While many analysts and ordinary Poles blame the SLD government which ruled Poland from 1993-7 for much of the hardships they are suffering including mass unemployment and rape of the countryside - it was the SLD they say, that closed down the state farms, sold of their assets down to the last cow and prevented farmers from obtaining further credits. And, even though the government was 'left-wing' it continued with Balcerowicz's low inflation, privatisation programme in the best Thatcherite fashion. It was also public knowledge that the party had used its connections as former Communists with the police and security apparatus to enrich themselves from dubious financial ventures like the debt rescheduling scam in 1991.

It seems, to quote one Polish businessman interviewed by BHHRG in Wroclaw, that people are still apt to pull down the family photograph album and re-live the days when life was cheap and everyone had free holidays provided by their trade union. Such nostalgia is the only way to explain how voters can again put their trust in Mr. Miller and co. What is going to be different in a post September 23rd Poland apart from a vague commitment from the SLD during the election campaign that it would consider restoring (part) of the functions of the Central Bank into government hands? Policies which will continue to impoverish ordinary people are being demanded by Poland's creditors as the parlous state of the country's finances comes under the spotlight. And, the knock-on effects of the 11th September tragedy in terms of foreign investor confidence is bound to make its mark.