

Did the Polish communist regime collapse in 1989 because of a crisis of legitimacy?

The collapse of the communist regime in Poland in 1989 was part of a wider disintegration which saw the end of all communist regimes in the Soviet Union and across Eastern Europe. Leslie Holmes and Jan Pakulski are key sources in this analysis. Holmes asserts that regimes such as the Polish one collapsed because of a crisis of legitimacy¹; whilst Jan Pakulski argues that the communist regimes never enjoyed mass legitimacy, and that it was the demise of conditional tolerance which brought about their demise². To answer the question, several factors need to be addressed. Firstly, I will define legitimacy, and will explain the way in which it's been applied to communist states by the likes of Holmes. Within this, the importance of separating types of legitimacy – most importantly mass popular and elite self-legitimacy – will be explained. Secondly, I will demonstrate that mass popular legitimacy probably did not exist in Poland, and will also show the difficulty of proving that it exists in any context. In doing so, I will highlight the flaw in Holmes' legitimacy crisis argument. Thirdly, I will argue that elite self-legitimacy did at one point exist in Poland. Finally, drawing upon the assertion that mass popular legitimacy never existed, I will argue that the collapse of the regime can be attributed not to a crisis of mass legitimacy, but to the collapse of conditional tolerance and the accompanying erosion of elite self-legitimacy.

Legitimacy is defined by Pakulski – with reference to Weber – in terms of both voluntary compliance and normative support, as well as subjects and objects. The voluntary compliance and normative support is offered by the subjects, including the elites, the political administrative apparatus, strategic social categories – such as the intelligentsia and industrial workers – and the masses, to the objects. There are three principal objects; the national state, the regime (including socio-political institutions), and the rulers³. Crucially, as Saxonburg highlights, a regime needs the support of its populace for it to be legitimate⁴. Therefore, it's also important to distinguish between mass popular legitimacy, and elite self-legitimacy; the former already having been mentioned, and the latter being a regime' belief

¹ L. Holmes, *Post Communism: An Introduction*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997

² J. Pakulski, *East European Revolutions and 'Legitimacy Crisis'*. In: J. Frenzel (ed), *From a One Party State to Democracy: Transition in Eastern Europe*, Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1993

³ J. Pakulski, *East European Revolutions and 'Legitimacy Crisis'*, p 70

⁴ S. Saxonberg, *The Fall*, Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 2001, p 144

in its own right to rule. It is also important to distinguish between normative support and conditional compliance, which will be dealt with later.

Holmes' legitimation crisis theory – the flaws of which will be explained later – can be applied to the Polish case. Holmes identifies seven internal – traditional, new traditional, charismatic, official nationalist, teleological, eudaemonic, and legal-rational – and three external modes of legitimacy; formal recognition, informal external support, and external role model. In each mode, regimes recognise that rule by legitimation is more effective than unstable rule by coercion, and thus upon the failure of a certain mode, a shift will be made to another in an attempt to achieve the desired mass legitimacy. Following this, he outlines four successive scenarios; legitimation shifts, abnormal regime change, reversion to coercion, and finally the identity crisis and the collapse of elite self-legitimacy. An example of the first and second scenarios was the Polish politburo's decision to replace Ochab with Gomulka in 1956, who promised reform in an attempt to achieve previously non-existent popular legitimacy⁵. Gomulka was subsequently replaced in 1970 by Gierek after unrest caused by the violent suppression of strikes⁶. In the third scenario, with the second having failed once again, the Polish regime, now under Jaruzelski, launched a crackdown on strikes and the Solidarity movement and imposed martial law⁷; this was an appreciation that its attempts to legitimate itself had not succeeded, and thus it was reverting to coercion. In the final scenario, with Gorbachev's liberalising reforms leading to the loss of the external role model, and the repeated failure of economic reform, an elite identity crisis occurred. As will be explained, this contributed to the collapse of communism in Poland. Indeed, it is instructive that whilst the regime was prepared to forcefully suppress uprisings in 1981, they were not prepared to in 1989, and gave up power peacefully.

Secondly, it's questionable that mass popular legitimacy existed in any Eastern Europe regime, but especially in Poland. Pakulski casts doubt on Holmes' claim that a regime's change of leader can boost popular legitimacy – and also shows the difficulty of proving mass normative support in any context – by noting the difficulty of distinguishing between

⁵ L. Holmes, *Post Communism*, p 53

⁶ T. Junes, 'The demise of communism in Poland: a staged evolution or failed revolution?'. In: K. McDermott, M Stibbe ed, *The 1989 Revolutions in Central and Eastern Europe*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013, p 96

⁷ Ibid

‘mass normative approval’, conditional support, and the temporary popularity of leaders and policies⁸. Holmes fails to mention that Gomulka’s popularity was based on his promises of reforms which would have brought a deviation from the system, and therefore his popularity – which evaporated after he abandoned his reformist line – represented a desired deviation from communist rule, rather than popular regime endorsement^{9 10}. In addition, the emergence of the Solidarity movement – which in 1981 had ten million members¹¹ – and accompanying strikes, demonstrated the absence of mass normative support. Holmes’s model also fails by assuming the prior existence of legitimacy in each tested mode – which is extremely difficult to prove in any case – and thus puts down the failure of regimes such as Poland to a loss of legitimacy in each mode. Pakulski also shows that despite a strongly held commitment in Poland to ‘socialist values, and the expression of these values by the regime, it was in times of social dissent that they were most strongly articulated by the people, against the regime¹². ‘Justice, democracy, freedom, and dignity’ were seen to have been neglected and corrupted by the regime, and so they were taken up by nearly all the Polish workforce in the commitment to Solidarity¹³. Tellingly, there was the conspicuous absence of any form of legitimacy test until the semi-free elections of 1989, the results of which demonstrated the absence of normative support¹⁴. Furthermore, the mass support of the Catholic Church, which Markus argues acted as an ‘institutional competitor’ to the state¹⁵, indicated the absence of mass normative regime support. Therefore, it’s been shown that mass popular legitimacy in Poland probably did not exist, and that it’s difficult to prove its existence in any context. As a consequence, the collapse of communism in Poland cannot be explained in terms of a crisis of mass legitimacy, distinguished from elite self-legitimacy.

Thirdly, it can be demonstrated that despite the lack of mass normative support, the Polish regime – defined here as party functionaries, legislators, and state and governmental

⁸J. Pakulski, *East European Revolutions and ‘Legitimacy Crisis’*, p 74

⁹ Ibid, p 75

¹⁰ L. Holmes, *Post Communism*, p 54

¹¹ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Solidarity>

¹² J. Pakulski, ‘Ideology and Political Domination: A Critical Re-appraisal’, *International Journal of Comparative Sociology*, Vol 28 No 3, 1987, p 132

¹³ Ibid, p 133

¹⁴ J. Pakulski, *East European Revolutions and ‘Legitimacy Crisis’*, p 75

¹⁵ M. Markus, *Overt and Covert Modes of Legitimation in East European Societies*. In: T.H. Rigby & F. Feher, *Political Legitimation in Communist States*, London: The Macmillan Press Ltd, 1982, p 91

administrators, coercive organs, and strategic social categories¹⁶ – did believe in its own right to rule at least until the granting of semi-free elections in 1989. This belief was based on a ‘political formula’, defined as a commitment to mono-party rule, the centralised economic system, and the Soviet right to intervene. The use of coercion was one indicator of this belief, a good example being the suppression of strikes in 1981, accompanied by the imposition of martial law and the banning of Solidarity¹⁷. Prior to this, what Bloom describes as ‘deadly force’ had been used to suppress strikes in 1970¹⁸. The similarly violent repression of the students’ revolt in 1968 was further evidence of this belief¹⁹. Indeed, the commitment to teleological ends was shared amongst those within the structures of the regime who wished to reform the system. Wacilewski and Wnuk-Lipinski note that the reforms of Gomulka, though he later backtracked on them, included limiting coercive powers, and halting agricultural collectivisation. They argue that ‘the identity of the Communist system remained intact’ after these reforms²⁰. In fact, Gomulka’s later backtrack on his reforms is perhaps further indication of the regime’s belief in its own right to rule, in the sense that its willingness to compromise on the teleological grounds of Marxism-Leninism was limited, and it was liable to revert to the form originally imposed on Poland. Overall, the Polish regime’s belief in its right to rule, even in the face of widespread societal, religious and intellectual opposition, has been demonstrated²¹. The deterioration of this belief, which contributed to the regime’s ultimate collapse, would come later.

Finally, it can be argued that the collapse of conditional tolerance, and the erosion of elite self-legitimacy, resulted in the collapse of Polish communism. Pakulski argues, contrary to a theory of normative mass compliance such as that already outlined, that people tolerated their leaders on the basis that the benefits, such as subsidised food and housing, were considerable, and the costs of opposition – coercion and sanctions – too high. This promise

¹⁶ J. Wacilewski, E. Wnuk-Lipinski, ‘Poland: Winding Road from the Communist to the Post-Solidarity Elite’, *Theory and Society*, Vol 24 Issue 5, 1995, p 679

¹⁷ Junes, ‘The demise of communism in Poland: a staged evolution or failed revolution?’, p 97

¹⁸ J. Bloom, *Seeing Through the Eyes of the Polish Revolution*, Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2013, p 9

¹⁹ J. Wacilewski, E. Wnuk-Lipinski, ‘Poland: Winding Road from the Communist to the Post-Solidarity Elite’, p 672

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ Junes, ‘The demise of communism in Poland: a staged evolution or failed revolution?’, p 97

of benefits in return for compliance was bound up in an implicit social contract²². Over time, as was the case in Poland and other communist states, the tolerance was eroded by the shifting of the cost-benefit balance, which was caused by several factors. The most important of these was the economic hardship caused by the failings of a planned economy and indebtedness to Western countries, to the extent that 'hard currency debt by 1986 was five times the annual level of hard currency exports, and had increased by 35% since 1982; yet the shops were still empty'²³. Consequently, in the absence of the promised benefits, people were less liable to remain quiescent. The costs of non-compliance were also diminished, as the coercive organs of the state failed at key points – such as during the widespread strikes of 1988 – to resort to repressive measures, despite having done so in the past. Additionally, the imprisonment of two members of the Polish secret police for the 1984 murder of Father Jerzy Popieluszko²⁴, meant that members of the secret police had less certainty that they would be backed up by the State, and thus they became less likely to resort to repression. The elites' faith in themselves was further weakened by the failure of the aforementioned 'political formula' which had underpinned their belief in their right to rule: the principle of mono-party power, the superiority of the centralised economic system, and the Soviet right to intervene²⁵.

Mono-party rule started to show the limits that would culminate in the 1989 elections when, in 1987, the Polish Politburo leaked a document which contained the crucial line that 'the party does not want the right to monopoly in governing'²⁶. Indeed, Schopflin writes that at some stage in 1988, Gorbachev discussed with Jaruzelski the possibility of legalising Solidarity to prevent a shift to ungovernability²⁷; making the task of maintaining the status quo even harder for the regime. This demonstrated the regime's failing confidence in its own right to rule, brought on by the recognition that strikes, such as those that were to come a year later, were becoming increasingly frequent and difficult to control. The second

²² M Dimitrov, 'Vertical Accountability in Communist Regimes: The Role of Citizen Complaints in Bulgaria and China'. In: M. Dimitrov, Ed, *Why Communism Did Not Collapse: Understanding Authoritarian Regime Resilience in Asia and Europe*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013, p 278

²³ Nigel Swain, 'Negotiated Revolution in Poland and Hungary'. In: K. McDermott, M Stibbe ed, *Revolution and Resistance in Eastern Europe: Challenges to Communist Rule*, Oxford: Berg, 2006, p 140

²⁴ K. McDermott, M Stibbe, 'The collapse of communism in Eastern Europe: origins, processes, outcomes. In: K. McDermott, M Stibbe ed, *The 1989 Revolutions in Central and Eastern Europe*, p 9

²⁵ Pakulski, *East European Revolutions and 'Legitimacy Crisis'*, p 76

²⁶ *Ibid*, p 369

²⁷ G. Schopflin, *Politics in Eastern Europe 1945-1992*, London: Wiley, 1993 p.234

eroded with the continual failure of the planned economy, and the third with Gorbachev's effective renunciation of the Brezhnev doctrine; such as his conversation with the then Polish Prime Minister Rakowski, in which he ruled out a Soviet intervention by insisting that the Government respect the 1989 election results²⁸. This meant that the Polish regime could not rely on the support of the Soviet Union in the event of the need to suppress a popular uprising. Overall, it has been shown that the collapse of conditional tolerance and the erosion of elite self-legitimacy, instead of a crisis of mass legitimacy, explains many of the reasons for regime collapse.

In conclusion, it has been demonstrated that the Polish communist regime did not collapse because of a crisis of mass legitimacy, but because of the collapse of conditional tolerance and the accompanying deterioration of elite self-legitimacy, which ultimately resulted in the regime declining to resort to previous methods of coercion, and giving up power peacefully. Indeed, this erosion of conditional tolerance – brought about by the continual economic and societal failure via the communist model – punctured the elites' belief in the so-called 'political formula' underpinning communist rule, and equally convinced them that their ability to suppress unrest was becoming weaker. Holmes' model, whilst providing a coherent framework to apply to the Polish case, fails in that it assumes that mass legitimacy did at one point exist, and that its failure brought regime collapse. On the contrary, it is difficult to prove the existence of mass legitimacy in any case, but particularly difficult in Poland; the evidence strongly suggests that the regime did not enjoy mass normative support. Though beyond the scope available here, it is important to note the specificity of the Polish case in terms of the strength of the Catholic Church as an institutional and ideational competitor – unique to Poland – and the level of societal opposition, which, in contrast to other East European states, remained consistently high throughout the communist rule.

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²⁸ G Stokes, *The Walls Come Tumbling Down: The Collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1993, p 130

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