


Poland in the (Neo)liberal System of International Relations

Polska w (neo)liberalnym systemie stosunków międzynarodowych

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Abstract: The aim of this work is to present the role of Poland in the system of international relations governed by the principles of (neo)liberalism, mainly in the context of crisis phenomena taking place in the West. The hypothesis of this article is as follows: the downturn in Western liberal structures may lead to the modification of the functions and legal and economic system of the Polish state, undermining the principles and rules of liberal democracy applicable there. The turbulence to which the liberal structures of the West are subject may be problematic for those states that have identified their long-term interests with the phenomena of globalization/liberalization and do not have their own strategies of action and more autonomous tools to achieve national goals. Should the western zone weaken, there may be a possibility not only of a geopolitical transformation but also of significant political and economic transformations in countries like Poland. The state may fall into the zone of influence of the new centre in a geographical or functional sense, which will impose a different civilization model, based on alternative economic principles and institutional solutions, violating the rights of individuals, minorities, and private businesses. The compulsion to adapt to the new rules that will emerge as a consequence of lowering the role of liberal institutions, the foundations of which are not yet known, may lead to a reduction in the level of protection of citizens and capital in the region. The work includes comments on the functioning of the (neo)liberal system of international relations, the socio-political transformation of Central and Eastern European countries, and Polish internal/foreign policy in the face of the crisis in the Western zone.

Keywords: Poland, neoliberalism, international relations

Streszczenie: W artykule podjęto próbę przedstawienia roli Polski w systemie stosunków międzynarodowych regulowanym zasadami (neo)liberalizmu, głównie w kontekście zjawisk kryzysowych rozgrywających się na Zachodzie. Postawiono następującą hipotezę: dekonstrukcja zachodnich struktur liberalnych może prowadzić do modyfikacji funkcji oraz ustroju prawno-gospodarczego polskiego państwa, podważając obowiązujące tam zasady i reguły demokracji liberalnej. Turbulencje, którym podlegają liberalne struktury Zachodu, mogą być bowiem problematyczne dla tych państw utożsamiających swoje długofalowe interesy ze zjawiskami globalizacji/liberalizacji i nieposiadających własnych strategii działania oraz bardziej autonomicznych narzędzi realizacji celów narodowych. W razie osłabienia strefy zachodniej może zaistnieć ewentualność nie tylko transformacji

geopolitycznej, lecz także istotnych przeobrażeń ustrojowych i gospodarczych w takich państwach jak Polska. Może bowiem dojść do ich osunięcia się w strefę oddziaływania nowego centrum w sensie geograficznym lub funkcjonalnym, które narzuci inny model cywilizacyjny, polegający na alternatywnych zasadach gospodarczych oraz rozwiązaniach instytucjonalnych, naruszających prawa jednostek, mniejszości oraz prywatnego biznesu. Przymus przystosowania się do nowych reguł, które wyłonią się w konsekwencji obniżenia roli instytucji liberalnych, a którego zręby nie są jeszcze znane, może prowadzić do obniżenia poziomu ochrony obywateli oraz kapitału w regionie. W pracy znalazły się uwagi na temat funkcjonowania (neo)liberalnego systemu stosunków międzynarodowych, transformacji społeczno-politycznej państw Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej oraz polskiej polityki wewnętrznej/zagranicznej w obliczu kryzysu strefy zachodniej.

Słowa kluczowe: Polska, neoliberalizm, stosunki międzynarodowe

Undoubtedly, Poland may function today as an independent and sovereign subject of international policy as a result of its entry into the orbit of the Western world after 1989. However, the above statement seems to be a paradox, as this system – based on global liberalism – leads to a reevaluation of the role of state actors, quite significantly modifying the very notion of sovereignty. This seems to undergo a process of slow “privatisation,” understood as shifting the responsibility for the public sphere to non-state actors.

The aim of this article is an attempt to reflect on Poland’s role in the system of international relations, regulated mainly by the principles of (neo)liberalism, especially in the context of crisis and decomposition processes taking place within the West.

The hypothesis of this work is based on the statement that the decline of Western liberal structures may lead to the transformation of the functions and the legal and economic system of the Polish state. It may undermine, among others, the principles of liberal democracy in our country.

A tool for the verification of the above hypothesis will be, among others, the theory of political adaptation. This focuses on the dynamics of changes in the environment of world politics and economy and its influence on the functioning of international relations actors at the legal, social, economic, etc. level. In the area of its interest is the activity of various international relations entities, including state and non-state actors, which is considered in the aspect of their external and internal operation. The theory of political adaptation explores the adaptive and creative activities of the above-mentioned bodies, analysing a wide range of changes in the system of global

politics, with particular emphasis on the dynamics, timing, conditions and consequences of these transformations (Pietraś 1990: 123–158).

The work includes comments on the functioning of the (neo)liberal system of international relations, the socio-political transformation of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe (hereafter: CEE), and Polish domestic/foreign policy in the face of the crisis of the Western zone.

1. The functioning of the liberal paradigm of international relations

It is worth starting with a reflection on the essence of the liberal system of international relations, which Poland joined when integrating into Western structures. The hallmark of this concept is the interdependence of politics, economy and society, emphasising the role and importance of, among others, private capital (Kotz 2001: 93–109). In this view, states are not bouncing billiard balls, as scholars of political realism have argued. For states become one of many actors, constituting a kind of transmission belt for the preferences of individuals and social groups. Their policies are co-shaped by a variety of factors, including the activities of non-state actors such as corporations, businesses, media, individuals, etc. In the Western zone, states take the form of decentralised institutional networks geared to interacting with various participants in the internal and external environment.

The premise of the system is to strengthen the role of non-state actors, who originate mainly from the West. The position of nation-states is reinterpreted, taking into account the functioning of both strong supranational actors (e.g., corporations, transnational organisations) and important sub-state players (e.g., individuals, associations, interest groups). Therefore, states share sovereignty not only with other state actors within supranational organisations but also with non-state actors in the free market economy (Bairoch, Kozul-Wright 1998: 37–68). Thus, their power – on the basis of the doctrine of neoliberalism – becomes an object of transformation carried out under the influence of the activity of non-state actors based on private capital. It is worth noting that free play in the free market can be interpreted as a kind of competition conducted mainly by private entrepreneurship, where the role of the state remains only subsidiary (Glyn 1998: 391–409).

The process of deconcentration of power, which is a phenomenon of the Western world, gradually leads to its transfer from the public sphere to

areas that are not subject to direct democratic authorisation. Private capital seems to be guided by particular economic interests, while non-state actors originating from Western countries actively co-shape various dimensions of public policies and the economy. Independent institutions, i.e. central banks, judiciary, media, market regulators, etc., guard the interests of business. The goal of the liberal system seems to be to create a stable framework for non-state actors and at the same time to move away from the agonistic conflict of states that have so far dominated the global system. In this view, the rights of individuals and minorities are strengthened, while the category of national interest is displaced by the preferences of the business, pressure groups, transnational organisations, etc.

It is worth asking whether states in such a system are the main subject of international relations. However, the very category of subjectivity in the liberal scheme is modified. This is because state actors – as open integrative subsystems – are the site of reorganisation of internal relations as a result of the distribution of central power among various decision-making centres (local government, business, courts, media, etc.). In this sense, political subjectivity is realised through the activity of “their” non-state actors, functioning within the framework of the free market economy. It can be concluded that interest groups based on private capital enter into a dialogue with other actors in the international environment, influencing the public sphere of countries gathered in supranational integration groupings (Dunne 2008: 110–121).

In the (neo)liberal paradigm, power is shifted from democratic political institutions to the largest non-state actors, including influential interest groups or multinationals that seem to pursue primarily individual goals. Additionally, economic inequalities can make democratic procedures a kind of façade, hiding political and economic power that is not the result of mere ingenuity, creativity or efficiency, but rather the result of decisions made within non-transparent mechanisms (Dawson, Hanley 2016: 20).

Undoubtedly, the above-mentioned neoliberal order has been quite significantly strained in the past by events such as the 2008 financial crisis, protectionist tendencies in global trade and the rise of China’s political importance, among others. Since then, a shift of emphasis back to the state as the main actor in international politics can be observed, while the essence of the liberal order is located in the sphere of values and principles governing international relations, although the interpretation of the liberal paradigm is heterogeneous and subject to constant reinterpretations (Polus 2016: 37–49).

2. The (neo)liberal transformation of Central and Eastern Europe

Having commented on the foundations of the liberal system, it is worthwhile to look at its influence on the legal, political and economic transformation of the CEE region. At the forefront is the wide opening of the region's economies to non-state actors from Western economic centres. In addition to the important and quite obvious stimulus for innovation and modernisation, these actors brought to the region their own interests, linked to the will to maximise economic profits. Their preferences were reinforced by the political position of the state from which they originated, as well as by the actions of supranational institutions creating conditions for the expansion of international business.

Accession to the Western world required the adoption of systemic solutions in the legal, political and economic spheres adequate to functioning in a (neo)liberal economic environment. The vehicle for these ideas was, among other things, the process of unifying Europe, which became a signpost, for example, for the Polish transformation, involving the formatting of the state so as to adapt it to free-market integration structures. There was a conviction that in order to guarantee individual and minority freedoms, the role of the central government had to be reduced, the ineffectiveness of the real socialist period being an important memento for the proponents of a pro-integration CEE course. The state – the night watchman – was to guard against interference in the sphere reserved by private international business (Keohane 2012: 125–138).

The premise of the region's transformation was to implement neoliberal rules into local legal and economic orders, mainly through participation in structures based on the free movement of people, services, goods and capital (Krastev 2016: 88). In return, these states gained access to development funds and, most importantly from their point of view, were included under the security umbrella of NATO and the EU. The metamorphosis of the CEE states into asymmetric openings to Western markets was becoming essential for obtaining and sustaining Western security guarantees, and the non-alternativeness of this situation encouraged modernisation inspired by free-market theories.

Thus, in line with the will of the societies, the authorities decided to join this system, despite the poor potential of the domestic economies, which resulted in their lack of readiness to play a role in the liberal international system. Guided by, among other things, the concept of dependent

development, they opened up to economic entities of foreign origin, which expressed an interest in investing their assets in many sectors of the local economies. The strong economic presence of large companies, focused on generating and transferring profits to their countries of origin, was intended to provide a bulwark for close relations with the West. The result of links in the spirit of liberal globalism was to be the development and modernisation of local economies and political institutions. The operation of Western capital in the CEE prompted governments to provide security guarantees for their investments in the countries of the region. In exchange for military protection, the CEE area was supposed to provide a legal and administrative infrastructure that allowed Western businesses to operate freely.

The domestic and foreign policies of these states thus focused on adapting to the framework of the international liberal order, which left its mark on their systemic conditions. Among the main demands of the new approach, especially in the economic field, was the idea of a minimum state, based on a tripartite government, a significant role for institutions not subject to direct electoral authorisation, as well as the privatisation of state enterprises and the opening of markets to foreign direct investment (Diamond 1999: 12). As a result of geopolitical settlements related to the victory of the USA over the USSR in the Cold War, the concept of liberal democracy was implemented there, which was supposed to protect the interests of individuals, minorities and private enterprises. This new, non-alternative system empowered primarily non-state actors, who were the backbone of the neoliberal economy, but in the conditions of the Central European transformation, these were mainly foreign economic entities with much greater market power than their local counterparts.

Despite the perceived asymmetry in relations, Poland decided to define its long-term goals, mainly taking into account the recommendations of the Western institutions to which it had acceded. Its political adaptation was essentially based on a rather passive linking of its own interest with the fate of the system as a whole. In the heyday of globalisation processes in the early 1990s, the influence of the central centre spread to other regions, and its standards were appealing to the periphery, which assimilated suggestions directed from outside. The organs of the CEE states were thus shaped to operate more effectively within the network of liberal bodies, which was one of the conditions for their joining the Western zone after 1989. Their absorption of the principles of liberal democracy and a free-market economy, anchored in the rules of relevant international organisations, determined

the adoption of a pro-Western orientation. The fact that the transforming organisms of the post-communist states could not boast of having, for example, strong non-state entities based on private capital that could compete in the globalising markets became a certain challenge.

The will to open up to the Euro-Atlantic world was dictated by the desire to take refuge under the security umbrella of Western countries. Due to the scarcity of their own development strategies, as well as the burden of the previous period, it was decided to recreate those models that had once brought socio-economic benefits to Western Europe and the USA. As a consequence, the legal and economic structures of CEE countries were transformed into hybrids, combining neoliberal schemes with elements of the previous system. As a result of the widespread implementation of Western norms into local legal, political and economic conditions, the responsibility for development and security strategies was gradually transferred to Western world institutions (Wood, Flinders 2014: 151–170). The belief began to dominate that the vital plans of Poland and other states in the zone would be defined and implemented within the framework of NATO and the EU, which would contribute to the integration of their participants and ensure their prosperity and security in a broader institutional arrangement. Although the state structures of the new members were to participate in the negotiation processes and arrangements taking place in the above-mentioned forums, their primary task became the effective implementation of policies designed for the entire organisations. The joint institutions not only managed the economic development of the participants but in the future were also supposed to replace local structures in defining activities related to their sovereign competencies.

Given the above, the future of the Polish state and its citizens was inextricably linked with the neo-liberal system of world politics. From this perspective, the European Union and NATO became the guarantors of economic growth, broadly understood security, and an anchor for the values constituting the foundations of the systems of Western states. Apart from the undeniable benefits, association with these bodies could also lead to asymmetrical dependence on non-state actors, who gained a significant influence on the political and economic reality of CEE. It should be noted that international business – interested in maximising profits – was guided by its own economic calculus, as well as the economic profitability of maintaining its assets in the region.

The integration efforts of these states, therefore, seemed to be exhausted in the accumulation of short-term profits, without showing any significant activity in the area of effective modernisation of their own structures. Indeed, the scale of transformation depended on their internal potential and willingness to make changes. In fact, there was an assumption that the Euro-Atlantic community would strengthen itself based on the principles of (neo)liberalism, so the structures of the Polish state would gradually “dissolve” into supranational organisms, entrusting the task of defining and implementing strategies to Western institutions (Junes 2016). This fusion of national bodies with the supranational sphere was to take place through the transfer of competencies from the national level to highly integrated integrationist regimes, which created a framework that protected civil liberties and the freedom to conduct business from excessive interference by national authorities.

Participation in the Western world was to provide the CEE area with a kind of shield, impregnating the area against the effects of chronic marginalisation in the past (Wallerstein 1974: 49). In this sense, participation in the processes of liberal globalism provided a shield against autocratic tendencies, entrenching the institutions of democracy and the market economy there. The rationalistic model of absorbing Western rules and principles, encased in the requirements of conditionality, was to result in more effective integration of, among others, the Polish state with the Euro-Atlantic world. As a result, the CEE leaders undergoing socialisation were given a rather strong mandate to introduce internal transformations, as the liberal paradigm seemed to be extremely attractive to the societies there (Giroux 2017: 13–20).

One of the most important motives for Poland’s integration into Western structures was the will to use their potential to pursue its own interests, which consisted in pushing back the geopolitical threat coming from the East. The pressure exerted by the eastern centre of political disposition was becoming a significant problem, which the CEE countries were unable to counteract on their own. This situation thus pushed the region towards closer relations with the West, which offered the prospect of modernisation with westernisation under the guidance of Euro-Atlantic institutions. A far-reaching understanding was thus shown for the postulates of deepening the European project according to the prescriptions of Western states, heralding the consolidation of CEE’s dependent development within the framework of centre-periphery relations, in exchange for

guarantees of protection against Russian aggression. In this way, the CEE states became one of the greatest defenders of the liberal international system, which assumed the maintenance of asymmetrical economic relations with the Euro-Atlantic community as the price for peace and security in the region. In view of the instability of the situation in the East, it became an important task for the Polish authorities after 1989 to anchor themselves in Western European structures, the essence of which was unbalanced cooperation within the global free-market economy. The threat from Russia prompted a close alignment of Polish interests with political and economic projects implemented mainly by large international business players.

3. Crisis of liberal structures in the West and Poland's domestic/foreign policy

In an era of turbulence around the (neo)liberal paradigm, EU institutions are experiencing difficulties in supporting the development of their members, and the crisis of this area heralds its inevitable spread – through mechanisms of transnational cooperation – to all participants in the system (Ikenberry 2011: 56–68). According to some experts, neoliberal international policy arenas are associated with risks, as they suffer from specific systemic flaws that may result in cyclical economic downturns (e.g., the euro common currency). Thus, faith in the effectiveness of the convergence process is fading, resulting in a weakening of the willingness to implement models coming to CEE countries from the centre of the system (Duménil, Lévy 2011: 113). The desire for unreflective copying or passive adaptation of the region is also gradually dying out, as is the desire to enjoy the benefits of cooperation while limiting own involvement in the work of joint bodies. According to the researchers, the lowering of the attractiveness of the model presented by the West may mean a retreat to the Europeanisation of the CEE zone, increasingly disillusioned with current political trends in the community (MacLeavy 2019: 627–640).

From this point of view, the prosperity of the “end of history” era, characterised by relative peace and security, was used for a kind of superficial imitation instead of activities aimed at a more independent development, corresponding to the local conditions and interests of CEE. The implementation of neo-liberal solutions, aimed at gaining acceptance from the centre

of the Western zone, was supposed to accelerate the economic development of the periphery. Nevertheless, this approach did not bring the expected results and did not live up to expectations, and following Western models created a sense of disappointment in some places. Economic problems have torn up the image of the Western area, which is presumably no longer worth imitating, so the further consolidation of its institutions in the margins is slowly being abandoned (Pabst 2016: 91).

The disintegration or marginalisation of Western integration bodies may in fact have long-term consequences, especially for the CEE zone, which faces the problem of decomposition of its functions and socio-economic system. It is doubtful whether these countries would be able to recreate the structures that have disappeared as a result of the transfer of competencies to the supranational level. The relevant functions would have to be re-created by national institutions, which so far have been based on a "strategic pause," supported by the domination of liberal thought in world politics.

If the political and economic centre is in crisis, the question of whether it is still worth imitating it becomes marginal. The copy will remain a surrogate of the original, which ceases to be an attractive goal of aspiration. In this way, the phenomenon of idealising the West, which with its shortcomings is no longer such an attractive model of economic, political, and social relations, loses its significance. The pull of the centre is slowly becoming a thing of the past, and values such as openness, pluralism or multiculturalism are seen as an existential threat in the periphery (Whitham 2018: 252-264).

Despite the symptoms of the declining neoliberal global order, CEE countries seem to be stuck in a situation of non-alternativity, relying on the shortcomings of competing visions. Due to the fear of slipping into the sphere of influence of another centre (e.g., Moscow) – along with authoritarian systemic transformations – one of the few available options may be to accept the current political-economic trends in the West, even if their compatibility with CEE interests remains doubtful.

It should be noted that the political mimicry of the periphery is perceived as a kind of anomaly within the above-mentioned system, especially as the potential disintegration trends may deepen due to the modernisation deficiencies of the marginals. Underneath its pro-integration superficiality, the peripheries continue their previous institutional habits, while their defragmented organisational formulae, being a conglomeration of Western rules and national solutions, are characterised by a reduced level of efficiency.

The institutional baggage of the past era made the process of adapting CEE to Western standards more demanding than it was for the states – the creators of the community. These challenges translated into an attitude characterised by the pursuit of a kind of passive political adaptation. A consequence of this was, *inter alia*, the implementation of a significant number of regulations without in-depth analyses, which could lead to the selectivity of the introduced transformations. It can be concluded that the considerable investments made in the course of the adjustments were largely wasted due to resistance to the introduction of “good governance” principles. The internalisation of liberal principles in the CEE area, as well as the supra nationalisation of its local interests in the EU forum, therefore seems problematic.

The phenomenon of the dissemination of liberal principles has turned out to be an ephemeral mechanism whose effects produce a kind of ambivalence on the periphery of the system. The turbulence experienced by the West at the socio-economic level has led to its paradigms being perceived as less appealing, for example, in the new EU member states, which have so far followed European models. In general, the marginalia were content with a façade hiding old habits, generating an illusion of compliance with the rules functioning in the Euro-Atlantic area and thus hampering efforts towards real modernisation (Zarycki 2007: 5).

According to experts, the liberal system now reveals quite noticeable deficiencies, and the Western world no longer resembles the same area to which Poland reported its accession. Thus, there has been a close link between the fate of our country and the zone, which is experiencing a rather complicated and multidimensional crisis that could mean questioning its further functioning (Grosse 2019: 62–103). Analysing the effectiveness of the Polish influence, one would have to point to its moderate character, which gives way to the field of adaptation to the existing reality, which, in case of the intensity of its decomposition, puts into question the effectiveness of such a policy.

Given the above, electorates increasingly affirm the activity of bodies based on national legitimacy, perceiving them as capable of causal action in crisis situations (Öniş 2017: 21). It is also not insignificant that they have the ability to exert democratic influence over these structures. Supranational organisations – which are the anchor for liberal democracy – turn out instead to be bodies suffering from a “democratic deficyt.” The crisis of legitimacy of supranational bodies makes one question the competence of these

institutions to interfere in the internal politics of their participants. This may result in avoiding transferring the power to conduct policy to the supranational level or ignoring the rules of the existing system.

The decline of the liberal paradigm may in fact result from a growing conviction that transferring competencies back to the national level in selected areas of politics and economy is more prudent than their continual communitarisation. Until now, the freedoms of the EU internal market have led to an intensification of cooperation, and the circulation of capital, services or goods has limited the influence of national institutions on the functioning of the free market. At a time of turbulence in the Western world, quite significant layers of disbelief in integration organisations are emerging, which may mean that views are coming to the fore that it is worth seeking national solutions to one's own problems, outside the aforementioned structures, because of the risks they have become synonymous with.

It may be noted that integrationist tendencies are currently slowing down, there is a decline in the number of alignment activities with the various institutions of world politics, and decomposition trends in some international organisations are intensifying. A further escalation of unification tendencies can therefore be seen as a source of future problems, so citizens are beginning to formulate suggestions to halt the strengthening of supranational bodies, resulting in a reconsideration of the legitimacy of their participation to date, or even in a transfer of their plenipotentiary to institutions based on national legitimacy.

Summary

The crisis of the liberal structures of the West may be a test for those states which – on the basis of the theory of passive adaptation to the system – have located their vital objectives in the progress of the supra nationalisation process. Thus, they do not have the tools, resources and vision to function more independently and face the challenges ahead. Although the foundations of the Western world are being gradually eroded, it is unrealistic to postulate Poland's unilateral de-accession from this zone, even if the discussed structures are marginalised or grow into schemes unfavourable to the postulates and intentions of the CEE region.

However, should the current paradigms weaken, there is a serious risk of not only geopolitical changes but also systemic or economic transformations

in countries such as Poland. This may result in their slipping into the sphere of influence of a new centre in the geographical or functional sense, which will impose a different scheme, based on different rules of management and operation of institutions that do not guarantee the rights of individuals, minorities and private business. The structures of marginal territories tend to seek compatibility with the core centre, so these areas are inclined to copy patterns coming from outside. The compulsion to passively adapt to new models, which will occur as a consequence of the breakdown of the liberal paradigm, may lead to a lower level of protection for individuals and private capital in CEE.

The lack of implementation of internally motivated strategic projects – as a repercussion of the crisis of the Western zone – may therefore mean an imperative of passive adaptation to the rules dictated by the new centre of political disposition, which will force the countries of the region to transpose and imitate its own principles and rules. In the margins of the system, where a lack of will to actively co-shape the international environment on the basis of one's own strategic plans prevails, development demands corresponding to local expectations are not taken into account, only a programme of functioning corresponding to transformation schemes offered by external structures.

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