

Letter

Responding to comments in the American media about Polish election

January 10, 2016

I am writing this letter because, in my opinion, it is vital that we, the free citizens of Poland, reassure you that in spite of what the alarmist postcommunist commentators say, democracy is doing well in Poland today. The megamedia in the West, taking cues from some in the Polish press and from persons having ties to the former government (recently ejected from office by democratic vote), continue to criticize the current government and deliver untrue accounts of what has been going on. The “spin” is meant to obfuscate the truth about the last eight years and “poison the well” for those elected with the largest democratic mandate in modern Polish history. **The PiS government is the first government elected with a mandate to govern without coalition partners.** Attacks on this government continue from those who cannot claim objectivity because they are personally, professionally, and financially connected to those who lost the election. No one in Poland denies that a free people are endowed with a right to public protest. This is self-evident in a modern democracy. However, Western press accounts suggest that these protests are massive (they are not) and that they defend vital social rights (they do not, because no social rights are endangered). Those who protest had good salaries and now they do not have these salaries. This is the heart of the matter.

During the last eight years when PO ruled the country, democratic ideals were not always upheld. During the rule of the Civic Platform and its coalition partner the Polish People’s Party (PO-PSL), these standards were frequently and brazenly violated. For the record, here are some examples of what transpired during the coalition years:

1. Independent journalists were repeatedly harassed by security agencies. The staff of the daily *Gazeta Polska Codziennie* (GPC) had their homes searched. In May 2011 at 6:00 a.m., the Internal Security Agency entered the apartment of an Internet user who operated a satirical Website lampooning then-president Bronisław Komorowski.
2. Independent journalists lost their jobs when they pressed for a transparent investigation of the 2010 Smolensk air catastrophe. Tomasz Sakiewicz and Anita Gargas lost their jobs in the public media. Cezary Gmyz was dismissed from the editorial staff of *Rzeczpospolita* for publishing information indicating that traces of explosives were found on the wreck of the plane. This information was later confirmed by prosecutors leading the investigation.
3. In June 2014 agents of the Internal Security Agency raided the headquarters of the magazine *Wprost* after it published transcripts of recorded conversations held by PO politicians in one of Warsaw’s most expensive restaurants. During the raid the agents attempted to confiscate computers and data storage devices belonging to journalists. The so-called “tape scandal” (*afeta taśmowa*) that erupted upon publication of the content of these tapes provided evidence of scandalous and criminal behavior of people at the highest level of the government. These tapes revealed that state-owned companies subsidized those media that presented government propaganda as objective truth. The large-scale mainstream media, sympathetic to the ruling coalition and keeping mum about governmental corruption scandals, were recipients of lucrative advertising contracts from Poland’s largest companies, partly state-owned enterprises with large discretionary budgets. Independent media did not receive these monies, which amounted to government subsidies.
4. In December 2014 two journalists, Tomasz Gzela of the Polish Press Agency and Jan Pawlicki of Telewizja Republika, were arrested. They were covering protests held at the headquarters of the National Electoral Commission after local elections. For a week after the election the Commission would not certify election results, upon which local inhabitants forcibly occupied the premises of the Commission in protest, demanding electoral transparency and oversight. The journalists were arrested even though they possessed press passes and were doing their job. They also had to face a lawsuit. All this was going on against the backdrop of the highest-level PO politicians, such as the then-president Komorowski and mayor of Warsaw Waltz,

making public comments to the effect that it was an act of treason to question electoral processes and the alleged lack of transparency. Likewise, the head of the Constitutional Tribunal Andrzej Rzepliński publicly stated that there were no grounds to question the results of the election. To this day, the results of this local election remain questionable. An example of opacity is the fact that the Peasant Party (PSL) received ten times more votes than expected in the region of Gdynia, where they have had little historical support. This tenfold increase in the number of votes cast for PSL allowed the ruling party (PO) and its coalition member (PSL) to stay in power.

5. During the last eight years the PO government kept journalists and citizens under surveillance as a routine practice. **In 2014, secret services applied for permission to access 2,177,000 telephone bills.** As far as I know, permission was granted. This level of prying into ordinary citizens' lives is unprecedented in Europe. The District Public Prosecutor's Office in Warsaw is currently leading an investigation into the wiretapping of independent journalists under the PO government.

6. In May 2015, after President Bronisław Komorowski was voted out of office, the PO-PSL coalition violated the constitution by appointing five new members of the Constitutional Tribunal *before* the other justices' terms were up. The politicians of the departing coalition wanted to appropriate the Tribunal by limiting the victorious party's (PiS) opportunity to elect judges of their choice. Today, after reforms implemented by the democratically elected Law and Justice Party, the judges elected by the Civic Platform still constitute the majority in the Constitutional Tribunal. They occupy nine of fifteen seats.

These examples indicate that the PO government often acted in an authoritarian and unlawful way. Violations of civil liberties were frequent, but went unreported by pliant media directly or indirectly on the PO government's payroll. The number of corruption scandals that occurred under the auspices of the PO-PSL coalition is staggering. They range from small bribes (one minister received an expensive watch), to patronage, bogus unbid contracts, self-distribution of bonuses and pensions, and

preferential tax treatment for allies and supporters. Nationalization of the pension system, hitherto kept separate from government supervision, was still another major illegal act by the previous government. An example of major corruption is the pyramid scheme known in Poland as "Amber Gold" in which thousands of Poles lost their savings while the politically connected head of the National Bank said nothing despite having been aware of the scheme, as revealed in the so-called "tapes scandal." All of this took place while the government-sponsored media kept mum about institutionalized lawlessness. On October 25, 2015, Poles said enough in a democratic election, with not a single allegation of irregularities. The PO-PSL coalition was finally removed from power.

Democracy in Poland is the healthiest it has been in twenty-five years and certainly as compared to the eight years under the previous government. The reforms begin now and Poles are optimistic despite what is being printed in the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*.

Dorota Heck, University of Wrocław

The Wonder and Woe of Translating

Leonard Kress

Some time ago I decided to do something serious. This was the age Donald Hall's *Poetry and Ambition* ("I see no reason to spend your life writing poems unless your goal is to write great poems," <<https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/text/poetry-and-ambition>>), and his dismissal of much MFA poetry and the ubiquitous, drab, standardized "McPoem." Since I was also translating Polish poetry, I thought I would reach for the stars—and translate the nineteenth-century Polish Romantic epic *Pan Tadeusz* by Adam Mickiewicz. I would not waste my time with more publishable translations of works by Wisława Szymborska or Zbigniew Herbert or Stanisław Barańczak; no, I would go for a work