

**NICOLAE CEAUȘESCU'S 1989 APPEAL TO FELLOW PARTIES
AND ITS IMPACT IN POLAND**

**APELUL DIN 1989 AL LUI NICOLAE CEAUȘESCU ȘI
IMPACTUL SĂU ÎN POLONIA**

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Abstract

The article describes the most extensive and direct initiative taken by Ceaușescu before December 1989, that is, a letter to his fellow communist rulers and their parties from East and Central Europe and its impact on Polish political situation. The appeal was handed to the ambassadors of the communist countries on the night of August 19-20, 1989. Ceaușescu stated that the events in Poland were not only an internal problem, but posed a threat to socialism in the whole world. In Poland, the appeal was used by the communists to intimidate the Solidarity leadership and Church officials, but its effect was limited due to lack of advocates of that initiative in other communist states.

Key words: Nicolae Ceaușescu, Poland, nomenklatura

The year 1989 marked the end of communism in some of the Central and Eastern European countries. Although the Soviet Union collapsed two years later, the “wind of change” blew strong in the satellites of the communist empire. The changes were most radical in Poland, while Romania, along with East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria and Albania, was on the opposite pole. While other “conservative” leaders were rather passive, Nicolae Ceaușescu tried in many ways to prevent the collapse and to influence other countries to defend the communist cause. This article describes the most extensive and direct initiative taken by Ceaușescu before December 1989, that is, a letter to his fellow communist rulers and their parties from East and Central Europe.

The situation in Poland did not change in one year; it was rather a longtime process, started, at least according to a few sociologists and historians, as early as

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in 1984, when the first commercial structures were established¹. In that year, however, nobody even dreamed about political change. New hope emerged when Mikhail Gorbachev came to power in Moscow in 1985. He projected an image of a rather young and open-minded reformist, which contrasted with the previous rulers of the Kremlin. In a short time, he proposed a program of radical changes, known as *perestroika*, so as to prevent the disintegration of communism as a political system and ideology. Gorbachev wanted to implement all his ideas also in the USSR satellites.

In Poland, Gorbachev's ideas were welcomed warmly, at least by the majority of the ruling *nomenklatura*, the then political establishment. Communism as an ideology was finally compromised during martial law; as Poles no longer believed in it in the 1980s. Even the "Leninist roots", used in the Gorbachevist propaganda, were not accepted by the *nomenklatura*. They were not interested in any ideological issues. But the ruling class in Poland wanted to ward off any threat to its rule and, simultaneously, boost its economy. The *perestroika* won them over only because it promised the fulfillment of both their demands. There were no ideological claims from the Polish side, but, on the other hand, the implementation of *perestroika* in Poland lacked its ideological background - the main issues of interest were economy and politics. In these conditions, the ideological influence of the Catholic Church was growing strong. Not only regular citizens, but also Communist Party members and even a number of *nomenklatura* figures participated in the revival of Polish Catholicism, which emerged under the influence of John Paul II. The Polish United Workers' Party (Polska Zjednoczona Partia Robotnicza, PZPR) was losing the ideological battle with its longtime enemy, the Catholic Church.

The thaw in politics in People's Republic of Poland (Polska Rzeczpospolita Ludowa) had its new beginning in July 1986, when an amnesty law was passed by the communist parliament. In September, over two hundred opposition leaders were released from prisons. This did not mean, however, that the authorities wanted any dialog with them - the aim of the amnesty was merely to show that the system was being "liberalized". Yet many Solidarity leaders, Lech Wałęsa among others, were seeking a possibility to reach a compromise with communists and to have influence over some aspects of Poland's internal policy.

In 1986, it was too early for such experiments, although the government tried to pose as open to dialog - in December a "social" consultative body was created by the president of the State Council. It was called a Consultative Council (Rada Konsultacyjna) and comprised over 50 people of established popularity, but not directly linked with the communist elite. There were a few Solidarity activists even in the Consultative Council. The council, as the next months showed, had

¹ The best-known account is that of Polish sociologist Jadwiga Staniszkis, who wrote about the "1984 generation", young party activists establishing their first commercial firms. See Staniszkis, J: *Postkomunizm. Próba opisu*, Gdańsk 2001.

minor influence over the government and almost no social backup. This attempt to win the approval of the society thus failed.

Nevertheless, the Soviets were pleased with Polish reforms, partly because in other Central and Eastern European countries the situation was worse for them - the "conservatism" of the *nomenklatura* was so strong that even limited reforms, like the Polish ones, were almost impossible. Perestroika was fully implemented also in Hungary and in Yugoslavia, though with specific problems in the latter. The ruling elites of the other communist countries were not interested in *perestroika*, so the reforms there progressed slowly or did not take place at all.

In Poland, more significant changes occurred in 1988. Late April and early May saw strikes in many cities. The wave started in Bydgoszcz, where the employees of the city transport enterprise demanded better wages. The Bydgoszcz strike ended the very same day it started as the local administration promised to fulfill the demands, but in the next few days there were many other protests, strikes and student rallies in different cities, about twenty in total². They did not pose a major threat to the communist rule in Poland, mainly because of their limited size and impact. They did, however, give the government the idea to establish dialog with the opposition, which was very weak - but growing - at that time, at least according to the analyses made by the Ministry of Internal Affairs³.

In the summer of 1988, another wave of strikes occurred, starting on August 15 in the Manifest Lipcowy mine in Jastrzębie-Zdrój, southern Poland. In a few days many enterprises in Poland went on strike - this wave was stronger than the previous one. At that time, the government and party circles discussed the possibility of enforcing a state of emergency and finishing the protests in a militant way. But the advocates of a peaceful solution were stronger. At the end of August, an official decision, approved even by the plenum of the PZPR Central Committee, was made - the ruling class wanted dialog with opposition representatives. On August 31 Wałęsa met with Minister of Internal Affairs Czesław Kiszczak, a very influential figure at the time. On his part, Wałęsa promised to use his charisma to end the strikes, but stressed that the condition *sine qua non* was to re-establish Solidarity as a legal trade union.

In the next few months, several meetings were held between communist officials and Solidarity activists, often backed by Church officials, to set the stage for further negotiations, as well as the prospective delegation from the opposition. Both sides agreed that the future talks would be of primary importance in the transformation of the communist system in Poland.

Simultaneously, other changes were made. In September 1988, a new government was formed with Mieczysław Rakowski as prime minister. The cabinet

² Dudek, A.: *Reglamentowana rewolucja. Rozkład dyktatury komunistycznej w Polsce 1988-1990*, Kraków 2004, p. 138.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 143.

was formed by pro-market reformists, that is, by the standards of the PZPR; some of them even had experience in business and thus market reforms were crucial for that government. The *opus magnum* of the Rakowski cabinet was a set of laws introduced in late 1988 and early 1989. They allowed establishing private companies independent from the state capital. Communism was over in Poland, at least in terms of economy. In the first half of 1989, almost 6,000 private firms were registered. A significant part of them was created by *nomenklatura* members, who betrayed their “communist ideals” for capitalism.

Political changes followed economic ones. Many influential PZPR activists lost their interest in preventing the collapse of communism, while their interests were safeguarded by new property laws. In such conditions, the government could start the negotiations with opposition representatives without fear that this initiative could be stopped by the “conservative” wing. There were almost no communist hardliners in the PZPR in 1989, and the few who remained had no political influence.

This provided a good atmosphere to the onset of the negotiations with the representatives of the democratic opposition. It was not clear at that moment who would represent all the opposition groups, many of them holding different political and economic views, while some important organizations were entirely against any dialog with communist authorities. At the end of the day, a compromise had been achieved - the opposition delegation comprised delegates of different factions of Solidarity, as well as Church officials. Many opposition organizations called to boycott the whole negotiation process, claiming that some opposition leaders used non-democratic methods in the appointment of the delegation. In fact, a narrow circle of leaders, including Lech Wałęsa, met several times with Kiszczak and his people in a villa in Magdalenka, a small town near Warsaw; the meeting later gave rise to the so-called “black legend” of the Polish transition.

The negotiations, which became known as the Round Table, began on February 6, 1989 and lasted until April 5. There were many topics on the agenda, but the talks were essentially political in nature, as economic changes had formerly been introduced by the Rakowski government. Both sides agreed on partially free elections to the Sejm, the lower chamber of the Polish parliament, which meant that 65% of the seats were assigned to the communists, and the rest to free elections. The parties also settled to re-establish the Senate, abolished by the communists after World War II, to introduce the office of president elected by both chambers of the Parliament, and to change the law so as to enable legal registration of Solidarity. The regulations made at the Round Table also included limited reforms on the media market, thus the first issue of opposition daily *Gazeta Wyborcza* (‘election newspaper’) was published on May 8, 1989.

The elections took place on June 4, 1989. The effect was devastating for the communists, even the pessimistic ones. Solidarity won all, save one, mandates in the Senate, which was possible under the agreement made at the Round Table.

Other, non-Solidarity opposition candidates, however, lost the elections. Shocked by those results, the communists, backed by many opposition leaders, introduced another turn of the elections, held on June 18.

In the wake of the voting came a few months of instability and negotiations between different factions in the political arena. On July 19, General Wojciech Jaruzelski was elected president of People's Republic of Poland by the Parliament (joint session of Sejm and Senat) by only one vote. On July 29, at the PZPR plenum, Wojciech Jaruzelski lost his post as first secretary to Mieczysław Rakowski. The plenum also made a decision to designate Czesław Kiszczak as prime minister. This candidature was passed by the Sejm on August 2, but Kiszczak did not manage to form a cabinet.

In those circumstances, Solidarity leaders tried to enter a coalition with two pseudo-parties - one of peasants' and one of the intelligentsia – which were in so-called alliance with the PZPR. Having received a promising answer from their part, Solidarity proposed Tadeusz Mazowiecki, a leftist-Catholic journalist and activist, for prime minister. On August 17, Jaruzelski decided to give Mazowiecki the green light to his mission and accepted him as a prospective prime minister.

On the night of August 19, the Polish ambassador to Bucharest was summoned to the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. What he heard there sounded like a call from a different planet - the situation in Romania was so distinctly different from the state of affairs in Poland at that time...

...Ceaușescu strongly opposed *perestroika* and Gorbachev's team from the very beginning. The Romanian dictator did everything he could not only to prevent him and his family from ruling the country, but also to prevent the system itself, with all its political, economic and, probably most important, economical consequences. He tried to persuade the Soviet leader that Romania didn't need *perestroika*, nor any reforms, because everything was going well in the country. The message to Gorbachev, when he visited Bucharest in May 1987 was that Ceaușescu was the only political solution in Romania, because he ruled the country in a proper way and people loved him.

The protest in Brasov, staged in November that year, made the situation in Romania a subject of discussion for the international mass media. From that moment on, everyone spoke about the future collapse of Ceaușescu's regime, but only abroad. In Romania, the majority of people, including the dictator himself, believed the system would last for years, if not centuries.

Later on, Ceaușescu started denying reality; he even ignored reports provided by the Securitate, the secret police. He was preoccupied with the reconstruction of Bucharest and other gargantuan tasks in the country. His main goal, stated back in 1982, to pay off all the external debts, was achieved in the spring of 1989. But then at last some news reached the dictator. The partially free elections in Poland made him aware of the fact that the "cause of the socialism" is in danger throughout the

world. A new idea emerged in his mind, that is, to form an anti-reformist bloc among the Central and Eastern European rulers and parties.

The immediate reason to take action was the information that Tadeusz Mazowiecki received an offer to form a government. Although things were more complicated, it posed a deadly threat not only to the “principles of communism” (which was true), but also to the rule of the communists in Poland (which was only partly true at that time). It was the last chance to react. On August 19, the Romanian officials prepared the text of the appeal to fellow communist rulers and their parties from the Soviet bloc, as well as to the Communist Party of Soviet Union.

The appeal was handed to the ambassadors of the communist countries on the night of August 19-20, 1989 by Ion Stoian, the then secretary of the Romanian Communist Party (RCP). The text contained rather vague sentences and opinions. Ceaușescu stated that the events in Poland were not only an internal problem, but posed a threat to socialism in the whole world. He called on fellow parties to prevent Solidarity from taking power in Poland, but the appeal included no concrete steps to be made in that direction. It was not to be interpreted as a call to military intervention in the country, but rather to make some political moves, not precisely specified...

...It took the PZPR two days to write a response to the RCP letter. The author of the reply was Włodzimierz Natorf, Central Committee secretary and former ambassador to Moscow. The PZPR denied any accusations from the Romanian side and stressed that they would “do anything possible to guarantee a strong position of the PZPR in the government”⁴ and that the president of the People’s Republic of Poland should guarantee even more, because of his broad prerogatives.

Jaruzelski and the others did not take Romanian threats seriously, but they used the case to intimidate the opposition leaders. Everyone remembered 1956 in Hungary, 1968 in Czechoslovakia and 1981 in Poland. Any military action from the dying USSR was rather impossible at that time, but no one could have been sure about that. Before the Romanian letter, the PZPR kept its foreign contacts secret, but afterwards it decided to inform the Solidarity representatives and Church officials about the case. Minister in the President’s Office Józef Czyrek, when speaking to Father Alojzy Orszulik, an influential Church official, told him that other socialist countries, save the USSR and Hungary, shared the opinion of the Romanians and that they should be very careful when dealing with the Soviets⁵. The RCP initiative became known in the opposition circles and was treated by the still ruling team as an instrument to decrease Mazowiecki’s will to achieve more independence within the government which was not yet formed at that time.

⁴ Dudek, A.: *Reglamentowana rewolucja...*, p. 400.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 401.

In general, the impact of the Romanian initiative was rather minor. On August 26, Mazowiecki met with KGB chief Vladimir Kriuchkov, who assured him that Moscow had nothing against him as a prime minister of the People's Republic of Poland. That meeting finally canceled the threat of possible military intervention in Poland. On September 12, 1989 the Mazowiecki government passed a voting in the Sejm...

...On August 21, in Bucharest a meeting of the Political Executive Committee was called, where Ceaușescu evaluated the events provoked by the letter sent to fellow parties⁶. The effect, even in very optimistic estimation, was none. Ceaușescu stated that they should once again appeal to the PZPR, but this was nothing more than a statement, lacking any concrete proposal of future steps. That initiative failed.

In conclusion, the August 1989 RCP appeal to fellow parties about the situation in the People's Republic of Poland had three dimensions. In Romania, it clearly proved that the 'cause of socialism' was dying. In the rest of the communist countries, it showed that Ceaușescu was an extreme hardliner who had no followers in the other states. In Poland, the appeal was used by the communists to intimidate the Solidarity leadership and Church officials, but its effect was limited due to lack of advocates of that initiative in other communist states.

⁶ Moraru, C.: *Stenograma ședinței Comitetului Politic Executiv al C.C. al P.C.R. din ziua de 21 august, privind evenimentele din Polonia*, "1989", Issue no. 1-2/ 2005.