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**Poland and Totalitarianism: An Unique Experience**

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The „Karta” Centre is a non-governmental organisation located in Warsaw, which originated from a group active in conspiracy in the 1980s. “Karta” was a conspiracy magazine, an answer to the introduction of the martial law in Poland. I am mentioning it because my point of view on the problem in question is related to group experience from that period. The problem of totalitarianism is for Poland a practical issue; of course, theoretical background is equally important; however, the historical practice we have very often cannot be expressed with any theoretical definitions.

We have created “Karta” after the introduction of martial law by Polish communists. Answer to the question whether communists rule was a totalitarian regime would be “no”. However, if a year before, in December 1980, not in 1981, when 18 Soviet divisions were stationed on the Polish border ready to enter the country, an order had been given for the forces to cross the Polish border, there would have been no doubt that this was an attack of a totalitarian state. Under such circumstances the whole history of Eastern Europe would be dramatically different, as would be the terms with which we describe it. This situation would have resembled the events from Budapest in 1956 or Prague in 1968.

The question posed in Poland – totalitarianism or totalitarianisms is crucial for the understanding of Polish history. The history of virtually the whole 20<sup>th</sup> century in Poland is related to one of the two European regimes [communism and Nazism]. The Polish problem is not only the relation to each of those, but also the inner relation of how the Polish society let itself be influenced by them. As it happens, two important anniversaries take place this year – 70 years ago, in September 1939, Poland has lost sovereignty and 20 years ago, in June 1989, it has regained freedom after free elections. Poland ceased to be a free country for 50 years and was during that time exposed to the influence of regimes which can be referred to as totalitarian; knowledge about this fact is crucial to understand what kind of country Poland is and what kind of society its citizens are.

The beginnings of totalitarianism’s influence date even further back than to 1939. Poland regained independence in 1918, having at its eastern border a country which was very quickly becoming a totalitarian country [Russia]. The successful war with Bolshevik Russia in the 1920s had removed the danger of communism spreading over Europe, yet Poland experienced strong pressure from this country ever since. In addition, Poland’s western

neighbour was the Third Reich, a country that perceived Poland as a parasite state which had deprived Germany from some of its territories.

Thus, Poland before the second world war had been surrounded by two totalitarian countries, which had disastrous results. In 1937, the Soviet Union started a nationalistic campaign directed against Poles. A great ethnic cleansing had costed the life of two million people, of which 10% were Poles or had connections with Poland. About 110 thousand people were killed by a shot in the back of their head, similarly as in Katyń, because of their Polish nationality. The authorities in Soviet Russia were obsessed with the thought of the infiltration of Polish agents and thus murdered virtually all people having connections to Poland. This is the largest mass murder and the most tragic of all Polish experiences with communism. Little about it is known in Poland, however, as it has always been deemed an inner matter of the Soviet Union. Yet, it was one of the first symptoms of Soviet Union's aggressive policy towards Poland. A result of this policy was the partition of Poland in September 1939, planned together with Germany and sealed by the Ribbentrop – Molotov pact. Should those two totalitarian countries had been unable to sign this agreement, the second world war might not take place at all. Poland, although it had undertaken some actions, was virtually unable to perform any effective actions against two so strong military powers.

The above described facts started a period of 50 years of dependence and influence of hostile and hitherto alien ideologies in Poland. Analysing interwar Poland, it can be stated that it had to a high degree resisted the influence of any of those totalitarian ideologies. Of course, some events from the 1930s are very shameful for all Poles, and for me personally, yet I do believe that to a high degree the Polish country was immune to those ideologies. I do not want to go into details here, as it is a long story, but later history shows that both those systems, but especially communism, had growing influence on Poland. The result of the 50 years dependence was horrifying. Although Poland's society finally managed to free itself from communists rule, the society's conformist attitude had been one of the reasons that the regime forced upon by foreign influences managed to hold so long in Poland. The long period of the occupations was another reason for the weakening of Polish resistance against those ideologies. While Poland's society endured the second world war in a relatively positive condition, later years of Stalinism proved disastrous. It is no place to talk about it longer, but I would like to underline that the Polish experience is unique.

From the Polish point of view, the second world war was a combat of three main forces – two totalitarian states and the Allies. Poland was at all times on the side of the latter. The fact that after winning the war the Allied Countries perceived the Soviet Union as a

member of the coalition and did not acknowledge the totalitarian character of the country was disastrous for Europe. There is no doubt that Poland treated the Soviet Union as an aggressor during all the period in question. It is very important for the perception of the history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to realise that Soviet Russia was an aggressor and took part in the war in the name of its own ideology, and in the name of the same ideology occupied large parts of Poland first, and large parts of Europe afterwards. After the second world war the Allied countries have formally accepted this occupation.

For Poland the end of the second world war was a defeat and meant the end of one occupation and the start of another. The second of those was even more gruelling, as it lasted much longer and was to a very high degree effective. The Polish resistance had weakened in the course of the years and what was happening with the Polish society is an important example for the topic of this conference. How the Polish society first accepted and then resisted communism is visible if one looks onto Polish history decade after decade. Unusually positive were the last ten years, between 1979 and 1989. Organised opposition developed shortly before; important was the influence of Pope John Paul II, who succeeded in inspiring the society which then accepted the arguments of the opposition. In result, opposition developed from a marginal group to a movement encompassing the whole society. Thus, the society had real impact on the political changes in this part of Europe.

Those changes in the attitude of the Polish society are especially surprising if one compares the society in 1968 and 1980. Such a comparison shows two completely different pictures. In 1968 the authorities were able to force their will upon the people without any stronger resistance – they paralysed the students' movement and took part in the military attack on Czechoslovakia. The New Years Eve's of 1967 and 1968 were identical, with the same speeches delivered by the leader of the Polish United Workers' Party. A breakthrough happened between 1968 and 1980. Suddenly, the Polish society became a subject of actions, not merely an object.

Another important difference is whether the totalitarian system is forced upon the society from outside or whether it is a system which infects the society from inside. In my opinion, the latter is even more important. I think that the Polish society has been deeply infected. For example all the discussion about Poles attitude towards Jews are dramatic. Anti-Semitism is still present in Poland. However, I truly believe that this problem is declining. I mean, while Polish democracy is growing stronger, anti-Semitism, strongly present in Poland in 1930s, is becoming more rare. This shameful aspect of Nazism, or rather fascism ideology, is connected with Polish consciousness in general; it shows to which extent Poles understand

their own history, their way. I am convinced that Poles do not understand their own history. It is a huge task for education, although some actions in this field are already taking place; yet there is still the possibility that some nationalistic voices can be heard in public discussions. Little has been done during those 20 years since 1989. Still, some optimism is allowed, as the new generations, which grow up in free Poland have strong democratic habits and show no sign of the bad customs present in the previous 50 years. Therefore anti-Semitic voice can and will be even more seldom present.

I think, that it is most important in the perception of history that communism has still not be sentenced. The greatest difference between communism and Nazism is that the Western countries have always had an understanding for communism; even today, relations between Western democracies and Putin's Russia are difficult to understand. It seems that the alliance has lasted so long that it has caused a particular unjustness in European perception of communism. There is no doubt that genocide has taken place in Soviet Russia. The most important proof of it is the document "limits of terror", in which the Soviet authorities had set particular numbers of "enemies of the state" who were to be killed in each administrative district of Russia. Those quotas were afterwards even over exceeded. The whole process proves that people have been killed in Russia because of ideological reasons, as are all the later events which occurred during the second world war. There is no reason whatsoever why communism should not be sentenced.

Thank you for attention.