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1989 in Poland (up to the June Elections) in the Journalism of *Le Monde*

Rok 1989 w Polsce (do wyborów czerwcowych) w publicystyce dziennika *Le Monde*

• Abstract •

The article aims to show how one of the most influential centre-to-left French journal *Le Monde* assessed the political developments in Poland from the end of 1988 until the Solidarity victory in the June elections. The attitude of *Le Monde* towards the changes in the Soviet Union and its external empire is considered as well but it serves only as a contextual backdrop. The French newspaper observed the irreversible nature of the ongoing processes in the Soviet Union that marked a significant change in Gorbachev's foreign policy approach. The political developments of all members of the Eastern Bloc were closely examined by the daily but the changing dynamics in the Polish People's Republic directed most of the magazine's focus towards the situation in that country. It may seem astonishing that the journal analysed the puzzling murders of Polish priests and scrutinised the reforms introduced by M. Rakowski in significant detail. However, these issues were considered intertwined with the progress of Poland's political transformation. The agreements made at the Round Table and the results of the June elections were viewed as significant accomplishments. The Solidarity was commended for abstaining from abrupt actions that could threaten the agreement

• Abstrakt •

Celem artykułu jest ukazanie, w jaki sposób jeden z bardziej wpływowych centrolewicowych dzienników francuskich – *Le Monde* – oceniał polityczną sytuację Polskiej Rzeczypospolitej Ludowej w okresie od końca 1988 r. do wygranych przez Solidarność wyborów czerwcowych. *Le Monde*, który w roku 1989 widział nieodwracalność procesów zapoczątkowanych w Związku Sowieckim, szczególnie przełom dostrzegał w zmianie stylu prowadzenia polityki zagranicznej przez Gorbaczowa. Realia polityczne w każdym państwie bloku wschodniego były przez pismo pilnie śledzone, jednak dynamika przemian w PRL-u spowodowała, że sytuacji właśnie w tym państwie periodyk zaczął poświęcać najwięcej miejsca. Może aż dziwić, że na łamach pisma znalazł się drobiazgowy opis i analiza takich kwestii, jak tajemnicze zabójstwa polskich księży oraz wprowadzane przez M. Rakowskiego reformy. Były one widziane jednak nie jako osobne kwestie, ale sprawy ściśle związane z postęпами transformacji ustrojowej w Polsce. Porozumienia okrągłostołowe oraz wynik czerwcowych wyborów postrzegano jako wielki przełom. Popierano przy tym ostrożną i umiarkowaną linię postępowania środowiska Solidarności, chwalać je za to, że nie podejmuje kroków gwałtownych,

with the authorities. *Le Monde* opines that such actions could be hazardous owing to the present geopolitical situation and the likelihood of resistance within the party.

Keywords: *Le Monde*; Polish People's Republic; Central and Eastern Europe; Soviet Union; the Autumn of Nations

odrzucających porozumienie z władzą, kroków, które – według pisma – były niebezpieczne z uwagi na sytuację geopolityczną oraz możliwość reakcji wciąż istniejących w partii twardogłowych.

Słowa kluczowe: dziennik *Le Monde*; PRL; Europa Środkowo-Wschodnia; Związek Sowiecki; Jesień Ludów

Mao [Zedong] brutally suppressed those who responded to his call to speak up during the Hundred Flowers Campaign. A comparable repression in Gorbachev or his successor's time would surely encounter greater obstacles [...]

Le Monde

Whatever happens in Sunday elections, Solidarity has already won. Eight years ago, the movement led by Mr. Lech Wałęsa was crushed by force. Just two months ago, it was still considered illegal. Despite lacking political experience, the movement dominated the election campaign from start to finish, setting its own tone, themes, arguments, and vitality.

Le Monde

Introduction

French intellectuals and politicians shared the aspiration to dismantle the order established at the Yalta conference. The aim was to put into practice the Gaullist concept of a “Europe from the Atlantic to the Urals”, i.e., to put an end to the division of Europe and to form a coalition of countries from the old continent which would cooperate closely on political and economic fronts and thus compete with the United States and China (Szeptycki, 2005, pp. 117–119; Pazik, 2012, pp. 62–65). This is why the French approved and closely monitored Mikhail Gorbachev's change in foreign policy style, the advances made by perestroika and glasnost, which were actually aimed at creating a “liberal” image of the Soviet Union in order to obtain loans from the West to revive the bankrupt economy that was unable to continue participating in the arms race (Nowak, 2022, pp. 388–389; Musiał, 2009, pp. 70–72; Trembicka, 2003, pp. 22–23; Szeptycki, 2005, p. 117;

Mikołajczyk, 2014, pp. 232–233).¹ In 1989, the process of the outer empire gaining independence from the centre accelerated in an unexpected way that took even the most perceptive analysts by surprise. Communism collapsed in every single country with a people's democracy, usually without bloodshed, and the "Sinatra doctrine" replaced the "Brezhnev doctrine" (Burakowski, Gubrynowicz, & Ukielski, 2021, p. 7).² The changes occurring in the Central and Eastern Europe only fuelled the French well-established curiosity, rooted in the collective sympathy for oppressed populations (Parzymies, 2017, p. 327; Jaworski, 2021, p. 340).

The prominent left-of-centre French daily *Le Monde*³ took a keen interest in the Soviet foreign policy, commenting extensively on the political changes taking place both in the USSR and in the people's republics that were dependent on it. This article will examine the writings of *Le Monde*, allowing for a distinct degree of extrapolation, as it can be inferred that the daily's perspectives were shared by its readers and those politically aligned with it in the Fifth Republic, governed by a socialist president.⁴ To a considerable extent, the views expressed by *Le Monde* were emblematic of other ideological and political factions in France, as well as a sizeable segment of Western

¹ It should be noted that the French right wing held mistrust towards Gorbachev and his policies. Thus, relations between France and the Soviet Union cooled after the centre-right won the 1986 French elections and Jacques Chirac's government was formed. Not until Mitterrand's successful re-election in 1988 did French-Soviet relations improve (Mikołajczyk, 2014, pp. 233–234).

² The term "Sinatra doctrine" was inspired by the renowned song *My Way* by the American vocalist, with reference to the Soviet Union's relinquishment of control over its satellites, leaving them to manage their domestic policies independently. It was introduced by Gennady Gerasimov, the spokesman for the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Kershaw, 2019, p. 313).

³ *Le Monde* was established in 1944 by Hubert Beuve-Méry. The driving force behind this project was General Charles de Gaulle, who was deeply concerned with the rehabilitation of journalism in France, which had been tainted by collaboration with the German occupiers. Following the war, numerous publications were dissolved, among them the renowned *Le Temps*, whose holdings were acquired by *Le Monde*. Beuve-Méry accepted to lead the magazine on the condition that the government would not exert any influence on its political stance, a condition that de Gaulle approved. In the beginning, the newspaper aimed to uphold total political impartiality, gathering views from both the left and the right. Nevertheless, this quickly became improbable, as the daily publication began taking sides against de Gaulle and NATO, the guarantor of France's security. Eventually, in 1968, it openly promoted the Union of the Left. In 1981, *Le Monde* endorsed François Mitterrand, but later became his adversary after the wiretapping scandal, in which Mitterrand ordered the wiretapping of journalists, including one from *Le Monde* (Rybińska, 2010; Thibau, 1996, pp. 49–50). For more information on *Le Monde* – Eveno, 1996, 2004.

⁴ Of course, as previously mentioned, the views expressed by *Le Monde* may not align fully with those of President Mitterrand, with whom the publication had a strained relationship. However, in regards to evaluating the transformations in Central and Eastern Europe, there is significant agreement between the two.

societies. This was frequently demonstrated as the evaluations made in the French publication were compared with those of other centre-left British and American magazines. Due to the wealth of material available, this analysis will focus solely on the political transformation that occurred in the Polish People's Republic from the end of 1988 until the Solidarity victory in the June elections. While the attitude of *Le Monde* towards the changes in the Soviet Union and its external empire will be considered as well, it will serve only as a contextual backdrop. Since the opening of the Round Table, Poland's transformation was discussed in depth in every edition of the newspaper. This article is dedicated to this particular subject, as there are no articles in Polish covering these important issues.

Soviet foreign policy and internal changes in the USSR

Le Monde generally had an upbeat perspective on the political reforms occurring in the Soviet Union, specifically highlighting the positive developments in the country's foreign policy. The paper states: "If there is one area in which perestroika has succeeded, it is foreign policy. Gorbachev might be meeting with stiff resistance as to economy reforms, ethnic tensions and domestic dissent from the conservatives. But he is praised to the skies abroad, particularly in the West" (*La pensée diplomatique de M. Gorbatchev. Une nouvelle coexistence pacifique*, 1989).⁵ Mikhail Gorbachev's détente foreign policy, labelled the "New Political Thinking", had a direct or indirect impact on several significant diplomatic breakthroughs. These included the Treaty on the Complete Elimination of Short and Intermediate-Range Missiles (INF Treaty) of 1987, the agreement signed in 1988 by the delegations of the USA, Cuba, South Africa, and Angola concerning the withdrawal of Cuban troops from Angola, the announcement of the withdrawal of Vietnamese troops from Kampuchea and the decision to recall Soviet troops from Afghanistan (*La pensée diplomatique...*, 1989; Roszkowski, 2003, pp. 374–375, 382).⁶ The de-ideologising of foreign policy since 1987 was particularly lauded. This shift meant that international relations were no longer viewed through the lens of class conflict (*La pensée diplomatique de M. Gorbatchev...*, 1989; Patman, 1999, p. 577).

⁵ Gorbachev's economic reforms led to chaos and a severe economic crisis due to poorly designed and haphazardly implemented policies (Stępień-Kuczyńska, 2016, pp. 175–176).

⁶ It is worth noting that the aforementioned agreement to eliminate short- and medium-range missiles remains the only one that requires the complete elimination of a designated category of weapons (Zarychta, 2015, p. 288).

Le Monde reporters found that respect for human rights in the Soviet Union had improved considerably (Les droits de l'homme à l'Est, 1989). The expected change in the Soviet Union's environmental policy was also welcomed (La pensée diplomatique de M. Gorbatchev..., 1989). However, the lack of transparency in the system of elections to the supreme law-making body of the Soviet Union, i.e., the Congress of National Deputies, was a clear indication of how far the process of democratising the Soviet Union still had to go (URSS: Parti unique et démocratie à l'Est, 1989). Nevertheless, the magazine remained optimistic, noting that "No, decisive steps have yet been taken and pluralism has not yet been institutionalized. The political establishment and its leaders retain exclusive control of determining what is true, but the first [democratic] elections have taken place and there has been a marked increase in the extent of free expression, especially in the discussion of the past. Therefore, a complete restoration of the former conditions before perestroika seems improbable. Mao [Zedong] brutally suppressed those who responded to his call to speak up during the Hundred Flowers Campaign. A comparable repression in Gorbachev or his successor's time would surely encounter greater obstacles" (L'évolution de l'URSS et la liberté, 1989).⁷

Shifts in People's Republics

Le Monde columnists closely followed developments in the Soviet satellites, assessing progress according to two key criteria: the degree of respect for human rights and the progress made in democratisation and economic liberalisation. At the beginning of the year, there was a perception that the human rights issue was a dividing line between the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, with some being "good" disciples of Gorbachev and others "bad" disciples, all of whom were signatories to the CSCE Final Act (Les droits de l'homme à l'Est, 1989).⁸ The reality is that the

⁷ The Hundred Flowers Campaign was launched by Mao in 1956 in response to widespread discontent in the country over the costs of forced industrialisation and collectivisation. The campaign slogan was "Let a hundred flowers bloom, and a hundred schools of thought contend". Its objective was to loosen the governmental restrictions on expression and provide individuals with the opportunity to express their views and even criticize the party. At first wary, the Chinese gradually grew more brazen in their extensive reproach of the party. Eventually, Mao put a stop to this and began to repress those who dared to speak out. There is a strong possibility that Mao engineered the campaign as a snare for his adversaries, enabling him to swiftly pinpoint them (Færøvik, 2018, pp. 104–112). Indeed, it is a challenge to compare perestroika and glasnost with the brief but vicious campaign of the Chinese dictator.

⁸ At the CSCE Vienna Review Conference, participating States adopted an extended commitment

commitment to respect human rights of the 1975 Final Act (the third basket) was generally unfulfilled.⁹ In that respect, the following countries were known as “bad boys”: the GDR rejected the possibility of implementing reforms modelled on the Soviet Union’s for fear of Moscow’s foreign policy reorientation towards the West, which could undermine the legitimacy of the GDR’s existence; Czechoslovakia, where a demonstration in honour of Jan Palach was suppressed by the security forces and Václav Havel was imprisoned; Bulgaria, where Todor Zhivkov gave only verbal support to perestroika and in practice did everything to prevent more significant changes. However, the most severe situation occurred in Romania during Nicolae Ceaușescu’s rule. Not only was the economy in a terrible state, but opposition was harshly suppressed. The “genius of the Carpathians” feared the ongoing transformation in other Eastern Bloc countries, gradually moving towards freedom (*Les droits de l’homme à l’Est*, 1989; TCHÉCOSLOVAQUIE *L’opposition tente de commémorer l’immolation par le feu de Jan Palach*, 1989; BULGARIE *L’affaire Tambouev ou le périlleux exercice de la glasnost*, 1989; ROUMANIE *Le poète Mircea Dinescu sanctionné pour avoir donné une interview à “Libération”*, 1989; Burakowski et al., 2021, pp. 261–262, 385–386, 444–445, 450, 498).

It was Hungary and Poland that led this liberating trend. As the year began, the magazine’s publicists noted the most significant progress made in Hungary: “Hungary remains the most accomplished student [of perestroika], with progress so extraordinary that it is at odds with its own ‘allies’ [Romania] over national minorities and freedom of movement. Poland is closely mirroring Hungary’s path, although the Warsaw authorities openly state their intention to refuse passports to certain opposition figures. This is no coincidence: both Hungary and Poland are currently searching for new political solutions that permit diverse degrees of opposition” (*Les droits de l’homme à l’Est*, 1989).

Hungarian-Romanian relations significantly deteriorated in the late 1980s when Ceaușescu repressed the Hungarian minority residing in Transylvania. Despite government efforts, the crisis persisted, and Hungarians criticised their politicians for inadequate responses. This contributed to an upswing in anti-system sentiment. Simultaneously, the country’s political climate grew increasingly tense. Not only did the opposition want to liberalise and democratise the system, but so did

to respect human rights. The document affirms the participating states “will respect human rights and fundamental freedoms, including freedom of thought, conscience, religion, or belief, without any discrimination based on race, sex, language, or religion” (Parzymies, 2020, p. 166).

⁹ From that point onwards, however, Western governments overtly backed dissident groups in communist states, and this assistance played a role in the emergence and strengthening of these movements (Parzymies, 2020, pp. 162–164).

the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party. As a result, on February 11, the Central Committee passed a resolution announcing the introduction of democracy and a multiparty system. It also adopted a revised interpretation of the events of 1956, stating that it was a popular uprising against the party oligarchy (Burakowski et al., 2021, pp. 198–199).

The announcement introduction of multiparty politics, although it was to be implemented gradually, was considered a major advancement – “a true breakthrough”, as stated by *Le Monde* (Une “transition graduelle” acceptée par le PC La Hongrie en marche vers le multipartisme, 1989). The newspaper stressed the significance of reinterpreting the events of 1956, which impacted not only the parties' legitimacy but also critical issues such as multipartyism in Hungary (HONGRIE: les travaux du comité central du PC Le soulèvement de 1956 était-il une “insurrection populaire” ou une “contre-révolution”?, 1989). Hungary surpassed other Eastern Bloc countries in terms of liberalising its economy. However, it is important to note that this did not result in an improvement of economic and social conditions (La Hongrie en actions, 1989; Burakowski et al., 2021, pp. 196–198).¹⁰ Following this, the rate of progress in the Hungarian People's Republic decreased to some degree. It should be noted that on June 13, which was when the Round (or triangular) Table negotiations began, the initial round of parliamentary elections in Poland had already been conducted (Burakowski et al., 2021, p. 203). The magazine's publicists naturally shifted their attention towards the developments in the People's Republic of Poland.

Socio-economic conditions within the Polish People's Republic

In 1989, the daily's articles primarily covered political changes, repression against priests, and economic issues. In particular, *Le Monde* followed the impact of rising prices and falling real wages on social morale, with strikes and protests breaking out in several sectors (POLOGNE: grève de mineurs, 1989; POLOGNE: Les paysans bloquent les routes, 1989; POLOGNE: La libération des prix provoque une nouvelle vague de grèves, 1989). Its journalists were particularly interested in how the economic situation was affecting the implementation of the Round Table agreements. In the words of Jacek Kuroń, it was crucial that the society accepted the agreement between the government and the opposition. However, Kuroń predicted that the

¹⁰ Even during János Kádár's time in Hungary, economic reforms that went further were implemented, compared to the Polish People's Republic. In Poland, despite some attempts, the absence of economic expertise among decision-makers and their mindset prevented the implementation of bolder reforms for an extended period (Dudek, 2004, pp. 29–30).

economic situation would not improve after the talks. The public prioritised “the meat stamps over the voting card” (Les négociations entre le gouvernement polonais et Solidarité Partie de poker à Varsovie, 1989). The society’s morale was low. The wave of strikes, which was temporarily limited at the beginning of the Round Table talks, quickly intensified (Szumiło, 2015, p. 81). As highlighted in a magazine article, “Both ruling and opposition authorities share the fear [...] of [the occurrence of] an incident that could trigger an explosion of social tension, which would result in the collapse of the fragile edifice [of mutual understanding] that is currently being constructed with great difficulty” (Les négociations..., 1989).¹¹

The magazine discussed the free market reforms of the government of Mieczysław Rakowski. These included the Wilczek Law (named after the Minister of Industry, Mieczysław Wilczek) of December 23, 1988, which introduced almost unlimited economic freedom for entrepreneurs. Other laws relaxed banking and currency regulations and facilitated foreign business (Burakowski et al., 2021, p. 87).¹² The newspaper’s claim was that the reforms were part of “Poland’s return to the status of the most open economy in socialist Europe”, but the main reason for their implementation was different. As noted, “[t]his [Wilczek’s] law allows private companies, whether Polish only or cooperating with foreign partners, to drive the economy. The large budget deficit and the cost of servicing the foreign debt (\$36.5 billion in 1988) means that stimulating the economy with public money is out of the question” (“Liberté, égalité, concurrence”. La Pologne veut faire en sorte que son économie redeviene la plus ouverte des pays socialistes, 1989). This forced the government to implement the reform. Moreover, the success of this initiative was uncertain, as Polish entrepreneurs faced obstacles due to their limited financial resources and lack of trained personnel. However, the key factor was the fact that the Polish economy was in the process of restructuring: “The people are not enthusiastic about this legislative upheaval, as they are exhausted by the constant alternation between green and red lights [continuous economic changes] and are mainly concerned with their daily struggles” (“Liberté, égalité, concurrence”..., 1989). The reforms failed

¹¹ The authorities consistently stated that the prerequisite for discussions and a productive accord was cessation of the strikes. Czesław Kiszczak made this condition clear to Lech Wałęsa on August 31, 1988, when they met for the first time in the Warsaw villa of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, located at Zawrat Street (Dudek, 2004, p. 172). During the talks, the opposition was warned that the agreement would not be signed under the influence of the strikes. This was also reported in *Le Monde* (POLOGNE: la réunion de la «table ronde» à Varsovie Solidarité dresse un réquisitoire contre la politique économique du gouvernement, 1989).

¹² Nevertheless, significant restrictions on economic freedom persisted, including the non-market valuation of the dollar exchange rate and the maintenance of rationing (Burakowski et al., 2021).

to halt inflation, enhance the economic scenario, and only enriched a select few (POLOGNE: Ouverture de la table ronde entre le pouvoir et Solidarité Une page tournée, 1989; Dudek, 2004, p. 188). Overall, the newspaper displayed a reserved stance towards the economic reforms. It seems that they were not supported because their success could have cemented the existing political system, which could have hindered the process of democratisation (realising a scenario similar to that of China).

Mysterious murders of catholic priests

Le Monde gave extensive coverage to the clergy murdered in mysterious circumstances.¹³ On January 21, 1989, Fr. Stefan Niedzielak – chaplain of the National Military Organisation (NOW) and the Home Army (AK), member of the Freedom and Independence Association (WiN) and founder of the Shrine “For the Fallen and Murdered in the East” in the Church of St. Charles Borromeo at the Powązki cemetery – was tortured to death. On January 30, Fr. Stanisław Suchowolec, chaplain of the Confederation of Independent Poland (KPN) and propagator of the cult of Fr. Jerzy Popiełuszko, was killed by “unknown perpetrators”. On July 11, Fr. Sylwester Zych, chaplain of the KPN and associate of Fr. Suchowolec, died in similar circumstances. The deaths of at least the first two individuals were likely due to their knowledge and outspokenness, similar to that of Fr. Jerzy Popiełuszko. They had also been threatened on a number of occasions with dire consequences for what they had said and done (Żurek, 2009, pp. 145–146; Litka, 2010, pp. 8–38).¹⁴

Le Monde reported that the deaths of the priests had been surrounded by peculiar circumstances and pointed to previous threats against them, but that the ongoing investigation meant that no culprits had been identified. The magazine’s coverage of

¹³ Naturally, the mysterious deaths of the clergy were reported in the media around the world. Such newspapers covered this matter extensively as *The Guardian* in the UK (Simmons, 1989) or *The Washington Post* in the US (Diehl, 1989). Yet, *Le Monde* devoted far more attention to this issue.

¹⁴ Some see the assassination of the clergymen as a possible provocation by the security services and some communists, aimed at hindering the progress of political transformation in Poland, fermenting pessimistic attitudes and creating conditions in which it is impossible to reach an agreement. Although it is difficult to establish whether this is true, it is highly likely that the Security Service (SB) was involved in the murders. Fathers Niedzielak and Suchowolec were killed shortly before the Round Table discussions, and Fr. Zych during the period of presidential turmoil (Dudek, 2004, p. 346). For instance, Fr. Tadeusz Isakowicz-Zaleski asserts, without providing supporting evidence, that certain members of the communist party and the Security Service instigated the murders of priests as a means of provocation, and that this may have even been inspired by Moscow (Kotarba, 2014).

the issue was extensive, perhaps mainly a reflection of its concern about the impact of these events on public sentiment and political developments (Pologne L'autopsie confirme que le Père Niedzielak a été battu à mort, 1989; POLOGNE Un autre prêtre trouvé mort à son domicile, 1989; POLOGNE: Washington demande des éclaircissements sur la mort de deux prêtres, 1989; POLOGNE: Une enquête est ouverte après la mort d'un prêtre de Solidarité, 1989). This is what was written following Fr. Niedzielak's death: "Father Niedzielak was not Father Popiełuszko, the 'martyr of Solidarity', who was abducted and killed by political police in 1984 [...]. Nonetheless, the unsettling circumstances surrounding the passing of the elderly priest, renowned for his dedication to patriotic values (in Poland, this traditionally involves striving for independence from its eastern neighbour), have led several of his followers to suspect foul play" (POLOGNE: les obsèques du Père Niedzielak L'embarras de Solidarité, 1989). This left Lech Wałęsa with a dilemma that was extremely difficult to resolve: "Announcing that he was going to attend the funeral could suggest that Solidarity supported the political provocation thesis, while starting delicate negotiations with the authorities [...], peace is rather needed. Not attending the funeral could be problematic for Wałęsa, who has already planned to travel to Warsaw on Friday to meet Kiszczak. His absence could lead to misunderstandings among his supporters" (POLOGNE: les obsèques du Père Niedzielak..., 1989). While the murders of the priests were indeed terrible, the most critical aspect was that they did not have any adverse effects on the ongoing Round Table talks and that the talks were not suspended.

Prior to the Round Table

The process leading up to the Round Table was complex and protracted, with talks between government officials and opposition leaders going back to 1987. The catalyst for change was a televised debate between Lech Wałęsa and Alfred Miodowicz, the chairman of the All-Poland Alliance of Trade Unions (OPZZ), which Wałęsa unequivocally won (Trembicka, 2003, pp. 94–117). Wałęsa's resounding triumph garnered widespread attention not just in Poland, where backing for the Solidarity movement saw a significant surge, but also across the globe (Ligarski & Majchrzak, 2019, p. 31; Dudek, 2004, pp. 217–219).¹⁵ *Le Monde* hailed it as groundbreaking

¹⁵ An example of that might be a remark from a British centre-left *The Guardian* (Simmons, 1988), which noted that this was Wałęsa's first extended television appearance and went on to say that the Solidarity leader significantly influenced how the debate unfolded.

and meticulously outlined the course of the debate, under the apt headline: “Poland: a debate without precedent in Warsaw. Lech Wałęsa champions pluralism in front of millions of viewers” (POLOGNE: un débat sans précédent à Varsovie Lech Walesa plaide pour le pluralisme devant des millions de téléspectateurs, 1988).

The Miodowicz-Wałęsa debate was a major challenge for the communists. It also led to a breakthrough in the negotiations between the government and the opposition. In the aftermath, Jaruzelski and his government increasingly recognised that the growing popularity of Solidarity forced them to legitimise the union, even though they had previously vehemently opposed it. Sympathy for Solidarity increased even more after Lech Wałęsa’s visit to France on December 10–11, where he was received with the honours befitting an official representative of the state and was enthusiastically welcomed by the people of this country (POLOGNE: reprise des discussions entre le gouvernement et Solidarité La recherche d’un “compromis historique”, 1989; Dudek, 2004, pp. 217–220), as the French daily noted: “The festivities are over. After a few days of frenzy in Paris, where he was treated as if he were a film star or a politician, seen on all the television channels, driven around the capital in an ambulance with an official entourage, and received by leading politicians and trade unions, Wałęsa returned to Poland”. The magazine saw the authorities’ permission for Lech Wałęsa to leave Poland as the beginning of a “new climate” in Poland (Le pari de Lech Walesa, 1988). The government, while still ruling out the possibility of legalising Solidarity and denying passports to some opposition figures, began treating Wałęsa as a political partner, a “respected opposition figure”, something that would have been inconceivable until recently. “Aware of his powerful assets, the Solidarity leader is too cunning to ignore the risk of being seduced by the authorities. He also knows that disagreements on fundamental issues remain, but he believes that moderation and compromise will achieve what the weakness of the strikers has failed to do”, wrote *Le Monde* (Le pari de Lech Walesa, 1988).

In January 1989, the authorities grudgingly agreed to legalise Solidarity, knowing that otherwise it would have been impossible to come to terms with the opposition and control the anticipated outbreaks of social unrest, that the planned elections would result in a poor turnout and thus delegitimise the government, and that Poland would no longer receive economic aid from the west (Dudek, 2004, pp. 230–231).¹⁶ *Le Monde* recognises the motives of the authorities, noting that “the realisation of the extent of the crisis in Poland and the fact that it is deepening have certainly contributed to forcing the party leadership to make a sudden U-turn on

¹⁶ This agreement did not immediately lead to the legitimisation of Solidarity, which was officially registered on April 17 (Dudek, 2004, p. 263).

the issue of the opposition over just four months, even though it has resisted doing so” (POLOGNE: reprise des discussions..., 1989). “What was initially proposed on the question of legalising Solidarity was a two-year transitional period during which, for example, strikes would not be possible. This was hard for the more radical opposition to swallow”, *Le Monde* stressed. As the newspaper pointed out, whatever the opposition’s decision, the most important thing was that it would not split, which is what the authorities were hoping for (POLOGNE: Pluralisme sous conditions, 1989).

Round Table talks

Le Monde covered the Round Table very closely, reporting and commenting on all the decisions taken throughout the talks. The French newspaper pointed out the difficult task facing the trade union leadership even before the discussions began: “A week before the opening of the Round Table, the Solidarity leadership is well aware”, it wrote, “that one of the difficulties it will have to face is to convince Polish society that compromise is a profoundly sensible course of action” (POLOGNE: Les craintes de Lech Walesa, 1989). The possibility of social unrest that could disrupt the negotiations persisted, prompting Wałęsa to urge for temporary calmness. This was frequently reiterated by *Le Monde* (POLOGNE: M. Mitterrand à Varsovie en juin Reconnaissance de Solidarité rurale, 1989).

There was general support for Solidarity’s cautious tactics of compromise with the authorities. Echoing Bronisław Geremek, the paper reiterated the need to implant a ‘democratic prosthesis’ in the system in the form of contractual (curial) elections and to agree on a strong position for the president in the transition to full democracy. Assessing the attitude of the government, the paper said: “The Polish authorities, while trying to save their own skin, at least have the virtue of being open to dialogue with the opposition. This positively distinguished Poland’s communist rulers from the behaviour of elites in other socialist countries, such as Czechoslovakia” (POLOGNE: Des “prothèses pour la démocratie”?, 1989).

During the period of dynamic change in Poland, the official French-Polish relations intensified as well. The government of the Fifth Republic sought to maintain close relations with both the opposition, as evidenced by the aforementioned visit by Lech Wałęsa, and with the government (Pasztor & Jarosz, 2015, pp. 354–355). In mid-February, Prime Minister Mieczysław Rakowski travelled to Paris to ask the Paris Club for a moratorium on debt repayments (Przeperski, 2016, p. 218). *Le Monde*’s assessment of Rakowski’s behaviour was rather unenthusiastic: “[In his

statements] to the press, the head of the Polish government mixed realism with ambiguity and cynicism”. His realism was manifested in the lack of a concrete answer to the question of how to deal with the strikes, as well as to the question of the possible results of the round tables. The ambiguity consisted in the lack of a clear statement on the future of the Polish United Workers’ Party (PZPR) and the cynicism in the claim that censorship is not a big problem in Poland and will disappear in time (POLOGNE: Accord à la table ronde sur la légalisation de solidarité M. Rakowski juge “prometteuses” les relations avec Paris, 1989). This showed that, despite everything, the direction of political change in Poland remained a mystery to the French magazine, and the opposition’s quick victory was not certain.

Although the opposition and the ruling coalition disagreed,¹⁷ they eventually signed the deal on April 5. The compromise was highly praised by *Le Monde* as it involved contract elections to the Sejm, free elections to the Senate, strong presidential powers and a number of other important agreements, including changes to the law on union meetings of Independent Self-Governing Trade Union “Solidarity” (NSZZ “Solidarność”), Independent Self-Governing Trade Union of Individual Farmers “Solidarity” (NSZZ RI “Solidarność”), Independent Students’ Association (NZS), as well as several economic agreements (Dudek, 2004, pp. 259–261). The daily wrote: “For General Jaruzelski, it may be a ‘socialist parliamentary democracy’, whereas for Mr. Wałęsa it is ‘the beginning of the road to democracy and a free Poland’. Under different names, the system being introduced is the first of its kind in socialist countries”. However, it was pointed out that not all differences between the parties had been resolved (POLOGNE: l’accord entre le pouvoir et Solidarité Les institutions politiques seront démocratisées, 1989).

Election campaign

In the period leading up to the parliamentary elections in June, *Le Monde* kept a close eye on the situation in Poland. In its view, both sides were “in favour of openness”

¹⁷ This camp was very diverse. During the roundtables, it was clear that the OPZZ was emancipating itself in order to maintain public support, especially since the fall of the PZPR was a possibility. The division was expressed in the dispute over the indexation of wages. Alfred Miodowicz did not agree to the indexation of only 80% of the cost of living, which was supported by the government and Solidarity. The conflict over the order of speakers at the end of the meeting almost led to the OPZZ refusing to sign the agreements (Dudek, 2004, pp. 265–269). The French daily described and analysed these disputes (POLOGNE: Difficultés de dernière heure à la table ronde, 1989; POLOGNE: Accord final en vue à la table ronde, 1989).

and the legalisation of Solidarity contributed to a better rapport between the government and the opposition (POLOGNE: La légalisation de Solidarité devient officielle, 1989). An important and symbolic event for the magazine was the first meeting between Wałęsa and Jaruzelski in eight years, as well as official ceremonies honouring the Katyń victims by embedding an urn with Katyń soil in the Katyń Cross at Powązki Cemetery (La détente en Pologne Le général Jaruzelski et M. Lech Walesa se sont rencontrés pour la première fois depuis huit ans, 1989; Ligarski & Majchrzak, 2019, pp. 33–34). But the most important issue remained the election campaign, in which the opposition received strong support.

According to *Le Monde*, Solidarity's final victory was almost certain: "The future of the second [legalised] Solidarity should be viewed with confidence. For two important reasons. The most important is that it is the daughter of its mother ["Solidarity", registered in 1980], that it has the most beautiful name in the world and, thanks to the hope that Poles cherished in 1980 and 1981, [...] they trust those who talk to them about dignity, freedom and efficiency and rarely resort to violence [...]" The second reason was that the Soviet Union underwent similar changes as Poland, which prevented the USSR from interfering in the internal affairs of the Polish People's Republic. The journal expressed optimism not only about the outcome of the elections, but also about the prospects for further democratisation (POLOGNE: Solidarnosc mère et fille, 1989). Yet, fears about the government's reaction to the unfavourable developments remained. *Le Monde's* columnists asked themselves: "Is the Communist Party in a position to accept democracy?" (POLOGNE: les enjeux des élections des 4 et 18 juin. Quel avenir pour Solidarité?, 1989).

A threat to Solidarity's very likely success was the attitude of the radical opposition, such as "Fighting Solidarity" ("Solidarność Walcząca"), which called for a boycott of the elections, demanding an immediate removal of the communists from power and the holding of completely free elections (POLOGNE: Le général Jaruzelski et Solidarité se rendent hommage mutuellement, 1989; Dudek, 2004, p. 291; Ligarski & Majchrzak, 2019, pp. 107–112). The lack of electoral experience among Poles and the complicated electoral process could also have adversely affected Solidarity's result. *Le Monde* welcomed the idea of Solidarity organising training sessions to familiarise the population with voting procedures, fearing that Poland could break the record for invalid votes in the next elections (POLOGNE: le scrutin du 4 juin La complexité du système électoral fait craindre de nombreux bulletins nuls, 1989; Dudek, 2004, p. 289).¹⁸

¹⁸ Gazeta Wyborcza published instructions on voting (Ściągawka, 1989, May 17 and 18).

The coalition government¹⁹ had hoped that, by holding the elections swiftly, they would not give Solidarity the opportunity to prepare for them properly. They were, thus, taken aback by the opposition's dynamic activities, as well as a very well-run campaign, which adopted the principle of electing one candidate for each vacant seat. The government's campaign, in contrast, appeared sluggish, and the fact that several activists were allowed to run for a single seat meant that there was more competition between the government candidates than between them and the opposition candidates. In addition, the allied parties, the Alliance of Democrats (SD) and the United People's Party (ZSL), were at that time showing far-reaching emancipatory tendencies. There was also a gradual erosion of power, to the extent that some members of the Polish United Workers' Party openly supported the opposition (Dudek, 2004, pp. 255, 278–315; Terlecki, 2015, p. 462). *Le Monde's* columnists noted and analysed the above problems, pointing out that censorship still reigned and that Solidarity was given little airtime in the media (POLOGNE: avant les élections du 4 juin Le gouvernement joue la "stratégie de la tension", 1989). Nevertheless, they remained optimistic: "Whatever happens in Sunday's elections, Solidarity has already won. Eight years ago, the movement led by Mr. Lech Wałęsa was crushed by force. Just two months ago, it was still considered illegal. Despite lacking political experience, the movement dominated the election campaign from start to finish, setting its own tone, themes, arguments, and vitality" (POLOGNE: la campagne pour le scrutin du 4 juin La dynamique électorale a joué en faveur de Solidarité, 1989).

June election and its aftermath

The June elections were a breakthrough in Poland's postwar political history. They hastened the collapse of the PZPR and the destruction of the system itself. On June 4, the candidates of the Solidarity Civic Committee won 160 out of 161 possible seats in the Sejm, and on June 18, in the second round of the elections, another seat was won by the Solidarity candidate. In the first round, 92 Solidarity candidates were elected to the Senate, and in the second round, a further seven candidates were elected. Only three Coalition candidates got the required number of votes, the remaining were supposed to be appointed on June 18. The collapse of the national list, of which only two candidates received 50% support, was the real

¹⁹ The governing coalition included the following: PZPR, ZSL, SD, OPZZ, PAX Association, Catholic Social Union, and Christian Social Union.

embarrassment for the party. According to the law, these seats should have been vacant, but in order to maintain the Round Table Agreements, Solidarity agreed to change this provision, which was done by decree of the Council of State, and the coalition side filled these seats in the second round (Dudek, 2004, pp. 316–317, 326–328).

Commenting on the election outcome, *Le Monde* stated: “Frankly, the scale of Solidarity’s victory seems to embarrass its leaders, who are very careful not to do anything that might cause panic in government ranks”. This is linked to the fact that “the reins of the state remain in the hands of the PZPR, given that the Round Table Agreements did not provide for power to change hands, regardless of who wins the elections” (Après son triomphe aux élections législatives Solidarité se déclare prêt à “partager les responsabilités” à Varsovie, 1989).²⁰ Solidarity’s caution was also evident in the lengthy interview with Adam Michnik in *Le Monde*, which was praised by the daily. One of the union leaders underscored the importance of adhering to the agreements that were reached during the Round Table discussions, considering the intricate geopolitical climate and the lingering influence of the defeated parties. Furthermore, it was highlighted that by rebuffing aspirants from beyond the “Lech team”, the society adopted a strategy of temperance and transformation (POLOGNE: après les élections législatives Un entretien avec Adam Michnik, dirigeant de Solidarité “Il faut parler avec le pouvoir, qui a choisi le chemin de la négociation et non celui de la répression”, 1989).²¹ However, there was no mention of the fact that the change of the electoral law during the elections was a clear manipulation of the law in the name of political interests and an action against the will of the voters, who had expressed their opposition to the candidates of the national list by crossing out their names (Trembicka, 2017, p. 111).

Still paying close attention to politics in Poland, *Le Monde* noted the PZPR’s problems with its increasingly emancipated allies, the desire to create a social-democratic

²⁰ *The British Observer* also pointed out the surprise, both on the opposition and government sides. It also emphasised that power remained in Communist hands and the future was uncertain (Frankland, 1989).

²¹ This interview, as well as the views of other Western magazines and official factors in the West on the situation in Poland were discussed by *Gazeta Wyborcza* (*Zachód o wyborach w Polsce*, 1989). As in the interview with the French daily, Adam Michnik commented in the Polish opposition magazine: “The success of ‘Solidarity’ compared to other candidates from opposition groups is a sign that people today do not want extremes. [...] The idea of dialogue and compromise should form the basis of the institutional order after the elections. After all, Poland’s geopolitical position has not changed; the owners of the apparatus of violence have not changed. We are entering a time of hope, but also a time of threats. The shootings and deaths in Tbilisi and Beijing – to mention only the most recent events – point to the dangers we should all avoid” (Michnik, 1989).

cluster following the collapse of the party, and Solidarity's astuteness in aiding reformist coalition hopefuls to arrange public gatherings with their constituents ahead of the second round. The daily stressed the importance of upholding the "stability of the system", of honouring the mutual agreement, of the party's survival in the second round, lest "conservative" elements should emerge. There were also rumours circulating that the Warsaw Pact countries grew restless with the situation (POLOGNE: Accord sur un "repêchage" des candidats du pouvoir au second tour des élections, 1989; Solidarité à la rescousse des réformateurs du Parti communiste, 1989; POLOGNE: Les résultats des élections secouent le PC et ses partis satellites, 1989). Of course, as we now realise, these fears were unfounded, although the government side did threaten with the possibility that disaffected radical elements in the party might attempt a takeover (Dudek, 2004, p. 331).

To some extent, this attitude was influenced by the cautious policy of the Western countries at the time. These countries, which had until then clearly supported the opposition, were reassessing their position in the light of the surprisingly rapid changes in the Polish People's Republic. This was due to the fear of a possible reaction from hardliners, as well as the fear of intervention by the Soviet Union, which was still seen as likely. There was anxiety over Gorbachev's position in the USSR, which, if shattered by too radical changes in the USSR and the Eastern bloc countries, could lead to the breakdown of the détente process in Europe. For this reason, efforts were made to keep the Round Table agreement in force. For example, Jaruzelski was elected president.

Between the first and second round of the elections (June 14–16), François Mitterrand came to Poland. The Poles had high hopes for this visit, but it was not a groundbreaking one. He praised the government for its "responsibility" and "wisdom" and kept his distance from the opposition, for the reasons mentioned above (Pleskot, 2010, pp. 193–195).²² *Le Monde* noted that the French president's attitude and his words of praise for the authorities were probably misinterpreted by those who still perceived General Jaruzelski as "a man of martial law and repression. [...] However, Mr. Mitterrand's sole focus is on the democratic dialogue that has just begun in Poland and which is leading the country towards 'one of the most paradoxical situations in modern history'. That is why he refrained from making any comments that could potentially stir up the ongoing discussions in various factions. [...] The advantage of the policy towards Poland of Mr. Mitterrand lies in its outcome. France's support for the democratic process is accompanied by

²² During a lecture at Jagiellonian University, the French president caused astonishment by stating that socialism should not be "thrown out of the window" (Pleskot, 2010, p. 194).

actual economic aid measures, which are currently the most significant of all those announced by the West” (La fin de la visite du président de la République en Pologne M. Mitterrand n’a pas ménagé son soutien aux dirigeants de Varsovie, 1989). Thus, despite its less than favourable attitude towards Mitterrand himself,²³ the newspaper defended the French president’s behaviour, acknowledging that many Poles might not have approved of it.²⁴

Conclusions

The developments in 1989 in the USSR and among the countries of people’s democracies were diligently monitored by *Le Monde*. The French newspaper observed the irreversible nature of the ongoing processes in the Soviet Union that marked a significant change in Gorbachev’s foreign policy approach. *Le Monde* was particularly intrigued by the growing determination in Central and Eastern Europe towards democratisation and the protection of human rights, which was becoming increasingly resolute and unstoppable. Initially, the magazine observed exceptional advancements in Hungary. Nevertheless, the changing dynamics in the Polish People’s Republic directed most of the magazine’s focus towards the situation in that country.²⁵ It may seem astonishing that the magazine analysed the puzzling murders of Polish priests and scrutinised the reforms introduced by M. Rakowski

²³ Cf. Footnote 4.

²⁴ The Polish United Workers’ Party expressed contentment with the outcome of Mitterrand’s visit. It was noted that the visit in June by President Mitterrand resulted in the resolution of a previously challenging period in bilateral relations ([Suggestions for the conversation of the Prime Minister M.F. Rakowski with the President of the United States of America, G. Bush], 1989, p. 8 [no continuous pagination]). Just prior to the presidential elections, *Le Monde* released an extensive article regarding Jaruzelski. The article depicts the general as a mysterious figure whose motivations are not fully comprehensible. Was he an “internationalist communist”, a “Moscow agent”, or a patriot?, *Le Monde* asked. The article notes Jaruzelski’s apprehension about running for the presidency, fearing that the National Assembly would not elect him. However, it paradoxically states that the West ultimately saved the general. The visits of Mitterrand and Bush, along with the general’s trips to Brussels and London, and even the G7 summit in Paris, convinced Poles, particularly the opposition, that there was a consensus in the West regarding the general’s issue. The article suggests that only the general seemed capable of ensuring a smooth transition to democracy (*POLOGNE: l’élection de Wojciech Jaruzelski à la présidence de la République Les métamorphoses d’un général*, 1989). Jaruzelski withdrew his candidacy for president but altered his decision due to the support provided by Gorbachev and George H. Bush. The American president supported the general’s candidacy, arguing that withdrawing from the candidacy could destabilise Poland’s internal situation. Additionally, French diplomacy strongly supported Jaruzelski’s candidacy (Dudek, 2004, pp. 363–364; Pleskot, 2010, p. 204).

²⁵ This passage discusses the dynamics of transformation before the June elections. As a result

in significant detail. However, these issues were considered intertwined with the progress of Poland's political transformation. The agreements made at the Round Table and the results of the June elections were viewed as significant accomplishments. Additionally, Solidarity's prudent and conservative strategy was endorsed. The organisation was commended for abstaining from abrupt actions that could threaten the agreement with the authorities. *Le Monde* opines that such actions could be hazardous owing to the present geopolitical situation and the likelihood of resistance within the party.

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of the Roundtable's decisions, Poland did not hold fully free elections until October 1991, while Hungary had already held fully democratic elections in March 1990 (Burakowski et al., 2021, p. 210).

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