

LET'S AGREE ON POLAND

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<https://nowaumowa.pl>

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English-language commentaries about the book:

<https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/poland-democratic-deficit-european-union-by-maciej-kisilowski-and-wojciech-przybylski-2019-05>

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Abstract

On the eve of one of Europe's most important elections of the decade – the October 15, 2023 parliamentary ballot in Poland – a diverse group of 28 Polish intellectuals, representing views from the left and liberals to the conservative right, presents a comprehensive proposal for a democratic constitutional reform.

Like never before, argue the authors, Poland needs a social contract – a set of constitutional rules accepted by citizens of both progressive and conservative political leanings. The authors argue that the key to developing such rules, and thus to the emergence of a truly consolidated democracy in Poland, is greater involvement of provincial and municipal governments, as well as citizens, in the mechanisms of governing the country. In a light and jargon-free style, they describe the main tenets of the proposed constitutional settlement. In cooperation with Poland's leading fiction writers, they present, in a fictionalized form, how the proposed system would work in practice and what its implementation would mean for citizens.

“Let's Agree on Poland” is an invitation to a new way of thinking about the future of Poland, but also an inspiration for democrats around the world to be bold and creative in their attempts to confront the challenges of authoritarian populism and political polarization.

COMMENT:

A EUROPEAN DREAM ABOUT POLISH DREAMS

Kalypso Nicolaidis, European University Institute

I have a dream about dreams. In this dream, I walk. I walk around the world in search of places where humans have found better ways to live together. Oh no, not in harmony. Simply in peace, social peace, in peace and in joy. Places where people might have a sparkle in their eye because when they look at each other, when they run into their neighbor, they know that they share some kind of common purpose. Sure, they disagree on many things – like whether the state should do more or less, whether schools should teach religion, or whether women should have a choice. But they have this sparkle in their eyes. And in this sparkle, their social contract has come alive.

In my dream, I walk. I walk inside the dream of others and make these dreams my own. Have you ever tried to penetrate the dreams of others dear reader? It takes curiosity, abandonment, madness. It takes courage too. You can lose yourself in a utopia of their making, and surreptitiously, the utopia creeps from under your eyelids, and it is there, right in front of you, it feels so real, a realist utopia extracted from a dream, from a web of dream you have made your own.

And in this moment of awareness, it is no longer a utopia. It has happened. It is happening. In the dream, I walk inside the new post-2024 Poland conjured up by Anna, Maciej, and their friends, twenty-eight conjurers of realist utopia, weaving together dream of new Voivodships. I walk through the beautiful Polish landscape, from lowland plains to snowy mountains, from the Baltic Sea coast to the Southern forest belt, through lakes, beaches and rivers, through hills, swamps and islands. I walk.

And yes, surreptitiously, their web of dreams starts to paint a political landscape for me as I walk.

New sparkle in the eyes

The landscape harps back to old medieval times as it seems that voivodships have always existed in this part of the world. But in the dreams, they have come alive in this moment, in our XXIst century, filled with digital streams and virtual enhancements. They are no longer the boundaries of some semi-irrelevant administrative jurisdiction in a country where all is decided at the center, a center where the two sides battle over the supposed soul of the country.

Instead, each voivodship has become its own exciting experiment, each with its own variations on a common dream: a new Poland of togetherness.

And so I walk through them all, progressive Pomerania Voivodship, Christian-Democrat Podkarpackie Voivodship, leftist west Pomerania Voivodship, conservative Podlasie Voivodship, classical liberal Greater Poland Voivodship. Each more fascinating than the other.

Of course, the dreamed voivodships have different shapes and colors. Their main protagonists are dreaming up different clever strategies, different star projects, different daring policies. The open and equality-based dream leftist voivodship has a different look and feel from the liberal voivodship's democratic self-government of free people.

But in all of these dreamlands, something is brewing. In all of these dreamlands, I can see sparkles in the eyes of the people whose path I cross, old residents from the region who now know their leaders, or the new returnees, from Warsaw or from farther afield, and even those who have come although they were never there before.

Densely interconnected polycentric Poland

Have you entered my dream about their dreams, reader? I am not Polish, but French, Greek and British. But in this Poland, I feel at home abroad, which after all is what we mean by being European. Ah I hear you, this has already become your dream. You don't need any injunction to dream, from a foreigner like me or from anyone for that matter. You have already met them. In fact you are a bit of them too. All of them or some of them. Ela, Maciek, Greg, Amelia, Florian Iza, Yulka and Ira in progressive Pomerania, Christian-Democrat Podkarpacie's Dorota, Piotr and Seba in leftist voivodship, Magdalena and Pawel from conservative voivodship, or Aldona in liberal voivodship. Local heroes and local patriots, whatever you all prefer to call yourselves.

In this dream of ours you have already approved a constitutional coalition covering all political preferences as long as they remain inclusive, from the left and progressive camp, through classical liberals, to Christian Democrats and hard conservative right. You have already voted with your feet to choose your preferred political space across the whole of this new multicolored, multiethnic, multi-ideas Poland.

You have, in short, embraced "strategic decentralization", even if this is quite a mouthful!

This idea, this ideal, can mean many things, to you and to everyone else. It can simply mean: Let's agree! Yes. But let's agree to disagree. Peaceful co-existence. We shall each explore our social, economic, and political innovation in our own ways. Write our own provincial charters, with preamble that truly emphasize local values without excluding anyone. Pomeranians won't do taxation fairness in the same way as Podlasians with their family credits or Greater Poland's with their single flat tax. And when it comes to spending these zlotys, the ones will address cost of living or housing emergency first the others will focus on competitiveness. But they are all willing to kill their sacred cows, like business constraints on the left or quick privatization on the

right... some even imagine replacing the 500+ program! And they all care about race to the top, even if that top does not quite look the same.

But co-existence does not mean fragmentation. Note! There are lots of new train tracks in this decentralized Poland that can connect all these circles of autonomy. Here we have it: a densely interconnected polycentric Poland.

Mutuality in diversity

For strategic decentralization is also about mutuality. Beyond political coexistence it offers the promise of mutual recognition: I see your difference, I understand where it is coming from and so when I return to my own, I have been changed by this knowledge and yet remain myself. In this story, seeing you, next door or in the province, I accept even our disagreement about how to deal with our difference...including on how much Warsaw should help us deal with these differences. So mutual recognition needs to reach to the most sensitive corners of our social fabric: our collective memory. Isn't a good start when our conservative voivodship explains that "the provinces of Lower Silesia, Lodz, Lesser Poland, Mazovia, Pomerania, Silesia, Warmia-Mazury, Greater Poland and West Pomerania decided to jointly manage the Polish Academy of Sciences, while the provinces of Kuyavia-Pomerania, Lublin, Lubuskie, Opole, Podkarpacie, Podlasie and Swietokrzyskie decided to manage precisely the Institute for National Remembrance." Division of labor yes, but we talk!

For the Voivodship will not resist the temptation of learning and borrowing from each other: employer friendly rating System, pilot fields for pro-worker and green standards "non-trading" Sundays, electronic systems for evaluating the quality of public services, fair sovereign wealth fund -aren't these tradeable Goods?

So in spite of all these differences, in spite of all the diversity that the new Voivodship Poland is able to celebrate, the dream is about the collective a collective project of

diversity in unity. And Beyond mutual recognition, this is a story of shared joyful transformation. Even our conservative voivodship is busily inventing Industry 4.0 and Agricultural Valley 4.0. to connect real and virtual worlds to serve renewal. Sure, change may have different beacons on different lands. But doesn't Poznan's liberal leader speak for all when he proclaims, "if we are to be afraid of everything, we should have stayed in Warsaw!"

Glue and effervescence

We need of course institutional glue. In the interconnected dreams, a cohesion fund connects our Voivodships who, in a common college ensure some basic consistency across the country. and a Senate takes decentralization down to the municipalities to ensure that a new provincial centrism does not replace the old Warsaw centrism.

But even beyond local municipalism, isn't the ultimate thread linking these dreams, a story of decentralization all the way down? They all say the same in different keys: decentralization in the end is about the citizens, Polish nationals and non-nationals alike who ground this project with their collective intelligence and their collective aspirations. "Strategic" decentralization indeed. A strategy about ownership of the project by all, a strategy otherwise known as democracy! Here, people power and localism go hand in hand since the dream we are dreaming together means "giving voice to the people directly concerned, who benefit from what the local government can offer them" – from workers in the firms, to teachers in their classrooms, to doctors in the wards. Giving power to everybody in the body politics, who across our voivodships come to vote in physical or electronic referenda and preferenda, including on health care, schools, taxes. This new social contract is fluid, full of political conflicts and push back, with no end, to be constantly reinvented. Paradoxically perhaps, social acceptance for change rests on effervescent of democracy.

Are these logic of coexistence, mutual recognition and transformation, to be all intertwined in the new Poland? Or will they be steps on a long and winding road? Up to you to decide.

Do it for you, do it for us

I have a dream about your dreams. I am not Polish, but I allowed myself to make your dream my own. Why? Because what you dare or dread to call the Polish-Polish war cannot go on. Not when war is raging in Ukraine, not when we will need to rebuild Ukraine, not when we are all Ukrainians now. Split Poland hurts the Poles, and it hurts all Europeans. Poland can stay whole by embracing its diversity. It can be the avant-garde of citizen participation in governance while respecting its traditions. Do it for you and do it for us. This positive model of yours, a cross-party, democratic social contract based on regional self-governance, is brilliantly valid beyond your borders. In addition to your regional government officials, you will send your ideas and your blueprints to Brussels, and in the process, through contagion and sheer envy, you will change the whole of Europe and its mosaic of voivodships.

Let us share widely and broadly this Polish dream nurtured in a Social Contract Incubator (!) and born in this simple book weaved together by a wonderful group of committed academic-activists.

Imagine yourself, sometimes after the 2024 big bang. Whether joining Jadwiga's Christmas dinner table reading the Gospel in Suwalki, or Piotr's and Dorota's party drinking beer till the Pomeranian morning, or you have landed "At Grandmothers' and Grandchildren's", I believe we can all agree with Waldek in West Pomerania: "It's better here now than in England." Or for that matter better than anywhere else in the world!