

BOOK REVIEW

Paweł Churski, Tomasz Kaczmarek (Eds),
Three Decades of Polish Socio-Economic Transformations Geographical Perspectives,
Springer Economic Geography, 2022

by Andrzej Miszczuk

Maria Curie-Skłodowska University

E-mail: andrzej.miszczuk@mail.umcs.pl

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6928-6535>

The radical political, economic, and social transformation that took place in Poland in the late 1980s and early 1990s, which was facilitated by the unique geopolitical situation associated with the collapse of the Soviet Union and its sphere of influence, has been the subject of numerous political, economic, and sociological analyses. However, there has been a clear lack of research on the geographical effects of these changes, viewed from a national, regional, and local level, and from a longer-term perspective specific to the socio-economic processes occurring in space. This gap is successfully filled by the reviewed publication, which is aimed at foreign readers who may not always have access to comprehensive and in-depth studies of the Polish transformation. Not only does it serve as a source of information but also as a basis for comparative research on development in this part of Central and Eastern Europe. It is also of importance for Polish readers. According to data from the 2021 National Census of the Central Statistical Office of Poland, almost 39% those currently living in Poland were born after 1990. Therefore, they have no personal experience of the functioning of the socialist system before the transformation and may not fully appreciate its fundamental significance for the development of Poland, as well as the risks arising from the authoritarian tendencies of the current Polish authorities. The problem of intergenerational exchange and the ensuing partial loss of social consciousness regarding transformational processes is not unique to Poland, but affects most post-communist countries.

The main period of research, the results of which are presented in the monograph, covers the years 1990-2021, although some authors also bring to bear retrospectives. From the perspective of

the rapid events that have taken place in Europe and around the world in the years 2021-2023 (the implications of the pandemic, the war in Ukraine, the new global economic crisis), the monograph is of a historical character. However, it still provides an instructive lesson in this regard. The subject matter of the monograph covers five main groups of issues:

- Part I: The Context of Polish Post-communist Transformation) identifies the reasons and course of the social, political and economic transformations, focusing on the economic reforms and political changes.
- Part II: Transformation of Society, the Economy, and the Environment, demonstrates sectoral shifts in the economy (selected industries, services and agriculture) and the Polish character of the demographic transition as well as changes in the natural environment.
- Part III: Transformation of the Country's Space, highlights the new organisation of public administration, spatial changes taking place in Poland and focuses on spatial planning and landscape management, regional and local development in such areas as the urban and rural system and transport network.
- Part IV: Poland in Europe and in the World, shows Poland's place in both the global economy and European regional policy and indicates international trade relations.
- Part V Poland's Development in the Face of Global Challenges.

The foreword, authored by Andres Rodriguez-Pose, provides a synthesizing overview of the most significant transformative events and their consequences that have occurred in Poland since 1990, in comparative perspective with the Eurozone and selected post-communist countries.

Part I opens with a text by Leszek Balcerowicz, former Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance, responsible for the radical economic reforms in 1990-1991 known as the "Balcerowicz Plan." The remaining articles in this section address regional patterns of the transformation and policy responses from 1989 to 2019, the geographical and historical background of the transformation, electoral behaviour geography, and administrative reforms of territorial divisions.

Part II presents discussions on the dynamics of socio-economic development, the transformation of the car market (considered a spectacular manifestation of changes taking place in Poland), changes in ownership and production structure of agriculture, the tertiarisation of the economy and population changes during the demographic transition.

In Part III, which is dedicated to the transformation of the Polish spatial structure, the chapters look into changes in the spatial planning system, the transformation of the urban and rural systems, modernisation of transport infrastructure, tourism development, environmental change and management, as well as landscape and spatial management.

Part IV depicts Poland in the context of the global economy, looks at changes in the spatial and commodity structure of Polish foreign trade, transformations in the labor market, and the effects of EU regional policy on the development of Polish regions.

The final Part V focuses on Poland's structural resilience, the search for development concepts for Polish cities, and, in the form of an epilogue, the course and challenges related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

As previously mentioned, the authors were unable to include in their publication a discussion of the latest groundbreaking event for Poland, Europe, and the world, i.e. the Russian invasion of Ukraine, due to the timing of the publication. The consequences of this war are likely to have long-term and spatially diverse implications for Poland, but this is a topic for another extensive monograph.

However, in my opinion, the reviewed publication did not explore two threads that are quite symptomatic from the perspective of evaluating the mechanism and geographical effects of Poland's socio-economic transformation. One of these is the spatiotemporal analysis of the inflow of non-agricultural foreign capital, as well as its sectoral and geographical structure. In this regard, one can observe a regularity consisting of the inflow of this capital primarily to the western and southern voivodeships, with a clear delay in the diffusion of this process in eastern Poland.

The other overlooked topic is the transformations of border regions, in particular the variability of the functions of the individual Polish borders. Poland's entry into the European Union and the Schengen zone has made its frontiers with Germany, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Lithuania almost imperceptible, and thus they play a more integrative role. However, the remaining borders are filtering barriers, with intensified elements of cooperation only in the case of the border with Ukraine.

I also have some doubts about reaching back to the beginnings of the existence of the Polish state in the context of the changes in the last 30 years. While it is still justified (perhaps less so now) to look back to the period of the partitions (mainly the 19th century), the impact of earlier historical events is from today's perspective negligible, especially since, for instance, significant events related to territorial changes and mass population displacements took place within a few years after the end of World War II.

The publication's unquestionable value lies in its extensive factual and cartographic documentation of the presented considerations. The selection of the team behind the monograph is also noteworthy because it combines both young and experienced researchers, mostly affiliated with the Faculty of Socio-Economic Geography and Spatial Management of Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, but also originating from Warsaw-based universities (Prof. Leszek Balcerowicz, Prof.

Grzegorz Gorzelak, and Dr Piotr Żuber). Among the authors, one can also find two outstanding foreign professors, Andres Rodriguez-Pose and Peter Nijkamp.

It is difficult, within the framework of such a short form as a review, to describe each chapter in detail. However, it is possible to venture a few concluding reflections of a general nature.

Firstly, it is beyond doubt that the political and economic changes which took place in Poland (and by this example in many post-communist European countries) in the late 1980s and early 1990s were successful and initiated further positive transformations in various aspects and spheres of socio-economic life, as described in the monograph.

Secondly, the accession to the EU was a very significant qualitative moment for the development of Poland, not only in terms of access to the Cohesion Policy and the Common Agricultural Policy funds but, above all, with respect to the benefits of operating within the framework of the single European market, which contributed to the flow of not only goods and services but also capital and labour resources.

Thirdly, regional policy was strengthened (previously dominated by the sectoral-industry system), both in the interregional (national) and intraregional dimensions. This strengthening had an institutional (public administration reform), substantive policy-driven (new challenges, new instruments, project-strategic thinking), and financial (operational programs) character.

Fourthly, there has been clear progress in the area of infrastructure equipment, agriculture has been rebuilt, the labour market situation has improved, the service sector has developed, and society's wealth has increased (as evidenced by, for example, the development of the automotive market), but at the same time, unfavorable demographic changes are taking place, interregional polarisation is deepening, which is also reflected in different voting preferences.

Fifthly, despite the predominantly positive outcomes of the transformation that has taken place in Poland over the last 30 years, there are certain issues that remain unresolved, which the authors of the volume are aware of. These issues include problems and challenges resulting from such processes as globalisation, digitisation, development of civil society, symptoms of illiberal democracy, adaptation to climate change or most recently health threats due to the COVID-19 pandemic. A new external challenge to Poland's resilience is the ongoing war on our eastern border in Ukraine, while an internal challenge is the populist government discouraging Polish society from the EU and our country's presence in it. Furthermore, the government is unable to meet the so-called milestones to which it committed, and which are imperative for the European Union to once again provide Poland with significant financial resources, this time within the National Recovery Plan and Cohesion Policy 2021-2027.