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Democracy in the 21st Century World

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Democracy in Poland and its Promise for the Future

Poland has widely been regarded as one of the most prominent success stories of the third wave of democracy. However, despite the impressive accomplishments Poland has made in democratization, the country still faces considerable challenges. After years of communist government, Poland had to undertake the challenge of completely rebuilding their governmental system while fostering support for democratic principles among the public. Despite setbacks and challenges faced by all nations as they transition to a democratic system, Poland has shown relative strength and promise for the future.

There is little doubt in the minds of most scholars that Poland is a democratic state. Freedom House, the well-known NGO that assesses the state of democracy throughout the world, has assigned Poland a 1.0 for political rights and civil liberties.¹ This rating places Poland amongst the most democratic nations in the world. In an incredibly short span of time Poland conducted a fairly complete transition to democracy. Following World War II, The Soviet Union instituted a communist state in Poland, which existed as a satellite soviet state until the transition to democracy began in 1989. Economic struggles and labor turmoil during the 1980's led to the formation of a trade union know as Solidarity. This group developed into a powerful political force and, in 1990, Solidarity leader Lech Welesa

¹ Freedom in the World 2012: Poland. Freedom House, accessed November 10 2012.
<http://www.freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2012/poland>.

came to power in the first post-communist free presidential election. Under his leadership, Poland rapidly moved into free government and market economy. The adoption of “shock therapy,” an economic tactic where price and monetary controls are immediately removed and all industry is rapidly privatized, led to the fast growth of a free market, crucial to supporting democracy.²

After the fall of the communist government, Poland’s new democratic leaders were faced with the challenge of creating an entirely new system of government for the nation. Within a relatively short span of time a Parliamentary republic was formed, composed of a bicameral legislature, headed by a prime minister, a president, and an independent judiciary.³ Poland uses a multiparty system, whereby a coalition of several parties is necessary to the formation of a government. Due to the large number of political parties, no one coalition has ruled twice. Thus, Poland passes Samuel Huntington’s two-turnover test with flying colors. However, the sheer number of parties and resulting electoral volatility have posed a challenge to the success of democratic governance in Poland.⁴ Despite this, a stable coalition has been formed following the outcome of every election thus far, and the trend is likely to continue in the future.

In 2006, concerns over democratic backsliding came to the forefront when twin brothers Lech and Jarosław Kaczyński came to power, serving as President and Prime

² Richard F. Starr "Transition in Poland." *Current History* 89, no. 551 (December 1990): 401-427.

³ "Country snapshot: Political structure." Country Report. Poland no. 4 (April 2012): 25. Business Source Complete, EBSCOhost 75129999.

⁴ Francis Millard. *Democratic Elections in Poland, 1991-2007* (New York: Routledge, 2010).

Minister, respectively.⁵ The concentration of power in two brothers, while not in violation of any laws or democratic principles, would have made it easy for the pair to undermine the nascent democratic system, and retain near absolute power. However, these concerns were somewhat eased by the unfortunate death of 89 high ranking Polish officials, including President Lech Kaczynski, in a plane crash in April 2010.⁶ This tragedy offered a significant test to the Polish government's ability to overcome a crisis situation. Though there was a momentary uncertainty over the future of newfound democratic state, Poland was able to follow the procedures laid out in their constitution in selecting new leadership. The persistence of democracy even through a crisis of this scale is a strong indicator that democracy will continue in the coming years. Despite the challenges Poland has faced, the countries' progress toward democratic consolidation is impressive.

Poland has built strong connections to other, more established democracies, becoming a member of NATO in 1999 and a member of the European Union in 2004. Poland has become well integrated into the European Union and held the rotating presidency of that body during the second half of 2011.⁷ Poland also continues to have a close relationship with the United States, especially in the area of defense due to a U.S. ballistic missile interceptor facility located in Poland.

Only one year after the beginning of the democratic transition, over 100 political parties were registered.⁸ Since the beginnings of democracy in Poland, a vibrant civil society has flourished. In addition to a large number of domestic political parties, NGOs

⁵ Krzysztof Jasiewicz, and Agnieszka Jasiewicz- Betkiewicz. "Poland." *European Journal Of Political Research* 46, no. 7/8 (2007): 1063-1074.

⁶ Janusz Bugajski, "Poland's Progress: Where Warsaw Fits in Europe," *Current History* 110, no. 734 (March 2011): 103-109.

⁷ Outlook for 2012-16 Country Report Poland (2011)

⁸ Francis Millard. *Democratic Elections in Poland, 1991-2007* (New York: Routledge, 2010).

have had a major impact on governmental and social reforms.⁹ Despite Poland's well-developed network of NGOs, civil society on a micro level – groups of citizens acting together in an informal manner – has not developed as strongly. Poland's struggle with voter absenteeism has remained a major concern given the relative youth of their democracy. In the October 2011 elections voter turnout was only 48.9 percent, almost 5 percent lower than the Parliamentary elections in 2007. Additionally, organized, unpaid community or political activities are rare among the public, with one April 2011 survey indicating only 24% of Poles volunteered for any organization within the past year.¹⁰ In order to ensure a lasting democracy, Poland will have to take action to encourage individual involvement in politics and civil society, and continue to foster a belief in the importance of the individual vote.

One of the most prominent challenges facing Poland today remains the level of corruption. In 2006 the state formed the Central Anticorruption Bureau (CBA) in a somewhat sincere attempt to address the issue in both the public and private sector. However, the CBA itself has corrupt elements. In September 2010 the former head of the Central Anticorruption Bureau was charged with abuse of power after being suspended from his position in 2009 for allegedly encouraging CBA employees to engage in bribery.¹¹ Transparency International, an NGO watchdog, has ranked Poland 41st of 182 nations in the

⁹ Nations in Transit: Poland, Freedom House, accessed Nov 16 2012.

<http://www.freedomhouse.org/report/nations-transit/2012/poland>

¹⁰ Tadeusz Szawiel "Democratic Consolidation in Poland: Support for Democracy, Civil Society and the Party System." Polish Sociological Review no. 168 (November 2009): 483-506.

¹¹ Freedom in the World 2012: Poland. Freedom House, accessed November 10 2012.
<http://www.freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2012/poland>.

2011 Corruption Perception Index.¹² While this rank places Poland in the quarter of nations, a moderate success for a new democracy, the issue remains a critical area for improvement in order to ensure the long-term success of democratic governance.

Poland's independent judiciary is based on a sound framework much similar to those found in other European states. However, the judiciary has some major need for improvement in practice. There are concerns that many judges are corrupt, accepting bribes (partially due to their low pay) and leading to the extremely slow adjudication of corruption cases.¹³ If the Judiciary remains subject to political pressure one of the main components of the Polish system of checks and balances would be wholly compromised. In order to support a free and fair democratic system, the judiciary cannot be independent in name only. Unfortunately, there has been no significant progress in addressing these problems in recent years.

Poland has made particularly impressive strides in the areas of civil rights and civil liberties. The Polish constitution, ratified in 1997, guarantees such rights as freedom of expression, assembly, and religion. The Polish government has instituted strong protections for ethnic minorities as well as women. In recent years women have made considerable advances in the professional and political world, with women now holding

¹² 2011 Corruption Perception Index, Transparency International accessed Nov 16, 2012, <http://cpi.transparency.org/cpi2011/results/>

¹³ Nations in Transit: Poland, Freedom House, accessed Nov 16 2012.

<http://www.freedomhouse.org/report/nations-transit/2012/poland>

24% of seats in the Polish lower house, the Sejm.¹⁴ This number is highly favorable given that women hold only 18% of seats in the United States House of Representatives..¹⁵

The Palikot movement, a liberal political party founded by Janusz Palikot in 2010, has emerged as a champion of civil rights concerns and liberal social policy. In the 2011 parliamentary election the party gained an impressive 10% of seats. The success of Palikot, who promotes liberal positions on abortion, gay rights, and the separation of church and state, signals a departure from the staunchly conservative and religiously informed Poland of the past.¹⁶ Palikot himself is wildly popular among the younger generation, and has garnered political fame for his provocative stunts. Earlier this year Palikot received attention for leading a group of lawmakers in smoking marijuana outside of parliament as part of a campaign to liberalize the Poland's drug policy.¹⁷ In the 2011 elections, a transsexual woman and an openly gay man won seats in Parliament, both members of the Palikot movement.¹⁸ Many commentators believe that a social libertarian party such as the Palikot movement may become dominant in Polish politics in later decades.

¹⁴ Freedom in the World 2012: Poland. Freedom House, accessed November 10 2012.
<http://www.freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2012/poland>.

¹⁵ Congressional Research Service, *Women in the United States Congress: 1917-2012* (Washington, DC: GPO, 2012)

¹⁶ Nicholas Kulish and Anatol Magdziarz. 2011. "Provocateur's Strong Showing Is a Sign of a Changing Poland." New York Times, October 11. 4

¹⁷ The Associated, Press. 2012. "Polish activists smoke pot in front of parliament." AP English Worldstream - EnglishNewspaper Source Plus, EBSCOhost

¹⁸ Monika Scisłowska; Vanessa Gera. N.d.SCISŁOWSKA;VANESSA, GERA. n.d. "Poland: Transsexual woman and openly gay man take seats in new parliament in historic change." Canadian Press, TheNewspaper Source Plus, EBSCOhost
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The emergence of new liberal political parties has led to a particularly strong challenge to the Catholic church, which has traditionally had very strong influence in Poland. Staunchly conservative political parties, such as the League of Polish Families have emerged in response to growing liberalism in Poland. In an attempt to prevent liberal policy changes even members of the clergy have become political.¹⁹ Father Tadeusz Rydzyk, founder of the extremely controversial Radio Maryja Catholic broadcast network, has become one of the most influential voices in conservative Polish politics. The sway he has gained illustrates the power the church still maintains in Poland. Despite a prominent conservative element, Polish politics has been moderate and has traveled in a liberal direction in recent years.

The Freedom House Nations in Transit report rates the level of democratic consolidation among states, a seven being reserved for the least democratically consolidated states. Poland received an average score of 2.14, receiving the poorest marks for corruption, receiving a 3.25 in that sub-category. Though Poland surely has many areas where improvement is necessary in order to sustain their democratic experiment, it has made significant progress and undergone an impressive transformation from communism to popular government. It is extremely likely that Poland will remain a democracy in the coming decades. Though improvements have been slow in some key areas, there have been few if any cases where democracy has not been on the rise in Poland since 1989.

¹⁹ Krzysztof Jasiewicz, and Agnieszka Jasiewicz- Betkiewicz. "Poland." *European Journal Of Political Research* 46, no. 7/8 (2007): 1063-1074.