

Polish Journal of Political Science

Volume 6 Issue 4 (2020)



Wydanie bieżącego numeru PJPS – zadanie realizowane w ramach umowy 874/P-DUN/2019 ze środków Ministra Nauki i Szkolnictwa Wyższego przeznaczonych na działalność upowszechniającą naukę.



**Ministry of Science
and Higher Education**

Republic of Poland

Polish Journal of Political Science

Volume 6 Issue 4

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eISSN 2391-3991

Original version: e-book

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**In search of the European welfare state.
Social Europe concepts in contemporary Polish political
thought**

Abstract

Social Europe, understood as a desirable political project, has been reflected in contemporary Polish political thought, especially after 2004. This paper explores the accounts of political thought of three political parties: the Democratic Left Alliance (SLD), the Polish People's Party (PSL), and the Self-Defence of the Republic of Poland (Samoobrona RP). Their political thoughts shared emphasis on the social aspects of EU integration. According to the assumptions propagated by these parties, a social Europe would be built by incorporating the welfare-state principles to the European level, becoming a response to the multifaceted and excessive globalisation process, and offering resistance to the neoliberal agenda. All the political parties discussed here focused on the social nature of a unified Europe, and on promoting the values of solidarity, equality, freedom, justice and democracy.

Key words: political thought, European Union, European integration, Poland, socialism

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Background

At the 2017 Gothenburg Summit, the European Parliament, the Council of Europe and the European Commission announced the establishment of the European Pillar of Social Rights. It expresses 20 principles and rights essential for fair and well-functioning labour markets and welfare systems in the 21st century Europe. The Pillar comprises three chapters: “Equal opportunities and access to the labour market”, “Fair working conditions”, and “Social protection and inclusion”. The European Pillar of Social Rights has become a template for building a Social Europe.

The concept of Social Europe goes back to the doctrine called Delorsism (derived from Jacque Delors, President of the European Commission between 1985–1994), whose underlying aim was to finalise building of a single market while ensuring greater appreciation for the social aspect of integration. Delors postulated liberalisation of the European economic space and, at the same time, creation of a European social space (*l'espace sociale*), in which values such as solidarity, social rights, social dialogue, etc. would be fully respected. According to some interpretations his concept was meant as a kind of recompense for economic liberalisation, which would legitimise the single-market project among the public.¹ It should be emphasised that there were three notions of Social Europe circulating in public consciousness. First, as a normative category, or a de facto political project, representing the opposite of the neoliberal vision of the Community (liberal Europe, monetary Europe). Second, as a strategic vision, a kind of “ideological incantation” of the European

¹ Anioł (2011): 20; Rinaldi (2016); Dekker (2006).

left (the Party of European Socialists), which was demanding that social issues become a more prominent feature of the integration process. Third, as a descriptive category relating to social trends and processes in the European Union.² Social Europe, understood as a desirable political project, has been reflected in contemporary Polish political thought, especially after 2004. The subject of research was the political thought of contemporary Polish political parties. Contemporary Polish political thought was analysed in its three dimensions: ideological, conceptual, and programmatic. This paper explores the accounts of political thought of three political parties: The Democratic Left Alliance (SLD), the Polish People's Party (PSL), and the Self-Defence of the Republic of Poland (Samoobrona RP). Their political thought shared emphasis on the social aspects of EU integration.

The research goal of the article was to establish the content and meaning of "social Europe" in contemporary political thought of selected parties. A methodology specific to political science was applied, i.e. a middle-order system analysis and comparative analysis. Taking into account the research techniques, the basis of the article is the analysis of the sources of political thought.

The Democratic Left Alliance (SLD)

Cooperation between states in international organisations was an important subject in social democratic political thought. European integration was set in the broad context of global interdependence between states. For SLD the multifaceted interdependence between states and the blurring

² Anioł (2011a): 1–8.

of the lines between national and supranational spheres meant that the state had gained new opportunities to pursue its *raison d'état*. The empowerment and potential of the state in diverse forms of integration were also a precondition for maintaining sovereignty. Social democrats were proponents of Poland's entry into the EU, taking pride in the fact that a social democratic formation had "led Poland into the Union". They regarded this momentous act as overthrowing the post-Yalta order, "the ultimate fall of the Iron Curtain", a fact with critical bearing for Poland's future and a part of Poles' common good. Poland's entry into the EU was seen as "a historic and strategic" choice for Poland rather than a decision driven by short-term interest, and it was the government's task to "find the right place in the European family" – as an influential state with actual impact on the EU's reality, as opposed to a mere recipient of the EU's decision-making processes.³

A particularly accentuated subject was the concept of Social Europe, seen as another stage of European integration, following its political and economic phases. The Social Europe project was meant to bring into reality the social model so cherished by social democrats, one founded upon solidarity, social justice, protection of labour, the poor and the unemployed, and the concept of a welfare state. Social democrats believed that the objectives of a Social Europe were to be met by developing European standards in social policy and aligning healthcare, welfare, and education systems, while respecting the specific national needs of individual Member States.

A Social Europe was meant to be an area of common social standards and a space for achieving a social market economy, full employment, social progress and sustainable

³ Miller (2004).

development – in fact a single European “modern welfare state”. Economic and social goals of the EU’s policy were to be balanced against each other to ensure the social aspect of integration and promote greater co-responsibility of the states for solving social problems.⁴

In order for a Social Europe to materialise, Europe had to undergo the federalisation process, producing a “strong transnational European organism”. Deep integration was meant to include “all possible options”, the constitution and expansion of federal institutions. A federation of nation states with strong Community institutions and cultural diversity was to act as a recipe for a range of threats to the EU’s stability such as: the economic crisis, integration slowdown, inequalities between Member States, the building of multi-speed Europe, the weakening of European cohesion policy, and a rise in national egoism. Poland’s entry into the Eurozone, considered to have been “a re-entry into the European Union” was to deepen the integration, as well as to help Poland avoid marginalisation. Different “speeds” of European integration were thought to be an unavoidable, logical and objective phenomenon. Accordingly, it seemed reasonable to join the EU’s centre, focused around the monetary union member states. Community federalisation was seen as the EU’s global power, with “a strong European Union” making it possible to build “a strong Poland”.

Notably, social democratic views on European integration and the resulting concept of a Social Europe originated from the preferred model of the state which accentuated the welfare component. There were two reasons for which the welfare role of the state was essential. The first one,

⁴ Słodkowska, Dołbakowska (2010): 71–73.

attributable to the state's thinking being based on humanistic values, aimed to ensure the well-being of people and bridge the social gaps and disproportions between the poor and the rich. The other reason was related to the important social democratic principle of justice. It was meant to materialise in relations between

employers and employees, the centre and the periphery, the majority and any minority, and between the better and the worse off.

The welfare state was regarded as the highest achievement of the left in post-war Western Europe. In SLD's view man created and improved the state to defend and protect against external threats and prevent strong social groups from dominating the vulnerable. The welfare state's aim was to create conditions for citizens to be active and to shift from giving state handouts to multiplying common resources.

It is worth emphasizing that the SLD was one of the few parties that, from the beginning of Polish integration with the EU, identified themselves directly with the assumptions of the European Parliament faction - the Party of European Socialists (PES), and from 2009 - the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D). The PES's program document was recognized by the SLD/UP coalition as the political program concerning the elections to the EP in 2004. For both the faction and the Democratic Left Alliance, the European Union was an important player in the era of globalization, because only a united Europe could overcome global crises and improve the quality of life of its citizens. It was postulated to create a social, democratic and active Europe within the framework of international socialism, in which

the economy would revive and citizens would live in more just and safer societies than ever before. Both the SLD and the S&D advocated a social market economy model that nurtures the values of social solidarity rather than right-wing individualism.⁵

The Polish People's Party (PSL)

The PSL took a more Euro-realistic approach, which was clearly due to the party's actual involvement in the negotiation process. They demonstrated a positive attitude towards European integration, with the caveat that due regard would be given to Poland's national interests, including in particular the well-being of Polish agriculture.⁶ The study of accounts of the PSL's political thought led to the conclusion that Poland's membership in the EU was the party's main point of reference in Polish foreign policy and a decisive factor for the range of Poland's links with the world. PSL's politicians saw the EU as evidence of the continent's unification based on a shared Christian, Greek and Roman heritage, as well as a common culture and economic model, regardless of the specific nature of each Member State and the diversity of their interests. The only alternative for Poland was to become part of the "Commonwealth of Independent States" and de facto fall within the Russian sphere of influence.⁷

PSL's politicians claimed that by accepting Christianity in the 10th century, Poland became part of Latin Europe, to which it, in a way, returned after the fall of Communism. This return meant that Poland would re-adopt democratic

⁵ Pienias (2016): 290, 294; Master (2014): 65.

⁶ Zuba (2006): 307–308.

⁷ Grzyb (2006); Miller (2004).

standards and re-empower its citizens by making them the central point of reference for any actions taken by political authorities. The European Union was regarded as the source of potential economic and social successes, as well as a challenge for the government, especially in relation to creating an integration model in line with the country's interests and ambitions, and to having an impact on EU legislation and EU policy towards third states and international organisations. Hence Poland's presence in the EU was, on the one hand, an obvious and irreversible historic step, dictated by *raison d'état*, and, on the other, a means to help the country develop its economy, improve the financial situation of its citizens and build a welfare state.⁸

And it is for this reason that PSL's politicians advocated the idea of a social Europe, in which priority would be given to: solidarity, social rights, the principle of the priority of labour over capital, social justice and social security. This project was meant as a synthesis of free-market and social aspects of integration, and a starting point for creating a uniform European "social space".

For PSL's politicians the social Europe project could only be implemented in the integration model of a Europe of homelands, "a Union, as opposed to a strictly federal entity", working for the benefit of Member States. European states could only integrate on equal partnership terms and based on mutual respect. This ran contrary to the federalist idea, which, in PSL's view, would lead to the shrivelling of Member States' sovereignty and the formation of a European superstate, one the one hand, and pose a threat of two powerful states – France and Germany – claiming domination, on the other.

⁸ Kuźmiuk (2003): 5.

PSL consistently reiterated that the Union should not become a federation, as

shown by the case of the Soviet Union, which fell because it was too centralised, overtightened, without having regard to cultural differences and the specific nature of individual nations.⁹

Moreover, a two-speed Union would cause the fragmentation of the Community and prevent it from building a common, uniform social space of Member States.

The Self-Defence of the Republic of Poland (Samoobrona RP)

European integration was an important subject for Samoobrona RP. Its politicians participated in the debates on EU-related subjects, both before and after Poland's entry to the EU, but had no impact on the negotiation process and its results, nor had they any influence on shaping EU policy after 2004.

The party declared its support for European integration and wished that it had a positive influence "on the lives and pockets of each citizen of our homeland", since – as Samoobrona RP argued – Poland was and is in Europe", and given the growing international connections in the contemporary world, it was unacceptable for states to remain politically and economically isolated. At the same time, the party warned that interdependence between states should not mean subordination and domination, which was in the interest of strong states. For Samoobrona RP European integration meant cooperation rather than "consolidation at all costs", and its aim was

⁹ Pawlak (2011).

to help “overcome historical political divides” and “to chase out ‘Cold War’ demons once and for all”. Party members claimed that the 2004 EU enlargement changed the balance of power in the Union and strengthened the international position of the entire region.

After Poland joined the Community, the party opined that with the negotiations having an unfavourable outcome for Poland, the country would be unable to benefit from EU membership, have an inferior status, be an underdog, have the “humiliating” position of a second-rate state, “a poor relation”. And the most painful cost of this “moving with the crowd” towards the Union would involve throwing away economic relations with the East, from which Poland had been “squeezed out” of by Western countries. Samoobrona RP blamed this on the political elites of the Third Polish Republic, which substituted loyalty to Poland with servility towards “foreign, anti-Polish European interests”, implementing a plan of “colonial-style subjugation of Poland to international economic and political organisations”.

Like PSL and SLD, Samoobrona RP promoted the concept of a social (solidary) Europe, understood as a commonwealth of states in which human dignity was a supreme value enshrined in EU legislation. For Samoobrona RP the idea of a social Europe represented a constitutive value which cemented European integration by respecting human rights, including, above all, economic, social and cultural rights, as opposed to the “destructive” neoliberal model, associated with income inequality and poverty.

Running counter to the “neoliberal version of a globalising world”, the EU model was based on five principles: (1) subsidiarity, which set the boundaries of Community law and drew the lines of responsibility between EU institutions and

Member State governments, ensuring that decisions could be taken at the lowest possible level – that of the nation states’ administrations; (2) solidarity between nations, helping to bridge developmental gaps and balance economic and social potentials between Member States “subject to the consent, and at the cost” of affluent states; (3) balance between protection of interests and the ability to reach compromises and build coalitions with states which have similar problems and negotiation interests; (4) partnership based on the empowerment of Member States, respect for their *raison d’état* and right to follow their own path of social, economic and cultural development; and (5) “unity in diversity”, running counter to Europe’s cultural homogenisation and uniformisation.

Similarly to PSL, Samoobrona RP was consistent in its view that the concept of a social Europe could be brought into being by implementing the integration model of a Europe of homelands – “Charles de Gaulle’s, Margaret Thatcher’s and John Paul II’s idea”, aimed at the integration of nation states, as opposed to regions and “blurred state and national identities”. Such an integration model, promoting unity without eradicating differences, was in line with Poland’s national interest as it gave freedom to the nation state, considered by the party’s politicians as “an independent and lasting entity, cherished for generations”. The Europe-of-homelands model was to be reinforced by sanctioning Europe’s Christian roots and protecting the family and human life. Samoobrona opposed solutions which stood in opposition to the idea of nation states, such as granting legal personality to the EU, leading to the emergence of a European superstate, or the prevalence of EU law over Member States’ legislation. The party believed that a transnational federation, coupled

with a departure from the idea of a nation and sovereignty, would serve the interests of the “leading group” – the narrow club of founding Member States – marginalising other Member States, downgrading them and effectively leading to a “double-standard” Union, banishing any chance of building a welfare state.

The concept of a social Europe had its analogy in the state model preferred by Samoobrona. Samoobrona’s desirable state model was a social liberal state, understood as a modern social state in which people would be the most important agents. Resting on the premise, typical for the advocates of social liberalism, that the state should be free from poverty, the party claimed that the state’s task was to bridge social gaps, promote prosperity and ensure access to basic goods. They ascribed a broad catalogue of functions to the social liberal state, in accordance with the principle stating that

the state’s obligations towards citizens should have priority, followed by citizens’ obligations towards the state.

The state was to give its citizens guarantees at least in three areas: the first one was national security, understood as the “biological, economic and political” existence of the nation, by defending the life, property and social interests of citizens. Another area was social development in undisturbed conditions of state identity and sovereignty. The rule of law represented the third aspect. For Samoobrona’s politicians, the primary role of the state was to create social morality and guarantee the economic rights of its citizens. The new state philosophy would be based on the idea of respecting civil rights, meaning in practice social security (“supporting its citizens in both their professional and economic pursuits”).

All these elements would be incorporated in the European integration model.¹⁰

Final remarks

The concepts of a social (solidary) Europe expressed in the political thought of the Democratic Left Alliance (SLD), the Polish People's Party (PSL) and the Self-Defence of the Republic of Poland (Samoobrona RP) showed many similarities. According to the assumptions propagated by these parties, a social Europe would be built by incorporating the welfare-state principles to the European level, becoming a response to the multifaceted and extensive globalisation process, and offering resistance to the neoliberal agenda. All the political parties discussed here focused on the social nature of a unified Europe, and on promoting the values of solidarity, equality, freedom, justice and democracy. More specifically, the concept of a social Europe proposed that EU institutions implement social policies and have the obligation to meet the social needs of Member State's citizens. In reality, this would involve taking social rights of citizens to the European level, top-down and organised social policy regulations, promoting sustainable development, making active efforts to reduce unemployment, promoting a fair distribution of wealth and redistribution of goods on a European scale, establishing a uniform and harmonised tax system, improving the overall quality of life, introducing the European minimum wage and the guarantee of a minimum social income.

¹⁰ Piskorski (2007); Krajewski (2007).

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