

R E C E N Z J E

Paweł Churski, Tomasz Kaczmarek (eds.), *Three Decades of Polish Socio-Economic Transformations. Geographical Perspectives*, Springer Economic Geography, 2022, pp. 578.

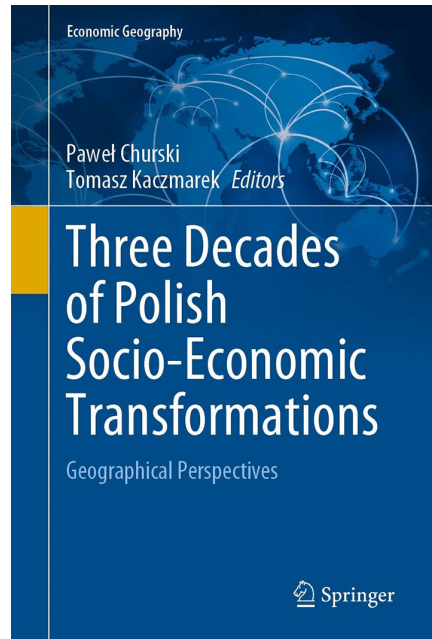
The wide-ranging political and socio-economic transition of the late 1980s and early 1990s, aided by a unique geopolitical situation, has been extensively covered by means of political science, macroeconomic and sociological analyses. However, there has been a paucity of geography-oriented studies on its implications examined at country, regional and local levels that would adopt a longer timeframe, which is typical of processes in the socio-economic realm. This research gap is filled by the reviewed publication, which, according to its authors, is addressed to “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 it also constitutes the basis for comparative

research on development in this part of Central and Eastern Europe. It seems, though, that a Polish reader should find this publication of value.

According to the latest data by Statistics Poland (in Polish GUS), roughly 40% of the country’s population were born after 1990; therefore, they do not have any memories of the time before the transition and might thus fail to perceive its fundamental significance for the current stage of Poland’s development.

The research, the results of which have been included in the monograph, primarily covers the period between 1990 and 2020, but some of the Authors also incorporate retrospection. The subject matter of the monograph is divided into five principal groups:

- Part I: The Context of Polish Post-communist Transformation) identifies the reasons behind and the course of social, political and economic transformations, focusing on 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 preface is synthetic, and it touches upon the most essential transition-related phenomena and their implications that resonated in Poland after 1990 compared to the Eurozone and selected post-communist countries. The last text, however, deals with the course and impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in Poland, an extraordinary phenomenon that affected the whole world in 2020–2022.

Owing to the publishing time of the monograph, the Authors did not manage to take into account another landmark event, i.e., the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The war is likely to have a long-lasting and spatially diverse consequences for Poland, but this topic will need to be addressed in another publication.

On the other hand, the reviewed publication lacks – in my opinion – two aspects, quite crucial when assessing the mechanism and geographical effects of Poland's socio-economic transformation in 1990–2020. One of them is the spatial and temporal analysis of the inflow of non-agricultural foreign capital, and the other – the transformation of border regions that takes into consideration the different nature of the functions performed by Polish borders. Also, I have some reservations with regard to looking back to the beginnings of the Polish state in the context of the changes that have taken place in the last 30 years. While it is still justified (probably less and less so) to mention the period of the Partitions of Poland, the impact of preceding historical events is negligible. An unquestionable asset of the publication, however, is its extensive factual and cartographic documentation of the presented issues.

The selection of the monograph authors is remarkable, as it combines both young and experienced researchers, most of whom are affiliated with the Faculty of Human Geography and Planning of the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, but some are also associated with Warsaw-based universities (Prof. Leszek Balcerowicz, Prof. Grzegorz Gorzelak and Dr Piotr Żuber). Two prominent foreign professors, i.e., Andres Rodriguez-Pose and Peter Nijkamp, are also part of the author team. Undoubtedly, a figure that stands out among the authors is Professor Leszek Balcerowicz, who in the first non-communist post-WWII government of

Tadeusz Mazowiecki (12 Sep 1989 – 12 Jan 1991) served as the Minister of Finance and Deputy Prime Minister for Economic Affairs, responsible for the transformation of Poland's economic system. In this case, practical aspects overtook the existing theories of economic transition. The so-called Balcerowicz Plan for the marketisation and change of the ownership structure in the Polish economy was successful and, at the same time, stimulated the development of new economic theories.

In such a short review, it is difficult to describe in much detail the 23 chapters that follow (introduction and preface excluded). However, it is possible to offer some more general reflections after reading the whole publication.

First of all, there is no doubt that the political and economic changes occurring at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s were successful and laid the foundations for further beneficial transitions in various aspects and spheres of socio-economic life that were described in the monograph.

Second, a vital quality-wise moment for Poland's development was its accession to the EU, not only when it comes to access to the Cohesion Policy and the Common Agricultural Policy funds, but first and foremost in terms of the benefits related to functioning within the single European market.

Third, regional policy (previously dominated by departmental and sectoral arrangements) saw reinforcement, both in interregional (national) and intraregional dimensions. This strengthening was of institutional (public administration reform), substantive (new challenges, new instruments, project-strategic thinking) as well as financial (operational programmes) character.

Fourth, there has been a clear civilisational progress in terms of infrastructural facilities; agriculture is being restructured, the labour market situation has improved, the service sector has developed, society has grown more affluent (development of the automotive market is one of its manifestations). At the same time, however, unfavourable demographic changes are taking place and interregional polarisation is increasing, which is also reflected in electoral preferences in different parts of Poland.

Fifth, despite the overwhelmingly positive balance sheet of Poland's transition in the last 30 years, there are also some issues that have not been fully resolved, of which the Authors are aware, noting 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 also the war taking place across the country's eastern border in Ukraine, whilst a significant internal challenge concerns the populist government discouraging Polish society from the EU and from the country's membership in the bloc.

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