

Dominika Rafalska

University of Gdańsk

ORCID 0000-0002-6004-2427

Just one way after all. Socialism as seen by the “Po Prostu” weekly in the days of Polish Thaw

Abstract

“Po Prostu” was one of the most important Polish magazines for young, a voice of a generation of people born shortly before the Second World War, in the 1930s. It played a crucial role in the days of Polish October and it traced a new path in the post-war journalism. People who created “Po Prostu” were young and idealistic students. They deeply believed that socialism as an idea makes sense even after Stalin’s death and Khrushchev’s famous speech *On the Cult of the Individual and Its Consequences* (1956). The aim of this paper is to show the “Po Prostu” team’s way of thinking about the socialist Poland in the days of Polish Thaw. What was the “better” or “truer” face of socialism that they were fighting for? Had this type of thinking a chance or it had to fail?

Keywords: “Po Prostu”, Polish Thaw, October 1956, socialism.

Jedyna droga mimo wszystko. Idea socjalizmu na łamach tygodnika „Po Prostu” w dniach polskiej odwilży

Streszczenie

„Po Prostu” było jednym z najważniejszych polskich czasopism studenckich, głosem pokolenia ludzi urodzonych w latach 30. XX wieku. Pismo odegrało kluczową rolę w czasach polskiego Października i wytyczyło nowe standardy powojennemu dziennikarstwu. Twórcami „Po Prostu” byli młodzi i idealistyczni studenci. Głęboko wierzyli w to, że socjalizm jako idea ma głęboki sens i jest „jedyną drogą”. Wiara ta towarzyszyła im nawet po śmierci Stalina i słynnym przemówieniu Nikity Chruszczowa *O kulcie jednostki i jego następstwach* (1956). Celem artykułu jest pokazanie sposobu myślenia zespołu „Po Prostu” o socjalistycznej Polsce w czasach odwilży. Jaka była „lepsz” lub „prawdziwsza” twarz socjalizmu, o którą walczyli? Czy ten sposób myślenia miał szansę powodzenia, czy też musiał zakończyć się porażką?

Słowa kluczowe: „Po Prostu”, polska odwilż, październik 1956, socjalizm.

The aim of this paper is to show the “Po Prostu” team’s way of thinking¹ about the socialist (in their words “the only way”) Poland after Stalin’s death. How did they see it? What did they want socialism to be? After Stalin’s death, when his successive crimes, euphemistically called “errors and distortions of the period of the cult of the individual”, came to light, no one in the Eastern Bloc countries or even in the USSR itself was in any doubt that there was, and could be, no return to such a style of leadership. It is worth revisiting those publications in order to trace the thinking of the young generation of Poles, who were born shortly before the war and knew no other Poland than a socialist one.

The subject of the analysis are selected publications that appeared in “Po Prostu” between 1955 and 1957². All of them refer to socialism as an idea and value even though they cover different subjects like history, political issues, social life, workers’ struggles, and many other topics. It is evident that all of them were written so that their authors – could advocate for a “better version of socialism”.

The primary research method is press content analysis. I believe that my article can make an important and original contribution to the field of media studies, particularly with regard to the history of 20th-century media and the changes undergone by the Polish press at a pivotal moment in history: the October Thaw.

The journalists at “Po Prostu” were young, idealistic people, born just before the war, in the 1930s. They knew no Poland other than the “socialist” one. They had no memory of pre-war Poland; the post-war period was the time of their youth, spent amidst ruined towns and villages on one hand, and intense propaganda on the other. Socialism was the point of reference, the value for this generation – a system which, in their view, was just and offered equal opportunities to all.

Over time, their views on the system in which they had grown up evolved – they saw the arrogance of officials, the misguided decisions of politicians, and all that which was described as the “errors and distortions” of the system. Could this have affected their ideological backbone? I put forward the thesis that it did not. At the end of this path, the ultimate goal of all their demands was always socialism. A better, fairer socialism, the one with a “human face”. But still the socialism after all. Young publicists expressed this in their writings discussed in this essay.

The additional hypothesis I wish to demonstrate in my publication is that the generation of the 1930s had the chance to see the truth about the system in which they believed only after the changes of the Polish October, when Władysław Gomułka – the new First Secretary of the Party, whom they strongly supported – simply dissolved their weekly as being too “counter-revolutionary”.

¹ Their point of view is so important because “Po Prostu” set the standard for independent, courageous journalism many years before such journalism was even possible in Poland.

² These were the golden years of the magazine, which became the voice of an entire generation and set new standards for journalism: courageous, truth-seeking, committed and close to readers. Compare: D. Rafalska, *Miedzy marzeniami a rzeczywistoscia. Tygodnik „Po Prostu” wobec glownych problemow spolecznych i politycznych Polski w latach 1955–1957*, Wydawnictwo Trio, Warszawa 2008.

Introduction. Why just one way?

“Po Prostu” – the weekly of students’ and young intelligentsia’s intelligentsias played an important role in the days of Polish Thaw³. The magazine not only described or documented the changes taking place in Poland, but also observed increasingly the authorities and even tried to criticise the system.

In the mid-1950s, the magazine underwent a metamorphosis. It was transformed from a boring, standard-issue magazine⁴ of the ZMP (pol. Związek Młodzieży Polskiej; eng. Union of Polish Youth)⁵ into a strong and brave, opinion-forming socio-cultural weekly of the young generation⁶: “We are editing a magazine for students and young intelligentsia – we want it to be a tribune of all young people with a warm heart and an open head. [...] We want to speak with a full voice about what makes us happy and to express our anger and indignation [...] so that in our country all windows are on the sunny side” – this is what “Po Prostu” wrote in the No. of 4 September 1955⁷. Were these enthusiastic words an expression of youthful idealism? Certainly they were, however the journalists tried their best to put them into practice.

It is important to indicate that “Po Prostu” was the first magazine in post-war Poland to oppose the errors of the system. At the same time, as we read in the magazine, its major aim was to build a “truly socialist” system in Poland. The editors also used the notion of the “democratisation of the system”, “socialist democracy” or “socialism

³ In Polish history, this term is used to describe the years 1953–1957. After Stalin’s death in 1953, and particularly after Khrushchev’s famous speech *On the Cult of the Individual and Its Consequences* (1956), the party liberalised its course and many political prisoners were released as part of an amnesty. These were still slow changes, but there was a fairly widespread awareness that there was no return to the old system. See for example: J. Eisler, R. Kupiecki, *Na zakręcie historii – rok 1956*, Oficyna Wydawnicza Volumen, Warszawa 1992; B. Hillebrandt, *Polska Rzeczpospolita Ludowa w latach 1956–1970. Zarys historii*, Książka i Wiedza, Warszawa 1985.

⁴ Founded in 1947, “Po Prostu” was initially a propaganda magazine that no one wanted to read. Harsh attacks on the Church, criticism of “American imperialism” and “Germany’s fascist policy” were its routine. This reality was not to begin to change until after the death of Joseph Stalin (March 1953). In Archiwum Akt Nowych (AAN; eng. Archive of New Files) relatively few traces of censorship interference with the weekly’s content in those years have survived. Paradoxically, the documents collected there show that, thanks to the work of the censors, several shallow and aggressive texts were removed from the paper, embarrassing in terms of workshop and compromising the authors and publishers of the newspaper. See for example: Archiwum Akt Nowych w Warszawie (AAN), Główny Urząd Kontroli Prasy, Publikacji i Widowisk 1949–57; See also: *Czarna księga cenzury PRL*, cz. 1, oprac. T. Strzyżewski, Aneks, Londyn 1977; Z. Romek, *Cenzura w PRL – relacje historyków*, Wydawnictwo DiG, Warszawa 2000.

⁵ Union of Polish Youth (ZMP): 1948–1957: youth ideological and political organisation, modelled on the Soviet Komsomol. See for example: M. Wierzbicki, *Związek Młodzieży Polskiej i jego członkowie. Studium z dziejów funkcjonowania stalinowskiej organizacji młodzieżowej*, Wydawnictwo TRIO, Warszawa 2006; *My z Zetempe... Upadek i likwidacja ZMP 1955–1957 (Dokumenty do dziejów PRL, z. 17)*, oprac. M. Wierzbicki, Instytut Studiów Politycznych PAN, Warszawa 2004.

⁶ In 1953 Eligiusz Lasota (1929–2001) took over as editor-in-chief. He worked on this position till 1957.

⁷ [no authors’ name], „Po Prostu” 1955, No. 27.

with human face”⁸. At times these were rather imprecise, but could “Po Prostu” have afforded harsher judgements? However, if the editors actually wanted to “overthrow socialism” is also questionable. Nonetheless, the weekly’s demands and the topics it covered – both in their form and content – definitely stood out from other magazines, and some of them were perhaps even ahead of their time. The magazine advocated the dreams of the Polish people, especially the young generation raised in Polish People’s Republic. It wrote about its problems, dreams, disappointments and confusion in the reality of the 1950s.

“Po Prostu” fought for the truth. It became not only a symbol, but also an important actor of the Polish Thaw. It stimulated readers to search for “their own path to socialism”, and was the first to raise subjects considered earlier historical or moral taboo.

“Po Prostu” opposed lies and propaganda – it spoke with fresh and true language. It said “no” to falsifying history. The famous article *To meet people from the Home Army* by Jerzy Ambroziewicz, Walery Namiotkiewicz and Jan Olszewski⁹, initiated a debate on the Warsaw uprising and broke the conspiracy of silence surrounding the generation fighting in the uprising¹⁰. The authors defended the soldiers of the Home Army. They stressed their heroic fight with Germans. They wrote that their attitude was a unique example of courage and bravery and demanded respect for them. They wanted them to “come back to society” as those who served in the Home Army were actually excluded from social life. Imprisoned, oppressed, humiliated, they could not start life in Poland governed by socialists. The authors stated that it was an embarrassing guilt and a great mistake. This publication was one of the most important ones not even because it disclosed a “white stain” in the Polish history, but because it actually “met” the Home Army heroes. The authors wanted them to be back in society, to “build socialism” with them, to change the conditions of their life. In this text the young generation decided to meet their colleagues, often only a few years older, the ones whose fate was so cruel. The article and the afterward discussion constituted a great part of the Polish peaceful revolution of 1956.

“Po Prostu” also opposed violations of human rights, of individual freedoms and showed its readers the Polish countryside – poor and neglected. In the days of the Polish October breakthrough¹¹, it moved away from publishing manifestos

⁸ In fact, there is no such notion as “democratization”. There is democracy. Nor should there be “socialism with a human face”, because the face of any system should be human. The journalists of the “Po Prostu” weekly understood this too late, after the paper had already been dissolved in 1957.

⁹ J. Ambroziewicz, W. Namiotkiewicz, J. Olszewski, *Na spotkanie ludziom z AK*, „Po Prostu” 1956, No. 11.

¹⁰ The propaganda system tried to make people forget about the Warsaw uprising tragedy, presenting a “new interpretation” of the facts. One of the methods was simply silence. A primary school textbook for the 4th grade published in 1953 did not mention the Warsaw uprising at all! The Home Army soldiers had been presented officially as “bandits” and “traitors”. “Po Prostu” was the first magazine that decided to make a courageous step forward.

¹¹ I understand this concept more broadly – it is not just about a specific month: October 1956, but the dozen or so months preceding that time, when authors emboldened by the changes taking place in the country published increasingly courageous and truthful material.

and proclamations to perhaps the most “human” form of journalistic expression – reportage. Journalists reached the “backstage” of the socialist state – described poverty, hunger, suffering, injustice and pathologies, but above all boredom, stagnation and hopelessness. They questioned the disproportion between the standard of living of the average communist citizen and party officials.

It is impossible to overestimate the role that the magazine played in the days of Polish October 1956, when its columnists found themselves in the rallying stands, when they spoke to the authorities, unexpectedly becoming the expression of the will of thousands of Poles. In October 1956 its journalists created brave and courageous articles but also a kind of a social and political program. And here it is important to point out one thing: that program still had only one goal: “to improve socialism”.

The idea of so-called socialist democracy and democratisation

In order to understand “Po Prostu” way of thinking about the country’s most important No.s, it is crucial to remember that it was always a battle against the remnants of Stalinism, the aim of which, however, were always “democratic socialism”. One gets the impression that the authors had problems with its precise definition. They wrote about the need to “democratise the system”, about “socialism free of the errors and distortions of the period of the cult of the individual”, about the search for “the Polish way of socialism”.

They wanted more freedom and liberty, less state interference in the lives of citizens. They advocated building a different type of relationship with the Soviet Union. They supported workers’ self-government.

“Po Prostu”, however, never questioned socialism – neither as an idea nor as the prevailing system in Poland. Years later, the editors commented on this in various ways¹². One of the arguments was that it was impossible at the time to argue for the “overthrow of the system”, or writing more courageous articles as that preventive censorship was operating (of course it would not have approved for publication a text directed against the system). It is impossible to disagree with these arguments. However, a careful reading of “Po Prostu” published between 1955 and 1957 clearly shows that the editors at the time believed in socialism very deeply¹³. While reading the magazine, several clear demands for changes of the system or government emerge.

Most importantly, it seems that when writing about socialism, the publicists postulated a search for its “Polish way”. This was, by the way, one of the main postulates of Władysław Gomułka, with whose return to public life and to power Poles related

¹² See: D. Rafalska, *Zlikwidowane marzenia*, „Tygodnik Powszechny” 2006, No. 44.

¹³ See also: H. Olszewski, M. Zmierzak, *Historia doktryn politycznych i prawnych*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, Poznań 1994, p. 317–328.

such warm hopes¹⁴. In October 1956, the editors gave Gomułka their unconditional support, above all for this very reason.

One of the most important determinants of the “Polish way of socialism” was the attitude to the USSR. “Po Prostu” postulated building mutual relations between the two countries on the basis of friendship, but also of equivalence (*sic!*).

Another important political demand promoted by “Po Prostu” was the slogan of “people’s leadership”. In this respect, the editors’ postulates referred to the theoretical basis of the socialist system – the dictatorship of the proletariat. In the editors’ view, Stalinism had turned workers into “workmen” or even “tools” who had nothing to say, even in their own workplaces.

In the wave of discussions about the “cult of the individual” and its consequences, a number of articles on the subject appeared in the pages of the magazine¹⁵. The columnists tried to prove that Stalinism that distorted and degenerated Marxism and used it to construct a totalitarian system of power. Could socialism have been better constructed? In the opinion of the editors – yes. But before that, many questions had to be answered about what to do to make workers feel co-managers of factories; how to dismantle bureaucracy in workplaces; how to heal the Polish economy; how to build society’s trust in authority. In the mid-1950s these were questions the whole Poland was asking itself. In order to understand it, let’s go back several decades...

In September 1928 the Communist International gave the following definition of democracy: “The Soviet State being the highest form of democracy, namely proletarian democracy, is the very opposite of bourgeois democracy, which is bourgeois dictatorship in a masked form. Unlike bourgeois democracy, proletarian democracy openly admits its class characters, and aims avowedly at the suppression of the exploiters in the interests of the overwhelming majority of the population”¹⁶... These words seem to clarify many points. We should be aware that in the socialist Poland words: “socialism” and “democracy” were often mixed (intentionally). That’s why, Polish publicists (among others “Po Prostu” journalists) often used the term “socialist democracy”. That notion clarified in a very simple way the main features of the socialist way of thinking about the state. The “socialist democracy” was a fair system, because it was an opposite one to the bourgeois democracy which was unfair and based on a human humiliation.

“Democratisation” – that word described the needs of people who wanted to bring life to the system in the 1950s. What did that notion mean to them? That term was as vague as it was broad. “Po Prostu”¹⁷ tried to explain that it was a fight for socialism in its purest form¹⁸. That was in fact the struggle over healing the system.

¹⁴ See also: P. Machcewicz, *Władysław Gomułka*, Polska Oficyna Wydawnicza BGW, Warszawa 1995.

¹⁵ See for example: J. Segel, A. Wasilkowski, *Jednostka i państwo*, „Po Prostu” 1956, No. 47.

¹⁶ See: *Poland To-Day as Seen by Foreign Observers*, ed. M.K. Dziewanowski, Polish Research Centre, LondonCentre, London 1946, p. 6.

¹⁷ R. Zimand, *Próba o ludowładztwie*, „Po Prostu” 1956, No. 30.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*.

For those who wanted to improve the system, socialism was the greatest principle. Democratisation meant for them no terror and no bureaucracy. It meant freedom of speech; the truth and a transparency of the party's functioning. "Po Prostu" published dozens of articles analyzing what the new model of the state should look like. In one of them¹⁹ Jerzy Segel and Andrzej Wasilkowski wrote about the goals, purposes of the socialist state. There were at least a few. First of all, every citizen should have a chance for personal development. Those who will build communism should be well-educated and aware that besides communism there exist other philosophies and ideas. A communist should be a person who consciously chose communism. Socialist democracy as seen by Segel and Wasilkowski was a system based on the freedom of individuals. But we must admit nowadays that it was a very specific concept of freedom, one where the role of the state in the life of citizens was also a significant one.

Considering the changes within the system, "Po Prostu" promoted very strongly the idea of a "people's power". One of its elements could be – and this was strongly supported by the weekly – workers' committees and other bodies which would help to govern the factories and become an important voice in the public life. The publicists stated that over the Stalin period the workers had been changed into "machines" whose only aim was to perform a certain task and to produce a certain amount of goods. That should not be continued, "Po Prostu" argued²⁰: "Experiences of the 19th and 20th centuries teach us that those who govern the factories, govern the country"²¹. At the same time, the authors argued for the need of reforming the structure of the political life in Poland. In their words, the role of the Polish parliament had been only "a decorative one"²².

"Po Prostu" publicists talked about the consequences of the degradation of the working class's role in the socialist Poland. In their words, workers had become alienated; their needs had been ignored. The authors also protested against the old model of relationship in Polish factories, the "bureaucracy" and the distance between workers and their superiors. They did not, however, propose how to carry out the necessary changes or how to avoid a state of dependence at the place of work²³.

Furthermore "Po Prostu" wrote that workers should constitute a crucial part of the factory's life. That was the only way to unite them with socialism because true socialism should be a system where workers' voice, their ideas and needs were the most important ones. Some authors wrote that they dreamt about a "proletarian dictatorship" in Poland, however, they did not specify what this dream could look like. Very often their ideas had only a theoretical base, offering a suggestion that the workers should lead the country without explaining how that would be possible in practice. One thing

¹⁹ J. Segel, A. Wasilkowski, *Jednostka i państwo*, „Po Prostu” 1956, No. 47.

²⁰ *Ibidem*.

²¹ J.J. Lipski, J. Płudowski, *Wybory w perspektywie demokracji socjalistycznej*, „Po Prostu” 1956, No. 50.

²² *Ibidem*.

²³ S. Chełstowski, W. Godek, *Pierwszy zwiad*, „Po Prostu” 1956, No. 44.

the “Po Prostu” team were sure of was that the workers’ class was a kind of an elite that should heal socialism²⁴.

Although many of the above arguments were not explained in a detailed way, we must appreciate their value at this point in time. Even if the idea of the “proletarian dictatorship” was one of the absurd of socialism, we must realise that the publicists of the “Po Prostu” magazine tried to convince its readers of the idea of decentralisation, wanting to activate all groups of the society. They wanted people to take their problems into their hands, to decide about their future by themselves, to live a full life in their cities, villages, regions, factories, offices. That was what they called “an element of the process of a democratization”.

“Po Prostu” became famous also for its intervention reports describing major social contemporary problems: poverty, injustice, power abuse, human rights violations and many others. All of them put a shadow over what the image of an ideal system like socialism was meant to be. “Po Prostu” not only described (very bravely for that time) the faults of the system, but also fought for changes. As a result, it became a kind of an institution of the public trust²⁵. Its readers kept sending dozens of letters where they expressed their opinion on the existing problems. “Po Prostu” reacted by writing about these painful facts. It disclosed the reality of socialist Poland, very different from the one presented officially in the Polish press dominated by propaganda and limited by censorship. It wrote about people treated unjustly (dismissed, oppressed, harassed, deceived).

“Po Prostu” was also the first to protest against a system of privileges for the party officers. It described special stores “behind the yellow curtains”, where they could buy whatever they wanted. At the same time “regular citizens” were queuing for the most basic goods²⁶.

“Po Prostu” wrote about the most painful subjects of the Polish reality of the 1950s: the crisis of the authorities, the weakness of all organisations dedicated to young people, the system of lies and propaganda in the Polish press and literature. The magazine kept fighting for a better and more interesting face of Polish culture. It was seeking an alternative to social realism. It also stimulated the changes that animated social life at the countryside; it created clubs for intellectuals, organized various art exhibitions.

²⁴ R. Zimand, *Próba o ludowładztwie...*

²⁵ This was evidenced by the numerous letters that came to the editorial office. Compare also: A. Leszczyński, *Sprawy do załatwienia. Listy do „Po prostu” 1955–1957*, Trio, Warszawa 2000. The author describes “Po Prostu” as an institution to which, in the mid-1950s, people turned, seeing in the magazine their spokesman and their only hope of solving everyday, sometimes appalling issues, against which they felt completely helpless.

²⁶ See: J. Chudzyński, *Za żółtym firankami*, „Po Prostu” 1956, No. 14.

Who had forbidden the communists criticising the Soviet Union?

Crucial to these considerations, however, seems to be an understanding of the editors' attitude towards the entire post-war system placing Poland in the orbit of a non-democratic bloc, making it a country in the USSR sphere of influence.

The cult of Joseph Stalin did not die with himself (March 1953). At the beginning the countries of the socialist bloc declared their support and a will to continue along the way indicated by him. That was also the case in Poland. Everything changed with the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (February 1956) and the Nikita Khrushchev *Secret Speech*. Polish communists as well as the Polish society became aware of its content quite soon. On March 10th "Trybuna Ludu"²⁷ published the article *O kulcie jednostki i jego następstwach* (*On the Cult of Personality and its Consequences* – the title could not be just an accident) where it deeply criticised the Stalinist period.

The facts disclosed by the Khrushchev Secret Speech were shocking. Polish communists quickly realised that the only method to protect socialism was by erasing the vestiges of the cult of personality forever. Poles learnt that they had to change their way of thinking, their values, their authorities, almost everything they believed in.

But how could the press, whose activities were tightly controlled by the censors, write about it? Zygmunt Bauman wrote in "Po Prostu"²⁸: "The taste of the truth is a bitter one. But we must receive it all. All of us – those who were deceived and those who were deceived but also deceived other people". He stated that Stalinism abused beautiful ideas to hide the most awful crimes. People had to face that truth and had to accept it. And then they had to start living again.

"Po Prostu"²⁹ postulated an absolute fight with the vestiges of Stalinism and the cult of personality. In its view, socialism could exist only if the methods applied over the Stalin period were eliminated definitely and this should be of interest to the whole international workers movement.

"Po Prostu" criticised the Russian domination in the socialist bloc. It³⁰ stated that such a domination caused problems, among others a lack of a solidarity in the international workers movement. It wrote that socialist countries stopped seeking their own way to socialism, copying everything (good and bad) directly from the Soviet Union. That apologetic attitude to the Soviet Union only deteriorated the situation:

²⁷ "Trybuna Ludu" was a socio-political daily newspaper published in Warsaw between 1948 and 1990, the press organ of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party, with one of the largest circulations in Poland – around 1,5 million copies in the mid-1970s. The paper had a propaganda character, tended to keep silent about events or figures "inconvenient" for the party – e.g. later it notoriously belittled Lech Wałęsa or John Paul II. This makes it all the more important to appreciate this particular publication in the pages of the magazine.

²⁸ Z. Bauman, *Żeby nie powtórzyło się więcej*, „Po Prostu” 1956, No. 15.

²⁹ R. Zimand, *Sprawy robotników całego świata*, „Po Prostu” 1956, No. 45.

³⁰ J. Kossak, R. Turski, R. Zimand, *Internacjonalizm*, „Po Prostu” 1956, No. 44.

because of the lack of criticism, the cult of personality could grow and develop with all its cruelties and crimes. Consequently, all those mistakes, the terror implemented in the Soviet Union, had been copied and carried out in Poland or Hungary. Instead of asking (as it had occurred those times) “how dare you criticise the Soviet Union”, “Po Prostu” formed an opposite (brave) question: “who had forbidden the communists criticising the Soviet Union”? In its words, the lack of criticism caused problems in the whole communist bloc. The authors stressed that in the future Polish-Russian relationship should be based on the rules of equality in all fields: economic, political, cultural, ideological. They should also be based on truth about our common history. They wrote that there was a need for an honest discussion about our past (especially about the deportations of Poles between 1939 and 1941 and the attitude towards the Home Army). Silence (an element of propaganda in fact) could not be a “method of communication” any longer...

And then “two Octobers” occurred

There are two important moments in this story, taking place practically at the same time – the days of Polish October, when the editors stood shoulder to shoulder with Władysław Gomułka – the new First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers’ Party (pol. Polska Zjednoczona Partia Robotnicza, PZPR), in whom they believed and trusted so much in those days, and who, a year later, dissolved the paper judging it to be “a voice of a counterrevolution”.

The second important moment here is the Hungarian revolution (October 1956). It took a completely different course from the Polish peaceful revolt. Soviet tanks rolled into Budapest and blood was shed. The journalists of “Po Prostu” reported on these events with great empathy and concern. What was the paper’s narrative on the subject? Did it light a warning light in the editors and undermine faith in socialism as a system? It didn’t.

“Polish October” – a term that has permanently entered the dictionary of recent history was born in “Po Prostu”. It was the title of an enthusiastic manifesto by Eligiusz Lasota and Ryszard Turski – a large, cross-page article published on the front page of probably the most “revolutionary” No. in the history of “Po Prostu”, in October 1956³¹, when the editorial board was involved in the events taking place in the country, and was experiencing the days of its greatest splendor and popularity³².

Hungarians went a few steps further at the same time³³. At rallies in the centre of Budapest, also organised as a gesture of solidarity with the Poles demonstrating in Warsaw, they demanded, among other things, the immediate withdrawal of Soviet

³¹ R. Turski, E. Lasota, *Polski Październik*, „Po Prostu” 1956, nr 44.

³² See: B.N. Łopieńska, E. Szymańska, *Stare numery*, Aneks, Londyn 1986.

³³ See: J. Tischler, J. Karwat, *1956 Poznań – Budapeszt*, Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, Poznań 2006; B. Dent, *Budapest 1956. Locations of Drama*, Open Society Archives – Central European University, Budapeszt 2006.

troops, free elections, the abolition of censorship, a review of political trials and amnesty, and the formation of a government by Imre Nagy³⁴. On October 23rd, a crowd of a hundred thousand demonstrated around the statue of Stalin, which was thrown off its pedestal³⁵.

On October 24th, in line with public demands, Imre Nagy became Prime Minister³⁶. The first secretary position was taken by János Kádár³⁷, who had also been a prisoner of Stalinism in Hungary. The public opinion perceived that at first as positive signs of changes.

On November 1st Nagy proclaimed the country's neutrality and Hungary's withdrawal from the Warsaw Pact. It seemed that the revolution won. But in Moscow at that time there was a discussion not about whether, but how to crush the Hungarian uprising. On November 4th, Soviet troops entered Budapest and within a few weeks had bloodily suppressed the uprising³⁸.

The demands of the Hungarian revolutionaries were very close to the dreams of the Poles – not always expressed so openly and bravely. In October 1956 in Warsaw, no one officially rejected communism; at most, there was talk of “looking for a Polish way of socialism”, or a new model of Polish-Soviet relations. In Budapest, Hungarians took to the streets with the slogan “Nem kell Kommunizmus” (We don't want communism)³⁹.

Polish journalists often stressed that Poland avoided the “Hungarian case” only because the socialist party “did not betray” the Polish nation and because the nation trusted the party once again. The article *Sprawy Polaków* written by the staff of “Po Prostu” and “Sztandar Młodych”⁴⁰ in the days of the Hungarian revolution stated that those incidents could affect the situation in Poland and in the whole socialist bloc. The authors called the sending of Soviet tanks to Budapest an act driven “against

³⁴ Imre Nagy (1896–1958) was a communist politician. He collaborated with the NKVD in the 1930s, and after the war he participated in the building of the communist system. He returned to power under the demands of the Budapest street in October 1956. He announced the abolition of the one-party system, proclaimed the country's neutrality and the withdrawal from the Warsaw Pact. After the uprising was crushed by Soviet troops, he took refuge in the Yugoslav embassy. Arrested and sentenced to death, he was hanged in 1958. Compare: D. Rafalska, *Naród historii podzielony*, “Tygodnik Powszechny” 2006, No. 46; M. Fik, *Kultura polska po Jaku*, *Kronika lat 1944–1981*, Polonia Book Fund, Londyn 1989, p. 256; J. Rainer, *Imre Nagy. Biografia polityczna*, Książka i Wiedza, Warszawa 2003.

³⁵ Symbolically, all that was left of him were giant shoes. Compare: S. Kopácsi, *W imieniu klasy robotniczej*, Czytelnik, Warszawa 1988; D. Rafalska, *Piękniej niż w Moskwie*, “Tygodnik Powszechny” 2007, no. 44.

³⁶ See: *Significant Documents of the Hungarian Revolution of 1956*, ed. K. Nagy, Open Society Archives – Central European University, Budapest 2006.

³⁷ János Kádár, born János József Csermanek (1912–1989): General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party. In power in Hungary between 1956 and 1988.

³⁸ See: B. Dent, *Budapest 1956. Locations of Drama...*

³⁹ See: *Rewolucja węgierska 1956 w polskich dokumentach*, ed. J. Tischler, Instytut Studiów Politycznych PAN, Warszawa 1995.

⁴⁰ “Po Prostu”, “Sztandar Młodych”, *Sprawy Polaków*, “Po Prostu” 1956, No. 45.

the rules of internationalism”⁴¹. The article summed up the achievements of the Polish October. Poland avoided the Soviet intervention because Poles took their problems into their hands and decided about their future themselves: “We stated clearly that we would not take a step backward, that the problems discussed by the party committee were ours and only ours and no one except Polish communists could decide about our situation. It was the first victory for a new model of our relationship”⁴².

In another article Marian Bielicki specified very clearly what Hungarians really wanted: “Hungarians want Hungary to be a free and independent country. They want to live in a place where people will not be imprisoned only because this or that representative of the authority wants it so. [...] They want a Hungary where people can speak with each other normally, without fears. They want a Hungary where the power belongs to people”⁴³. Responding to Bielicki’s question of whether Hungarians wanted socialism, one of his interlocutors said: “We want justice, freedom and truth. If socialism cannot give them us, than we do not want socialism”⁴⁴. This type of statement was impossible to be considered by the “Po Prostu” authors.

Epilogue

Every October is followed by November. Metaphorically it seems like in 1956 November in its darkest form came even faster to Eastern Europe, especially in Poland and in Hungary. The Polish October had a moral rather than a real meaning. While it started the process of political changes, including the changes in the authority of the party, it did not change many things people believed it would change. After the October, Poland still was not a democratic country. And people realised soon that “democratisation” – the slogan promoted in the days of the Polish October was an empty and undefined word.

The young people of “Po Prostu” – created in their weekly a vision of an “ideal world”, the socialist one, the only one they believed in. Their publications were full of idealistic and romantic ideas which they rarely confronted with reality. They were far from objective. The consequences came soon.

“Po Prostu” supported the changes promised by the Polish authority in October 1956. But, in fact, the Polish October did not change many things people believed it would change. “Po Prostu” could not accept it. It kept fighting, postulating, criticising, demanding. Very soon the First Secretary of PZPR – Władysław Gomułka decided that such an attitude was an act of a counterrevolution. A few months later (probably over the summer 1957) he decided to terminate “Po Prostu”. When students came back from the holidays, they could not buy a new No. of “Po Prostu” because it stopped existing.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*.

⁴² *Ibidem*.

⁴³ M. Bielicki, *Dzień włączył po mieście*, “Po Prostu” 1956 No. 50.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*.

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