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"A Comparative Analysis of National Dialogues in Germany, Poland, and Spain as Potential Models for Resolving the Political Crisis in Belarus"



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Introduction

Six years after the events of 2020, Belarus remains in a state of unresolved political crisis. Despite the apparent stability of the current regime, the state has failed to achieve a return to normalcy. The prolonged persistence of this situation is gradually giving rise to new risks to Belarusian statehood, sovereignty, and international agency.

Over the intervening years, thousands of non-governmental organizations have been liquidated, independent media and political structures banned and forced to operate from abroad, and hundreds of people remain imprisoned on politically motivated charges.

As a result, Belarus has arrived at a political impasse. Given the systemic political crisis that took root in 2020 and persists to this day, alongside the rapidly shifting geopolitical environment, the authors of this study suggest that a process of political transformation or power transition in the Republic of Belarus may be initiated in the coming years. Because this crisis extends beyond a confrontation between the regime and democratic forces—affecting the stability of state institutions, the country's international standing, its economic development, and its capacity to determine its domestic and foreign policies independently—the issue of power transition or transformation becomes inextricably linked to a task vital to all stakeholders: preserving Belarus as an independent, governable, and unitary state.

The current regime retains control over the state apparatus, security services, and decision-making mechanisms; however, it lacks the means to fully restore public trust or overcome international isolation. For their part, democratic forces maintain a political and social alternative, yet lack the tools to directly affect change in the internal system of governance. Concurrently, Belarus's reliance on its foreign political and economic patron, the Russian Federation, continues to grow, restricting the scope for sovereign state decision-making.

Such a balance is not sustainable. It could be disrupted by an internal economic crisis, shifts in the international environment, a diminishing level of external backing for the current regime, or a rift within the state apparatus. However, the emergence of a crisis window does not inherently guarantee a peaceful or democratic resolution. Absent a prepared political actor, clear legal frameworks, and mechanisms to preserve administrative control, a weakening of the regime risks resulting not in democratization, but in institutional chaos or foreign intervention.

Therefore, the key objective of this study is to define a potential architecture for a managed transition. Such a model must simultaneously ensure an end to repression, the release of political prisoners, the restoration of political and civil rights, the holding of free elections, and the continuity of state governance. It must also mitigate the risk of armed or violent resistance from the outgoing regime, prevent the collapse of the administrative apparatus, and create conditions to safeguard Belarus's independence.

One possible mechanism for a peaceful resolution to the crisis is a national dialogue—an institutionalized negotiation process bringing together representatives of the current regime, democratic

forces, and major social groups. In this context, national dialogue is understood not as a compromise on principle or reconciliation without accountability, but as a means to agree on the terms for ending the political confrontation and to chart a legal path toward free elections. Its agenda must focus on preserving the state apparatus, achieving economic stabilization, and determining the parameters of accountability for representatives of the former regime.

However, the possibility of such a dialogue depends on a number of preconditions. The regime must face a situation in which continuing repression and maintaining the status quo become more risky and costly than entering negotiations. Democratic forces must consolidate into a capable counterpart—one that can formulate a unified stance, undertake binding commitments, and offer a realistic roadmap for the transition period. Within the state apparatus, a pragmatic faction must emerge—one invested in preserving the state and securing its own professional future. Finally, internal or international mediators are essential to guarantee the implementation of any agreements reached.

To analyze these conditions, Chapters 1 through 3 examine three historical models of political transition: the German Democratic Republic in 1989–1990, the Polish People's Republic in 1980–1989, and Spain in 1975–1982. The selection of these case studies is guided not by their surface-level similarities to contemporary Belarus, but by the divergence in the mechanisms through which a predominantly peaceful transition from an authoritarian system to a democratic one was accomplished in each country.

The experience of the GDR is of particular relevance to Belarus due to the role of an external patron, the ruling nomenklatura's dependence on its support, and the necessity of establishing public oversight over a formidable repressive apparatus. The East German case demonstrates how a rapidly formed Round Table managed to serve as an interim hub for political coordination, secure the disbandment of political repression bodies, and lay the groundwork for free elections without causing the collapse of the state administration or essential public services.

The Polish experience is instructive as an example of the long-term consolidation of an organized social alternative under repressive conditions. *Solidarity* approached the Round Table negotiations not merely as a protest movement, but as an extensive societal network complete with its own leaders, experts, information channels, and fully developed reform programs. For Belarus, this case study allows for an exploration of how democratic forces can prepare well in advance for negotiations and state governance, as well as how mass pressure, an economic crisis, and independent mediation can compel an authoritarian system to conclude a political pact.

The Spanish transition illustrates the vital role played by a reformist faction within the ruling system itself. Its applicability to Belarus hinges on whether a segment of the state apparatus can actively participate in reforming authoritarian institutions using existing legal frameworks. Furthermore, the Spanish model provides a framework for examining the most complex aspect of a negotiated transition: providing guarantees to members of the former regime, integrating moderate elements of the old elite into the new political system, and striking a balance between the demands for justice and the imperative to prevent armed or violent resistance.

Thus, these three cases represent distinct entry points into political transformation. In the GDR, the transition was driven by the rapid collapse of the former vertical of power, mass public pressure, and the

withdrawal of the regime's external protection. In Poland, the regime was forced to negotiate through sustained pressure from an organized society and a deepening economic crisis. In Spain, internal reformists played a pivotal role by leveraging the institutions of the authoritarian state to achieve its legal transformation. For Belarus, these models offer insight into three potential trajectories: a transition triggered by the weakening of external backing and an internal crisis, a transition driven by the pressure of an organized society, and a transition brought about through elite fragmentation and reform from within.

The study employs a comparative analysis methodology.

Drawing upon foreign experiences does not imply the mechanical application of pre-packaged historical models. Belarus differs from the GDR, Poland, and Spain in the nature of its political system, its economic structure, the extent of its dependency on Russia, the positioning of its security services, and the state of its organized civil society. Consequently, the objective of this study is not to find a country whose scenario Belarus might replicate, but rather to identify functional mechanisms capable of operating across diverse contexts: consolidating a negotiating counterpart, inducing a split within the ruling elites, mitigating the risks of violence, preserving state governance, institutionalizing the legal framework of the transition, and securing international guarantees for the agreements reached.

The core hypothesis of this study is that a peaceful resolution to the crisis in Belarus is achievable through a combination of four conditions: the existence of a consolidated and fully prepared democratic actor; the emergence of a pragmatic faction within the state apparatus; a shift in external circumstances that limits the regime's capacity to maintain control by force; and the establishment of a legal framework that ensures state continuity and the subsequent democratic legitimation of power.

The objective of this comparative analysis is to draw upon historical experience to outline the potential contours of a Belarusian transition model—one that would allow the country to end domestic confrontation, safeguard its independence, preserve functional state institutions, and restore to its citizens the right to independently determine the future of the Republic of Belarus.

Chapter 1. The Central Round Table in the GDR (1989–1990): A Model of Legal Power Takeover and Institutional Control Over the State Apparatus

Introduction

The experience of power transition in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) in 1989–1990 is an illustrative case study of taking control of governance amid the paralysis of an ideological vertical and the collapse of the regime's external Soviet backing. Events in the GDR unfolded under severe time constraints, driven by mass emigration to the West and large-scale street protests. At a moment when the outgoing regime had virtually lost its ability to govern the country while still retaining control over the security apparatus, the opposition—backed by widespread public support—succeeded in establishing an agentic counter-system: the Central Round Table (Zentraler Runder Tisch, ZRT). This temporary mediating body seized the strategic initiative and compelled the nomenklatura to step-by-step disassemble totalitarian institutions while strictly operating within a "law-to-law" legal continuity framework. The implementation of a "dual-key" model—a mechanism under which no major administrative or security decision could be made without the approval of civil society representatives—ensured effective oversight of the repressive and bureaucratic apparatus. This enabled the opposition to gain control over actual levers of power while fully maintaining the functional capacity of the state apparatus and essential public services.

The most critical conceptual lesson from the German experience is that a successful transition does not occur automatically through the mere weakening of a dictatorship. A protest movement must be capable of timely transforming into an organized force and a viable negotiating counterpart—one that can offer the state a new, legitimate legal alternative.

1.1. The Initial Stage of the GDR Crisis: Erosion of Regime Legitimacy and Destabilization of the Party-State System

The 1989 crisis in the GDR unfolded as a systemic process that undermined the state's electoral, social, and geopolitical foundations. The primary catalyst for this systemic erosion was the municipal elections held on May 7, 1989. In contrast to previous decades—when election results were met with widespread public apathy—activists from independent civic and church groups attempted to exercise institutional oversight.

By leveraging provisions of GDR electoral law that permitted citizens to observe the vote-counting process, monitors documented clear discrepancies between the actual ballots cast and the official tallies. The officially reported result—a 98.85% vote share for the unified candidate list of the National Front (Nationale Front), a coalition led by the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands, SED)—directly contradicted documented data from Berlin and Leipzig, where protest voting reached 15–20%. This proven fraud definitively stripped the regime of its legitimacy in the eyes of society.



Polling station in the East Berlin district of Prenzlauer Berg, May 7, 1989. Civil group activists monitor the counting of ballots during the municipal elections. This independent oversight revealed significant discrepancies with the officially announced results. (Source: Archive of the Federal Foundation for the Reappraisal of the SED Dictatorship, Klaus Mehner Collection) https://revolution89.de/aufbruch/erste-schritte-zur-revolution/nie-genug-vom-wahlbetrug/

The regime ceased to be viewed as a guarantor of stability, transforming in the eyes of society into a structure that held onto power solely through administrative pressure and force. On the 7th of every month, citizens took to the streets of Berlin to protest the falsifications, shifting what had been a legal issue into the realm of open political confrontation.

This collapse of trust in state institutions, exacerbated by the mass exodus of citizens fleeing abroad through neighboring socialist countries in August and September, triggered widespread regional protests. On September 30, 1989, in Greiz (Thuringia), independent groups held a large-scale street demonstration under the guise of an authorized church-community event.

This set a precedent for shattering the state's monopoly on public space. Shortly thereafter, on October 7 in Plauen, law enforcement forces failed to disperse demonstrators despite using crowd control equipment and water cannons, laying bare the operational limits of the local repressive apparatus.



A fire engine commandeered by Stasi officers and deployed as a water cannon. Plauen, October 7, 1989. (Source: German Federal Archives / BArch). https://www.mdr.de/geschichte/ddr/deutsche-einheit/mauerfall/demonstration-plauen-tag-der-republik-102.html

The epicenter of resistance became Leipzig, where weekly prayers for peace at St. Nicholas Church (Nikolaikirche) had been evolving into mass marches since September. The slogan "We are the people!" (Wir sind das Volk) encapsulated the surge in civic agency, as citizens asserted themselves as the true source of sovereign power. The events of October 9, 1989, in Leipzig ("The Leipzig Precedent") culminated in the security forces' first large-scale refusal to crush demonstrations by force, a turning point that sealed the eventual collapse of the SED regime.

In parallel, a migration crisis was unfolding as a form of "exodus as protest" (Flucht als Protest). Its primary catalyst was Hungary's decision to dismantle its border fortifications with Austria in

the spring of 1989, culminating in the opening of its border to GDR citizens on the night of September 11. This created a decisive tear in the Iron Curtain: within weeks, tens of thousands of East Germans escaped to West Germany via the Hungarian-Austrian border.



Dismantling of the Iron Curtain on the Hungarian-Austrian border in 1989. Photo: Fortepan / Zsolt Szigetváry (Szigetváry Zsolt). https://ungarnheute.hu/news/in-ungarn-begann-die-freiheit-vor-35-jahren-oeffnete-ungarn-die-grenze-fuer-ddr-buerger-88492/

When East Berlin blocked the Hungarian route, refugees flooded into Czechoslovakia and Poland, filling the grounds of West German embassies in Prague and Warsaw. People lived for weeks in tent camps inside the diplomatic missions, waiting for Bonn and East Berlin to negotiate the terms of their departure. This mass exodus dealt a severe psychological blow to the regime: by November 1989, more than 230,000 people had fled the country.

Those leaving were among the most qualified young workers—medical professionals, engineers, and transport workers. Their departure created critical labor shortages in municipal services and regional healthcare, leading to severe disruptions in hospital shifts and factory operations. This drain of skilled personnel, coupled with widespread protests, stripped the leadership of any capacity to stabilize the socio-economic situation.

A critical blow to the regime came with the shift in the Soviet Union’s foreign policy course. In June 1989 in Bonn, Mikhail Gorbachev and Helmut Kohl signed a Joint Declaration affirming the right of states to freely choose their political systems. The Brezhnev Doctrine of limited sovereignty was superseded by the so-called "Sinatra Doctrine." Coined informally by a Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesman, this term signaled Moscow's recognition of each country's right to pursue its own path of development and its refusal to deploy military forces to forcibly maintain satellite regimes.



Mikhail Gorbachev and Erich Honecker during a visit to East Berlin, October 7, 1989. (Source: Peter Turnley/Corbis/VCG via Getty Images). https://united24media.com/world/all-the-toppled-authoritarian-dictators-russia-gave-asylum-to-over-the-years-4335

A critical factor was Gorbachev's visit to Berlin for the 40th anniversary of the GDR in October 1989. His distancing from the conservative leadership and his refusal to deploy the Group of Soviet Forces in Germany (Gruppe der Sowjetischen Streitkräfte in Deutschland, GSSD) to crush the protests were interpreted by the elites as the termination of external military backing. Security officials and the nomenklatura realized that Soviet troops would not intervene to protect the regime. The elites' unwillingness to take responsibility for violence accelerated the split within the SED, destabilized the power vertical, and paved the way for the removal of the conservative faction led by Erich Honecker.

1.2. The Executive Branch Crisis and the Fall of the Berlin Wall

By late September and early October 1989, the migration crisis had reached its zenith. Thousands of East Germans in Prague occupied the grounds of the West German embassy, demanding West German citizenship and permission to emigrate. Facing an escalating international scandal, East Berlin granted permission for their departure but insisted that the trains carrying the refugees transit through GDR territory. The SED leadership intended to frame this concession as the formal expulsion of "undesirable elements" alongside the revocation of their identity documents. However, this decision produced the opposite effect: the movement of the trains triggered riots and attempts to storm railway stations in Dresden and other cities. Police and Stasi forces responded with violence to crush the actions, resulting in fierce street clashes and widespread arrests.



Security forces block the entrances to Dresden Central Station, October 1989. (Source: Rigo Pohl). https://revolution89.de/revolution/revolten-entlang-der-strecke

Attempting to demonstrate the unshakeable nature of the state order, on October 7, 1989, the regime organized the 40th anniversary celebrations of the GDR in Berlin in the presence of a Soviet delegation led by Mikhail Gorbachev. On the same day, thousands of citizens marched toward the venue of the festivities, calling for openness (glasnost) and reform. Following the departure of the Soviet guests, the General Secretary of the Central Committee of the SED, Erich Honecker, authorized the dispersal of demonstrators by police forces and the Ministry for State Security (Ministerium für Staatssicherheit, commonly known as the Stasi). Security personnel

deployed crowd control equipment and detained more than a thousand people in holding centers.

These police operations proved to be the most brutal in the late history of the GDR. In East Berlin, clashes peaked in the Prenzlauer Berg district near Gethsemane Church (Gethsemanekirche). Volkspolizei officers and plainclothes Stasi operational units beat demonstrators and bystanders with batons and set dogs on them. Detainees were transported by truck to improvised filtration centers set up in departmental garages, stables, and sports facilities, where they were forced to kneel facing walls for hours and subjected to physical abuse. This wave of violence rapidly spread to the regions. In Leipzig on October 7, approximately 4,000 demonstrators clashed with police squads and paramilitaries who deployed water cannons. In Dresden, security forces cleared protesters from Fetscherplatz; beatings and mass arrests were similarly recorded in Plauen, Zwickau, Magdeburg, and Karl-Marx-Stadt. The nationwide scope of these repressive measures was designed to terrorize civil society into submission.

Street violence ultimately destroyed the regime's remaining legitimacy and fractured the ruling elite. Fearing a violent confrontation modeled on the "Chinese scenario"—a repetition of the Tiananmen Square massacre—the moderate wing of the Politburo resolved to oust the top leadership. Conspirators Egon Krenz, Günter Schabowski, and Willi Stoph secretly received confirmation through KGB channels that Moscow would not intervene. On October 17, at a Politburo meeting, Chairman of the Council of Ministers Willi Stoph formally proposed Honecker's removal. The following day, on October 18, 1989, Honecker was officially relieved of his posts "due to health reasons." The party nomenklatura took this step purely out of self-preservation, hoping to pacify society by appointing Egon Krenz.

The change of leader did not stop the protests, as society did not believe in a "controlled renewal." The culmination came with the rally of November 4, 1989, on Alexanderplatz in Berlin, which drew between 500,000 and one million people. The rally was initiated by actors of the Deutsches Theater and the Berliner Ensemble who had protested against the violence of October 7. The SED leadership sanctioned the rally, hoping to channel the protest into the framework of the existing system.



BERLINER MORGENPOST

EXTRABLATT

Überparteilich · Berlins größte Abonnementzeitung · Unabhängig

SED beruft Egon Krenz zum neuen Partei-Chef – Honecker entmachtet

Egon Krenz gilt im Westen seit langem als „Kronprinz", nur in der DDR nicht.

Auf Erich Honeckers Rücktritt richteten sich in den letzten Wochen alle Hoffnungen in der DDR.

Front page of the special edition of the Berliner Morgenpost of October 18, 1989, with the headline "SED Appoints Egon Krenz New Party Chief – Honecker Stripped of Power." Source: LeMO online museum (Lebendiges Museum Online) / Collection of the House of the History of the Federal Republic of Germany Foundation (Stiftung Haus der Geschichte der Bundesrepublik Deutschland). https://www.hdg.de/lemo/kapitel/deutsche-einheit/friedliche-revolution/fuehrungswechsel

But the plan failed. The crowd demanded the abolition of the constitutional article on the leading role of the SED, the dissolution of the Stasi, and freedom of speech. Live coverage by GDR state television (DFF, Deutscher Fernsehfunk) carried these demands across the country. Speeches by party functionaries attempting to talk about the "renewal of socialism" were drowned out by the whistling of the crowd.

Opposition speakers—the writers Stefan Heym, Christa Wolf, and others—exposed the legal contradictions of the regime by setting Article 27 of the GDR Constitution (on freedom of expression) against the articles of the Criminal Code that criminalized independent activity. Christa Wolf's speech, in which she said that the slogan "We are the people!" had become a conscious civic stance, marked the shift of the symbolic initiative to the opposition.



November 4, 1989: demonstration on Alexanderplatz organized by artists and cultural figures of the GDR. Photo: picture alliance / akg-images. https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/am-alexanderplatz-vor-30-jahren-letzter-kampf-fuer-eine-100.html

The crisis of power unfolded against the backdrop of an empty treasury. According to a secret report by the State Planning Commission (Staatliche Plankommission) headed by Gerhard Schürer, submitted to the Politburo at the end of October, the planned economy was in default. External debt exceeded 26 billion valuta marks (approximately 20 billion US dollars), and the last reserves were being spent on servicing it and on price subsidies. Schürer concluded that without billions in loans from the FRG, the GDR economy was not viable.

In an attempt to retain control, on November 6 the authorities published a draft law allowing travel abroad for up to 30 days a year. However, departure required proof of foreign currency, which could not be legally purchased in the GDR. Society regarded the law as a mockery and responded with the slogan "Around the world in 30 days—without money!" In Leipzig, up to 400,000 people turned out for the Monday demonstration (Montagsdemonstration), demanding the abolition of the restrictions.

The Politburo hastily prepared a new decree permitting unconditional travel. However, chaos in the apparatus led to a loss of control during its announcement. On the evening of November 9, 1989, Günter Schabowski held a live press briefing. The text of the decree, which was to be published only on the morning of November 10, was handed to him just before the broadcast. When a foreign correspondent asked when the new rules would take effect, the unprepared

Schabowski glanced at the sheet and said: "As far as I know... this takes effect immediately, without delay."



Günter Schabowski at the press conference on November 9, 1989. (Source: picture alliance / dpa).
https://www.ndr.de/geschichte/chronologie/wende/Guenter-Schabowski-Sein-Zettel-und-der-Mauerfall,schabowskiszettel100.html

The broadcast triggered an avalanche. Tens of thousands of Berliners rushed to the checkpoints of the Berlin Wall. Border troop officers, lacking directives from the Ministry of Defense and the Ministry for State Security, found themselves at an impasse. At the Bornholmer Straße checkpoint (Grenzübergang Bornholmer Straße), Lieutenant Colonel Harald Jäger was unable to reach his superiors, who had only verbally ordered that activists be let through selectively, with their passports invalidated. Unwilling to shed blood, Jäger ordered the barriers opened on his own authority at 11:30 p.m. This set off a chain reaction at other checkpoints, and overnight the border regime at the Wall ceased to function.



Panorama of the Bornholmer Straße checkpoint on the night of November 9–10, 1989. Photo: Peter R. Asche. Source: Stiftung Berliner Mauer / Archiv Chronik der Mauer. https://www.orte-der-einheit.de/bornholmer-strasse/

Immediately after the border opened, West Berlin Governing Mayor Walter Momper switched the banks to emergency mode to pay East Germans "welcome money" (Begrüßungsgeld)—a West German grant of 100 Deutsche Marks. This step vividly demonstrated the gap in living standards between the two countries. The economic insolvency of the GDR rendered meaningless any plans for its "democratization" without dismantling the existing system.

This transformed the main slogan of the revolution. The demand to reform the GDR gave way to calls for state unification with the Federal Republic. As early as the Leipzig demonstration of November 13, 1989, the slogan "We are the people!" (Wir sind das Volk) became "We are one people!" (Wir sind ein Volk).



GDR citizens queuing for "welcome money" (Begrüßungsgeld) outside a bank in West Berlin, November 1989. Photo: © Matthias Schubert. https://www.ddr-museum.de/de/blog/archive/ost-west-beziehungen-zwischen-mindestumtausch-und-begruessungsgeld

On November 7–8, the GDR Council of Ministers (Ministerrat der DDR) resigned. The SED nominated Hans Modrow—First Secretary of the party's Dresden District Committee (Bezirksleitung Dresden) and a supporter of Soviet perestroika—for the post of Chairman of the Council of Ministers. On November 13, the Volkskammer approved his government.

The Modrow cabinet found itself in a situation of deep crisis and dual power: the ministries were subordinate to the premier, but the security bloc was demoralized. The opposition had mobilization potential but no legal levers of governance. To prevent the collapse of state institutions, a direct dialogue had to be launched. A temporary body was needed that would bring the ruling bloc and the protest movements to one table to prepare reforms jointly.



11th session of the GDR Volkskammer: Hans Modrow after his election as Chairman of the GDR Council of Ministers; November 13, 1989. Photo: Hartmut Reiche. Source: German Federal Archives (Bundesarchiv, Bild 183-1989-1113-054 / CC-BY-SA 3.0).
https://www.chronik-der-mauer.de/chronik/183636/11-tagung-der-volkskammer-der-ddr-hans-modrow

1.3. Dual Power and the Architecture of the Transition: The Institutional Framework of the Central Round Table

The institution of the Central Round Table (Zentraler Runder Tisch, ZRT) did not emerge from a vacuum. Its origins are linked to the activities of the Protestant congregations of the GDR, which provided a legal space free from ideological control.



Prayer vigil at the Gethsemane Church on the morning of October 8, 1989. The banner demands an end to the persecution of protesters: "Stop the investigations. Revoke the penal orders." Source: Stiftung Haus der Geschichte / Rolf Zöllner. https://www.orte-der-einheit.de/en/gethsemanekirche/

From September 1989, opposition groups coordinated their activities on church premises: New Forum (Neues Forum), Democracy Now (Demokratie Jetzt), and the Initiative for Peace and Human Rights (Initiative Frieden und Menschenrechte). New Forum, founded on September 10, 1989, played a particular catalytic role. Although the GDR Ministry of the Interior declared it an "anti-state platform," mass support forced the authorities to back down, and on November 8 the movement was officially registered.

After Honecker's resignation and the fall of the Berlin Wall, a situation of "dual power" took shape in the country. The legal government of Hans Modrow (a representative of the moderate, reformist wing of the SED) formally ran the ministries but had lost its authority. The opposition controlled the streets but had no levers of governance. Under these conditions, the Protestant Church acted as a mediator, initiating the creation of a nationwide negotiating platform.



Founding session of the Central Round Table, chaired by church representatives, at the Dietrich Bonhoeffer House (East Berlin); December 7, 1989. Source: Federal Foundation for the Reappraisal of the SED Dictatorship (Bundesstiftung Aufarbeitung), archival reference: Bild 89 1207, POL-RT 13 / Photo: Klaus Mehner. https://erinnerungsdebatten.de/debatten/verfassung-zentraler-runder-tisch-1989-1990/

On December 7, 1989, following preliminary consultations, the Central Round Table held its inaugural session at the Bonhoeffer-Haus complex in Berlin, later relocating to Schönhausen Palace (Niederschönhausen)—a formal GDR government residence. Discussions were moderated by prominent religious leaders: Martin Ziegler (Evangelical Church), Karlheinz Ducke (Catholic Church), and Martin Lange (Association of Christian Churches). They guaranteed neutrality, drafted the agenda, and enforced an ethical code of conduct for the dialogue.



First meeting of the Central Round Table at the "Bonhoeffer-Haus" complex in East Berlin; December 7, 1989. The tables for participants from the "old order bloc" and the "new forces bloc" are arranged in a hollow square (en carré). Photo: Klaus Oberst. (Source: German Federal Archives / ADN-Zentralbild, call number: sitzungstisch-zentraler-runder-tisch_foto_LEMO-F-6-179_barch.jpg / Bild 183-1989-1207-026).
https://www.hdg.de/lemo/bestand/objekt/foto-gespraech-am-runden-tisch.html

The institutional framework and rules of procedure of the Central Round Table (Zentraler Runder Tisch, ZRT) dismantled the administrative hierarchy accustomed to the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED). In expanding its structure, the ZRT codified the principle of parity, establishing 39 voting members divided into two distinct blocs:

1. The "Old Order Bloc" (19 seats): Representatives of the ruling party—which at the first session acted as the SED, rebranded following its congress on December 16–17 as the SED-PDS, and on February 4, 1990, became the Party of Democratic Socialism (Partei des Demokratischen Sozialismus, PDS)—alongside the Free German Trade Union Federation (Freier Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund, FDGB) and the former satellite parties of the National Front: the Christian Democratic Union (Christlich-Demokratische Union Deutschlands, CDU), the Liberal Democratic Party of Germany (Liberal-Demokratische Partei Deutschlands, LDPD), the Democratic Peasants' Party of Germany (Demokratische Bauernpartei Deutschlands, DBD), and the National Democratic Party of Germany (National-Demokratische Partei Deutschlands, NDPD).

2. The "New Forces Bloc" (20 seats): Delegates representing independent movements and new political parties born in the autumn of 1989 (New Forum, Democracy Now, Initiative for Peace

and Human Rights), the newly formed Social Democratic Party (Sozialdemokratische Partei in der DDR, SDP), and the Green Party (Grüne Partei in der DDR).



From the 4th through the 16th sessions, the Round Table convened under the state coat of arms of the SED dictatorship—an overt internal contradiction of the transition era. Photo: Peter Leske. (Source: picture-alliance / ZB). https://www.welt.de/geschichte/article254735996/Friedliche-Revolution-Die-Ecken-des-Runden-Tischs.html

A crucial factor in the functioning of the ZRT was the initiation of live radio broadcasts of its sessions on January 3, followed by live television coverage starting January 9, 1990. This had a profound effect on East German society. Citizens observed in real time as high-ranking bureaucrats and state security officers engaged on equal terms with dissidents, pastors, and intellectuals. The ZRT format neutralized the nomenklatura status of government officials, effectively transforming the proceedings into a public audit of the old regime.



Meeting of the Central Round Table in the conference hall of the GDR Council of Ministers at Schönhausen Palace (Berlin-Pankow); January 1990. Photo: Peer Grimm. (Source: picture alliance / dpa). https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/aufloesung-des-amts-fuer-nationale-sicherheit-entlassung-100.html

Political coercion exercised by the ZRT over the government was achieved through the hijacking of the legislative and executive agenda. The ZRT operated as an oversight body holding an effective veto power. The Modrow Cabinet recognized that its decisions would lack local enforceability without the explicit endorsement of the Round Table. Institutional sabotage by state ministries was countered by the opposition's threat to derail negotiations and call a general strike.



A session of the Central Round Table in the conference hall building of the GDR Council of Ministers at Niederschönhausen Castle (now Schönhausen Palace) in Berlin-Pankow; January 1990. (Source: dpa-ZB / Picture Alliance / Photo: Peer Grimm).
https://www.deutschlandfunkkultur.de/deutsche-rufe-10-der-verfassungsentwurf-des-runden-tisches-100.html

By late January 1990, the escalating economic crisis forced both sides to reach a compromise and establish a coalition "Government of National Responsibility" (Regierung der nationalen Verantwortung), the detailed mechanism of which is described below.

The final session of the ZRT took place on March 12, 1990. That same evening, the last Monday demonstration was held in Leipzig, drawing between 30,000 and 50,000 participants. These events marked the end of the phase of mass street protests and the active role of informal committees.



Delegates voting on urgent measures regarding personnel policy within the state apparatus at the final session of the Central Round Table of the GDR; March 12, 1990. (Source: Federal Foundation for the Reappraisal of the SED Dictatorship (Bundesstiftung Aufarbeitung), archival reference: 37096-25A-TH221-LEA / Photo: Peter Leske). https://erinnerungsdebatten.de/debatten/eliten-zentraler-runder-tisch-1989-1990/

Civil society safeguarded the country from chaos, securing a peaceful transition of power to a new parliament (the Volkskammer) elected in the March 18 vote, as well as to a coalition government. The legal status of the ZRT's achievements and the specific characteristics of the March 18 electoral cycle are analyzed in the concluding sections of this chapter.

1.4. Neutralization of the GDR Security Apparatus and the Liquidation of the Ministry for State Security

One of the most formidable challenges of the political transition was overcoming resistance from the security sector. The turning point in neutralizing the GDR Ministry for State Security (MfS, commonly known as the Stasi), the People's Police (Volkspolizei), and paramilitary formations was the "Leipzig Precedent" of October 9, 1989.

This phase proved decisive in the chronology of the autumn protests. Following the violent suppression of demonstrations in Berlin and the regions by law enforcement agencies on October 7–8, widespread fears emerged across society regarding the potential implementation of a Tiananmen-style forceful response in Leipzig. Emergency medical facilities were urgently prepared to receive casualties, and security units were issued live ammunition. Despite intense administrative pressure applied by the authorities through state media, the demonstration manifested an unprecedented level of mobilization: between 70,000 and 100,000 people took to the streets of Leipzig, chanting "We are the people!" (Wir sind das Volk!) and "No violence!" (Keine Gewalt!).



On the evening of October 9, 1989, tens of thousands of people marched along the inner ring road in central Leipzig. (Source: Robert Havemann Society / Aram Radomski). https://revolution89.de/revolution/wir-sind-das-volk/der-9-oktober-in-leipzig

By evening, approximately 8,000 personnel from the Stasi, the People's Police (Volkspolizei), and the Combat Groups of the Working Class (Kampfgruppen der Arbeiterklasse, KdA) had been concentrated in the city. However, no order to use force was issued due to a "responsibility vacuum": the central leadership in Berlin hesitated to authorize violence without explicit guarantees of support from Moscow, which was ruled out under the Soviet doctrine of non-intervention. The sheer volume of peaceful demonstrators paralyzed the regime's security apparatus, whose leadership ultimately shied away from triggering bloodshed.

A crucial role in de-escalating the crisis was played by the "Leipzig Six" (Leipziger Sechs)—a mediation group comprising three secretaries of the SED district committee (Kurt Höger, Jochen Pommert, and Roland Wötzel) and prominent figures from the intelligentsia, including conductor Kurt Masur, theologian Peter Zimmermann, and satirist Bernd-Lutz Lange. Their broadcast appeal calling for peaceful dialogue proved instrumental in averting clashes. Local security officials were thereby provided with a rationale to withhold offensive action, while the ruling elite perceived a viable pathway toward compromise.

The decisive factor depriving the regime of the capacity to suppress the protest in isolation was the breaching of the information blockade. On the day of the demonstration, civic activists Siegbert Schefke and Aram Radomski covertly climbed the tower of the Reformed Church (Reformierte Kirche) in Leipzig and captured the march on video. The tape, smuggled via diplomatic channels to West Berlin, was broadcast on West German television (Westfernsehen). Millions of GDR citizens who received West German television signals witnessed firsthand that security forces had refrained from using force, effectively neutralizing the state's apparatus of intimidation.



Siegbert Schefke and Aram Radomski monitor the progress of the Leipzig demonstration on October 9, 1989, documenting the crowd chanting slogans: "We are the people!", "Recognize New Forum!", and "Gorby, Gorby!". Photo: Aram Radomski / Robert Havemann Society (Robert-Havemann-Gesellschaft). https://www.spiegel.de/geschichte/leipzig-9-oktober-1989-montagsdemonstration-kurz-vor-ddr-ende-a-1289709.html

This shift in public consciousness initiated the dismantling of the old order: within a month, the Berlin Wall fell, and the state apparatus lost the capacity to govern the country without accounting for the street. The power vacuum shifted the decision-making center to the Central Round Table, where yesterday's dissidents gained leverage to control the regime's key institutions.



Speech by Rainer Eppelmann of the Democratic Awakening (Demokratischer Aufbruch) presenting firm demands to the Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the GDR, Hans Modrow, for the immediate disclosure of the structures of the MfS and SED during a session of the Central Round Table; January 15, 1990. (Source: Federal Foundation for the Reappraisal of the SED Dictatorship (Bundesstiftung Aufarbeitung), archival reference: 37068-25A-TH221-LEA-VorAw / Photo: Peter Leske). https://erinnerungsdebatten.de/debatten/aufarbeitung-zentraler-runder-tisch-1989-1990/

The liquidation of the Ministry for State Security also took place under the direct supervision of the ZRT. Following an attempt by the Chairman of the Council of Ministers, Hans Modrow, to preserve the security service by restructuring it into the Office for National Security (Amt für Nationale Sicherheit, AfNS), the opposition firmly insisted on the complete dissolution of the agency, freezing its budgetary funding. The pivotal moment occurred on January 15, 1990, when citizens established control over the central Stasi headquarters complex on Normannenstraße in Berlin.



Protesters establishing civic control over the Ministry for State Security complex on Normannenstraße in order to prevent the destruction of archival documents; Berlin-Lichtenberg, January 15, 1990. (Source: Federal Foundation for the Reappraisal of the SED Dictatorship (Bundesstiftung Aufarbeitung), archival reference: DDR Opposition Stasi Sturm / Photo: Ann-Christine Jansson). https://erinnerungsdebatten.de/debatten/aufarbeitung-zentraler-runder-tisch-1989-1990/



Citizens of East Berlin at the gates of the Ministry for State Security (Stasi) headquarters on Normannenstraße on the day the complex was placed under civic control; January 15, 1990. A demonstrator holds an acrostic protest sign criticizing the regime's attempts to retain power through cosmetic party renaming. The first vertical set of letters forms the party's old abbreviation SED, while the second forms the new one, PDS, creating the political slogan: [S]tasi / [E]inheits- / [D]iktatoren (Stasi and Unity Dictators [SED]); [P]robieren / [D]ogmatischen / [S]ozialismus (Attempting Dogmatic Socialism [PDS]); NIE WIEDER! (Never again!).
Photo: Rolf Walter. (Source: Robert-Havemann-Gesellschaft / German Federal Archives [Bundesarchiv]).
https://www.bundesarchiv.de/themen-entdecken/online-entdecken/storys/die-stasi-im-jahr-1989/januar-1990/

It is essential to emphasize the peaceful and organized nature of this action, which effectively preserved the national memory. When the security service began urgently destroying documents, protesters moved to establish control over the agency's headquarters to safeguard crucial evidence. Activists formed human corridors, preventing violence against personnel and halting the destruction of archives. Consequently, the complex was transitioned to civic administration, and the archives were formally sealed by representatives of civic committees and the Military Prosecutor's Office of the GDR.

Simultaneously, the institutional neutralization of the National People's Army (Nationale Volksarmee, NVA) of the GDR unfolded. Guarantees of personal safety and the preservation of social benefits were communicated to the officer corps through ZRT channels and informal contacts with the FRG, contingent upon strict non-interference. Recognizing the severe risks of street suppressions escalating into an internal armed conflict, the top NVA general staff sabotaged radical directives issued by the SED Central Committee. By early October, a fracture emerged at the lower ranks: cadets from several military academies openly declared their unwillingness to use force against fellow citizens. This dynamic was consolidated by a strict directive from the Soviet leadership prohibiting the Group of Soviet Forces in Germany (GSFG) from leaving their barracks or providing military support to the GDR authorities.

Thus, when Egon Krenz officially assumed office as the new leader of the GDR in October, the military leadership had already declared de facto neutrality and rejected all plans for the forceful containment of society. Stripped of its coercive foundation, the leadership of the ruling party rapidly lost control over the political situation, leaving early free elections to the Volkskammer (People's Chamber, the unicameral parliament of the GDR) as the sole pragmatic option to stabilize the state.

Concurrently, the external dimension of the German question was being resolved. West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl's visit to Moscow on February 10, 1990—where he secured Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev's agreement in principle to German reunification—deprived the GDR regime of its last remaining hopes for Kremlin support and effectively transformed the upcoming Volkskammer vote into a de facto plebiscite on the future statehood of East Germany.



Helmut Kohl and Mikhail Gorbachev during negotiations in Moscow; February 10, 1990. Photo: Engelbert Reineke / Press and Information Office of the Federal Government of Germany (Bundesregierung).https://www.bundeskanzler-helmut-kohl.de/seite/deutsch-franzoesische-beziehungen-zulieferung-august/

1.5. Mechanisms for Legalizing Round Table Decisions, the Government of National Responsibility, and the Finalization of the Transition

A defining phenomenon of the German transition was the evolution of the Central Round Table from a consultative dialogue platform into an entity exercising constituent power. The crucial success lay in the rejection of legal nihilism: the opposition did not seek the immediate annulment of existing laws, but rather utilized established formal structures to achieve a legitimate dismantling of the system.

This process relied on a strategy of coerced lawmaking. Lacking formal statutory authority, the Central Round Table utilized the East German Volkskammer as a technical instrument to confer the force of law upon its decisions. Deprived of external coercive backing, deputies of the old legislature relayed the will of the Round Table. Under the pressure of popular mobilization, the old parliament effectively yielded legislative initiative to the expert working groups of the Central Round Table (ZRT). This ensured external legal continuity: the state apparatus remained operational while enforcing substantively novel norms that retained the familiar form of parliamentary acts.



Submission of the draft bill "On the Privatization of State Property in Favor of Citizens of the GDR" by representatives of the Social Democratic Party (SDP of the GDR) for consideration by the Central Round Table; February 26, 1990. (Source: Federal Foundation for the Reappraisal of the SED Dictatorship (Bundesstiftung Aufarbeitung), archival reference: 36948-25A-TH221-LEA / Photo: Peter Leske). https://erinnerungsdebatten.de/debatten/vermoegen-zentraler-runder-tisch-1989-1990/

A key milestone in the transition strategy was the step-by-step integration of the opposition into executive power, culminating in the creation of the coalition "Government of National Responsibility" (Regierung der nationalen Verantwortung). This measure was dictated by the acute political crisis of late January 1990. The public was rapidly losing confidence in the cabinet of Hans Modrow, which was perceived as an attempt by the SED-PDS nomenklatura to maintain control, while the Round Table itself faced the risk of becoming a mere decorative body. To avert administrative chaos and economic collapse, the opposition went on the offensive. The takeover of executive authority unfolded at the turn of January and February 1990 through three pivotal milestones.



Discussion between the Chairman of the Council of Ministers Hans Modrow (SED-PDS) and opposition representatives Reinhard Schult and Ingrid Köppe of New Forum (Neues Forum, NF) at the Central Round Table. (Source: Federal Foundation for the Reappraisal of the SED Dictatorship (Bundesstiftung Aufarbeitung), archival reference: 37286-25A-TH221-LEA / Photo: Peter Leske). https://erinnerungsdebatten.de/debatten/akten-zentraler-runder-tisch-1989-1990/

First, on January 22, 1990, representatives of the "New Forces Bloc" at the Round Table issued an ultimatum to the Modrow government. The opposition refused to serve as a passive shield for the SED-PDS. Under the threat of collapsing the dialogue and triggering a general strike, the dissidents demanded direct participation in the governance of the country and the rescheduling of parliamentary elections from May to March to shorten the interregnum.

Second, on January 28, 1990, under the dual pressure of street protests and the ZRT ultimatum, Hans Modrow capitulated. During negotiations, the parties reached a compromise on the official entry of the opposition into the Council of Ministers of the GDR. The agreement establishing the provisional "Government of National Responsibility" granted leaders of civic movements the status of "ministers without portfolio" to counterbalance the old party bureaucracy.



Meeting between the GDR leadership, moderators of the Central Round Table, and opposition leaders at the Council of Ministers' "Johannishof" guesthouse; night of January 28–29, 1990. The negotiations resulted in an agreement to reschedule parliamentary elections for March 18 and integrate the opposition into the government. From left to right: Hans Modrow, moderators Martin Ziegler and Karl-Heinz Ducke, Acting Chairman of the GDR State Council Manfred Gerlach; on the right: leader of the Democratic Awakening party, Wolfgang Schnur. Photo: AP. https://www.spiegel.de/fotostrecke/20-jahre-runder-tisch-fotostrecke-108461.html

Third, on February 5, 1990, the Volkskammer of the GDR formally approved the new coalition cabinet. Eight prominent leaders of key opposition movements—including Rainer Eppelmann of Democratic Awakening (Demokratischer Aufbruch, DA), Wolfgang Ullmann of Democracy Now (Demokratie Jetzt), and Matthias Platzeck of the Green Party (Grüne Partei)—joined the Council of Ministers of the GDR as ministers without portfolio with full voting rights.



Hans Modrow (right) in the corridors of the Volkskammer with newly appointed ministers without portfolio (left to right): Tatjana Böhm (Independent Women's Association), Klaus Schlüter (Green League), and Gerd Poppe (Initiative for Peace and Human Rights); Berlin, February 5, 1990. The photograph captures the formation of the coalition Government of National Responsibility. Source: Bundesarchiv, archival reference: Bild 183-1990-0205-018 / Photo: Gabriele Senft. https://www.spiegel.de/fotostrecke/20-jahre-runder-tisch-fotostrecke-108461.html



New members of the coalition cabinet representing opposition forces on the day of their official confirmation in the East German Volkskammer; February 5, 1990. From left to right: Sebastian Pflugbeil (New Forum), Rainer Eppelmann (Democratic Awakening), Walter Romberg (SDP), Tatjana Böhm (Independent Women's Association), Klaus Schlüter (Green League), Matthias Platzeck (Green Party), Gerd Poppe (Initiative for Peace and Human Rights), and Wolfgang Ullmann (Democracy Now). Source: Bundesarchiv, archival reference: Bild 183-1990-0205-019 / Photo: Gabriele Senft. https://www.spiegel.de/fotostrecke/20-jahre-runder-tisch-fotostrecke-108461.html

The institutional backbone of the opposition ministers consisted of the 16 specialized working groups of the Round Table (focusing on the economy, security, media, legal reform, etc.), created between December 1989 and January 1990, which effectively duplicated the state ministries. Drawing on their analytical and technical expertise, the new ministers without portfolio gained access to classified state information, financial analytics, and government archives.



Discussion on the concept of establishing the Trust Agency (Treuhandanstalt) during a session of the Central Round Table of the GDR; February 12, 1990. (Source: Federal Foundation for the Reappraisal of the SED Dictatorship [Bundesstiftung Aufarbeitung], archival reference: 37078-25A-TH221-LEA / Photo: Peter Leske). https://erinnerungsdebatten.de/debatten/vermoegen-zentraler-runder-tisch-1989-1990/



Discussion on property relations reform during a session of the Central Round Table of the GDR. (Source: Federal Foundation for the Reappraisal of the SED Dictatorship [Bundesstiftung Aufarbeitung], archival reference: 37036-25A-TH221-LEA / Photo: Peter Leske).
https://erinnerungsdebatten.de/debatten/vermoegen-zentraler-runder-tisch-1989-1990/

This completed a direct vertical of control: draft legislation developed within the ZRT's working groups was converted by the ministers into executive decrees binding upon the legacy state apparatus. The Council of Ministers de facto transformed into an executive committee of the Round Table, ensuring a seamless transition: the state apparatus functioned with the understanding that directives emanated from a body of national consensus rather than from the weakened SED.



Report by the Chairman of the Council of Ministers, Hans Modrow, to the Central Round Table regarding the status of the dissolution of the Ministry for State Security / Office for National Security of the GDR (MfS / AfNS); January 15, 1990. (Source: Federal Foundation for the Reappraisal of the SED Dictatorship [Bundesstiftung Aufarbeitung], archival reference: 36975-25A-TH221-LEA / Photo: Peter Leske). https://erinnerungsdebatten.de/debatten/akten-zentraler-runder-tisch-1989-1990/

The specialized working groups of the ZRT effectively served as a temporary pre-parliament. It was precisely within these bodies that the new legislative package of the GDR was drafted: acts on the freedom of the press, assembly, and political parties, as well as liberal electoral legislation that enabled fair, competitive multi-party elections.



Delegates of 16 parties and socio-political associations discussing a government report as well as draft bills on elections, political parties, and civic associations during the 7th session of the Central Round Table; center: New Forum representative Ingrid Köppe. Source: Bundesarchiv, archival reference: Bild 183-1990-0115-018 / Photo: Rainer Mittelstädt. https://erinnerungsdebatten.de/debatten/akten-zentraler-runder-tisch-1989-1990/

The foundation of the legal transition was the striking, on December 1, 1989, of the constitutional provision guaranteeing the leading role of the SED from the GDR Constitution. This nullified the political monopoly of the ruling party, which reorganized in mid-December into the SED-PDS.



Emergency Congress of the SED, during which an attempt was made to reorganize the party and alter its name to the "Socialist Unity Party of Germany – Party of Democratic Socialism" (SED-PDS); December 8–9, 1989. Source: Bundesarchiv, archival reference: Bild 183-1989-1208-041 / Photo: Rainer Mittelstädt. https://erinnerungsdebatten.de/debatten/eliten-zentraler-runder-tisch-1989-1990/

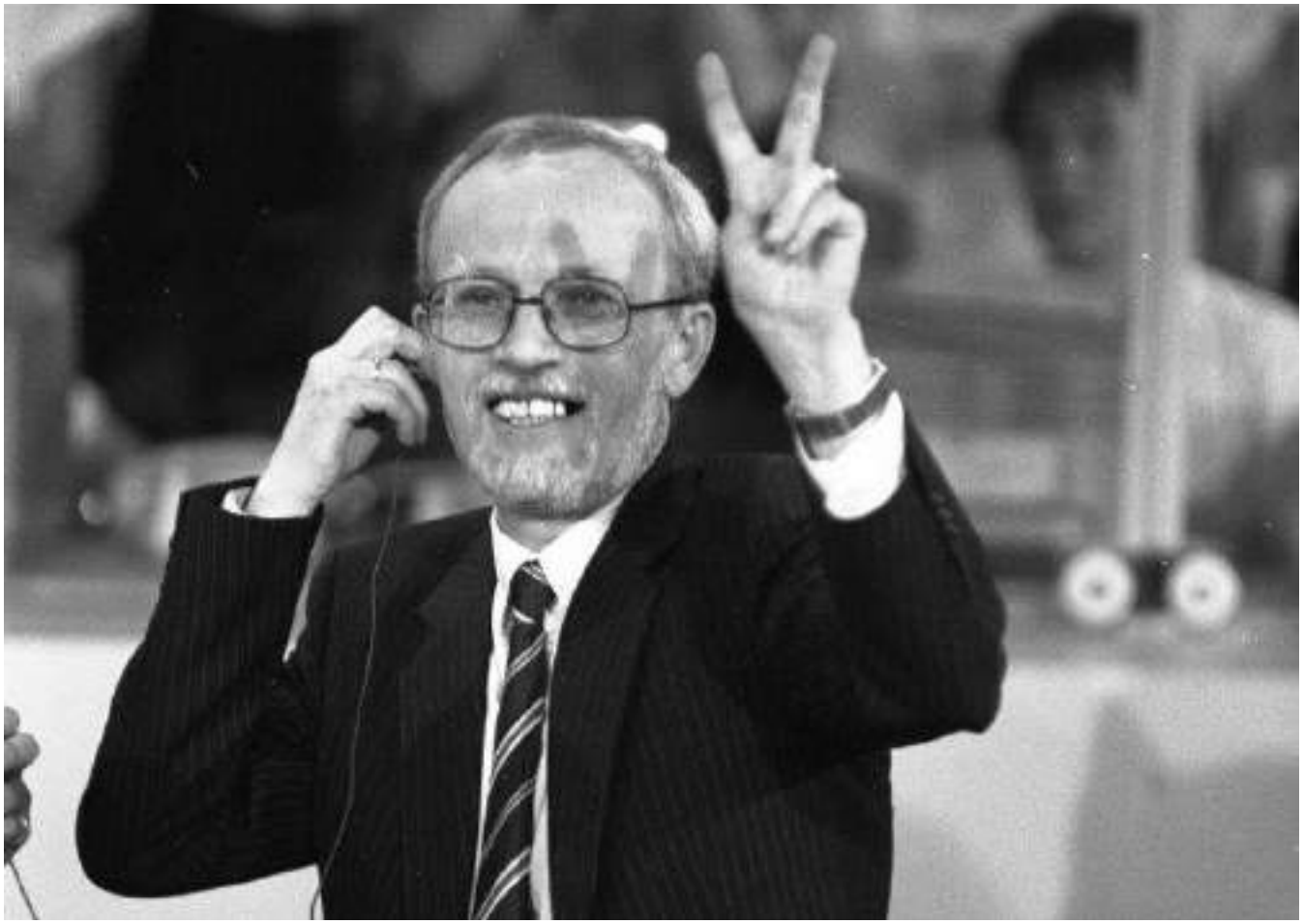
This created the conditions for drafting a new Constitution intended to transform the GDR into a democratic, ecological, and social republic. Within the ZRT, the draft was framed as the legal codification of a "third way"—an alternative to both the Soviet model and mechanical absorption by the FRG. In parallel, ZRT experts swiftly established the legal foundation for free elections, blocking electoral procedures that favored the nomenklatura.

The draft of the new GDR Constitution created by the Round Table was officially presented at the platform's final session on March 12, 1990. By the March 18 elections, a provisional legal framework—drafted by the ZRT and institutionalized through state mechanisms—was already in force, precluding a revanchist comeback by the old elites. The official dissolution of the ZRT transferred the authority for constituent lawmaking to the future legitimate parliament.



The final (16th) session of the Central Round Table at Niederschönhausen Palace; March 12, 1990. On the agenda was the discussion of sections of the draft for a new GDR constitution. Photo: Klaus Oberst. Source: German Federal Archives / ADN-Zentralbild (archival reference: Bild 183-1990-0312-024). https://erinnerungsdebatten.de/debatten/verfassung-zentraler-runder-tisch-1989-1990/

Thanks to the legal framework established by the ZRT, the first free elections on March 18, 1990, were conducted without electoral fraud and with a voter turnout of 93.4%, resolving any potential doubts regarding the parliament's legitimacy. The election results radically altered the political elite: a mere 3% of incumbent deputies were re-elected to the Volkskammer. The new parliamentary body was noticeably younger (with a mean age of 42) and distinguished by a high level of educational qualification (86% of deputies held higher education degrees).



Chairman of the Christian Democratic Union of the GDR, Lothar de Maizière, on the night of the vote count following the announcement of the victory of the conservative bloc "Alliance for Germany"; Berlin, March 18, 1990. Source: Bundesarchiv, archival reference: Bild 183-1990-0318-046 / Photo: Klaus Oberst. https://revolution89.de/fr/unite/pas-dexperimentation/les-premieres-elections-libres-en-rda

The political map of the GDR underwent a fundamental transformation. The greatest success was achieved by the center-right electoral alliance "Alliance for Germany" (Allianz für Deutschland), led by the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), which secured 48% of the vote and obtained a mandate for rapid reunification with the FRG. The Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS), the successor to the SED, garnered only 16% of the vote, marking a definitive end to the nomenklatura's monopoly.

This outcome radically altered the Round Table's plans for statehood reform. The voting results clearly demonstrated that the majority of the population was oriented not toward preserving a sovereign republic based on "third way" principles, but toward achieving the fastest possible reunification with West Germany for the sake of material stability.

Following the election results, the Volkskammer formed a broad coalition government led by Lothar de Maizière, leader of the East German CDU. The core of the coalition was formed by the "Alliance for Germany" bloc, which brought together the Christian Democratic Union of the GDR

(Christlich-Demokratische Union Deutschlands, CDU), the German Social Union (Deutsche Soziale Union, DSU), and the Democratic Awakening movement (Demokratischer Aufbruch, DA). To secure a constitutional majority, the Social Democratic Party in the GDR (Sozialdemokratische Partei in der DDR, SDP) and the Association of Free Democrats (Bund Freier Demokraten, BFD) also joined the cabinet. The primary objective of this transitional government became the technical and legal implementation of the GDR's dissolution and its seamless integration with West Germany.



The first and last freely elected government of the GDR, led by Prime Minister Lothar de Maizière (center), outside the Palace of the Republic following its official confirmation by the Volkskammer; Berlin, April 1990. Photo: FPI-Foto Press / ullstein bild. https://www.hdg.de/lemo/bestand/objekt/foto-kabinett-de-maiziere.html

The new leadership disregarded the ZRT's draft Constitution. The integration of the GDR into the FRG followed a scenario involving the rapid extension of the West German Basic Law (Grundgesetz) to the new federal states (Neue Bundesländer) via its Article 23. This article contained a mechanism permitting other parts of Germany to accede unilaterally to the jurisdiction of the Basic Law through a declaration of accession (Beitritt). Selecting this path instead of drafting a new constitution pursuant to Article 146 meant bypassing lengthy inter-state negotiations and referendums in favor of expedited integration. On October 3, 1990, five re-established East German states joined the FRG, rendering the ZRT's constitutional drafts obsolete.

Relevant Lessons for Belarus

Lesson 1. Political Agency as a Prerequisite for Negotiations: Institutional Systems Engage Only with Institutional Systems

The GDR elites consented to negotiations not as a consequence of liberalizing views, but because the opposition institutionalized itself and presented an operationally viable counterpart. For Belarus, this implies that external and internal pressure (sanctions, stagnation) does not inherently trigger a transition, but merely accumulates systemic tension. To diffuse this tension into a managed transition, democratic forces must establish a unified and agentic "counter-system." The consolidation of the opposition into a singular institutional actor is a prerequisite condition for dialogue. Negotiations will commence only when elites identify a designated counterpart capable of granting safety guarantees and offering an exit from the impasse. The path to a Round Table requires transforming spontaneous protest into a structured political dialogue.

Lesson 2. Overcoming the "Responsibility Vacuum" via External Signals

The Round Table in the GDR became viable only after the nomenklatura's illusion of external support dissolved. The "Sinatra Doctrine" and the strict neutrality of Soviet troops created a structural scenario in which the leadership realized it would bear personal accountability for state-sanctioned violence, deprived of its geopolitical patron's protection. For Belarus, this underscores the imperative of international diplomatic leverage aimed at conveying an unequivocal signal to the nomenklatura and security apparatus (siloviki): during an acute domestic crisis, external military intervention to suppress civil society is by no means guaranteed. As this protective perimeter erodes, the apprehension of individual legal liability prompts pragmatic elements within the incumbent system to seek a negotiated political compromise.

Lesson 3. The "Dual-Key" Model and the Role of the Human Resource Reserve

The East German experience is particularly valuable for its methodology of maintaining state capacity during regime change. Rather than dismantling state institutions, the Round Table

implemented a system of sectoral working groups. This mechanism allowed critical infrastructure specialists (public utilities, transport, healthcare) to remain under the management of legacy personnel while operating under the oversight of newly appointed, independent supervisors.

For Belarus, this offers an effective model to mitigate bureaucratic fears of administrative collapse. However, operationalizing this model requires democratic forces to proactively prepare a reserve of technical specialists capable of co-governance. Such preparation enables the opposition to assert control over financial flows and curb state repression while maintaining infrastructural stability. Consequently, the state bureaucracy is transformed into a technical executive body, its loyalty secured through status retention and the predictability of the transition process.

Lesson 4. Balancing Justice and Order Through Archival Control

The East German case demonstrates that during the initial stage of regime transition, securing control over information is more critical for dismantling the repressive apparatus than immediate, sweeping lustration. Sealing the Stasi archives deprived the old elite of the ability to leverage blackmail or destroy evidence, without paralyzing the routine operations of law enforcement agencies.

For Belarus, establishing civil and legal control over security service archives represents a primary mechanism to halt repression rapidly. Safeguarding these records mitigates the impetus for extrajudicial vengeance by demonstrating to society the institution of formal legal accountability. This prevents a legal vacuum and deprives security forces (siloviki) of a pretext for armed resistance driven by the fear of vigilante justice.

Lesson 5. Balancing the "Carrot and Stick": Sanctions Leverage and Financial Assistance

The transition in the GDR possessed a clear economic dimension, in which the FRG guaranteed large-scale financial assistance in exchange for reforms, acting as a hedge against economic collapse. Under Belarusian conditions, a Round Table must actively manage this balance. Sanctions pressure (the "stick") creates the initial impetus for dialogue, whereas financial aid and the phased lifting of restrictions (the "carrot") ensure a path out of the crisis.

The nomenklatura requires a step-by-step roadmap: compliance with specific conditions (the release of political prisoners, the cessation of repression) triggers the rollback of sanctions

packages and opens access to credit lines. This aligns support for the transition with the pragmatic interests of the elites in stabilizing the economy.

Lesson 6. Legal Continuity as a Bridge for the Bureaucracy

The Round Table in the GDR avoided radical legal ruptures, compelling the legacy parliament to formalize the new rules of the game. This transition "from law to law" enabled civil servants to remain in office without the immediate threat of criminal prosecution.

To minimize administrative sabotage within the Belarusian bureaucracy, it is critical that decisions made by the dialogue platform be codified through existing formal procedures. Operating within familiar legal mechanisms eliminates the psychological barrier of "treason against the state" for executive personnel, significantly streamlines the international recognition of the transition, and integrates the state apparatus into the process of peaceful reform.

Lesson 7. The Strategy of "Legal Substitution" and the Framework of Transitional Lawmaking

The East German experience demonstrates that a political transition remains resilient if a legal alternative for the interim period is prepared in advance. On the one hand, the East German opposition succeeded because it acted as the architect of a new normativity, implementing fully developed reforms through existing state channels. For Belarus, this underscores the imperative of drafting key decree proposals (on media freedom, political parties, amnesty, etc.) well beforehand. Relying on familiar administrative formats deprives the outgoing regime of pretexts to allege breaches of public order and prevents administrative chaos.

On the other hand, the final phase of the ZRT revealed the risk of a disconnect between expert designs and the pragmatic demands of society. The ZRT's draft of a new GDR Constitution ultimately proved obsolete: citizens favored rapid reunification with the FRG in pursuit of material stability. For Belarus, a pre-packaged legal framework must serve strictly as an interim technical mechanism to stabilize the country and conduct competitive elections. Any attempt by a transitional authority to entrench a long-term geopolitical or value-oriented trajectory while ignoring the material needs of the majority will undermine these foundational efforts. A future legitimate parliament will discard over-engineered reforms if they fail to address the immediate public demand for maintaining living standards.

Summary

In concluding the analysis of the German experience, it can be stated that the success of the transition in the GDR was dictated not only by the regime's inherent fragility, but also by the capacity of alternative political forces to rapidly provide the state with a new framework of legitimacy. The Central Round Table in Berlin operated not merely as a discussion platform, but as a temporary "center of gravity" for the entire political system, mitigating the risk of total institutional paralysis.

This case serves as empirical proof that the peaceful dismantling of an authoritarian vertical is achievable even in the presence of a formidable repressive apparatus—provided that the opposition operates as a consolidated "counter-system" and external structural factors deprive the nomenklatura of its resource monopoly. Germany demonstrated that once the elites' illusion of external protection dissolves, and the emergence of an operationally viable political actor guarantees systemic stabilization and governance, transitioning to dialogue evolves from "treason" into the nomenklatura's most rational strategy for self-preservation. Crucially, the transformation of civic consciousness from passive "objects" of politics into active "agents" remains an indispensable prerequisite for a successful transition.

Chapter 2. Poland (1980–1989): The Round Table and the Model of a Parity Agreement

Introduction

The experience of systemic transformation in Poland presents an exemplar case of coercing an authoritarian regime into negotiations through the creation of a long-term, pressure-resilient social counter-system. The Polish transition unfolded under conditions of a tight balance of power: the ruling nomenklatura of the Polish United Workers' Party (PUWP; Polska Zjednoczona Partia Robotnicza, PZPR) lacked internal resources for the complete eradication of the opposition, while the protest movement possessed no capacity for an immediate overthrow of the regime. The persistent threat of Soviet military intervention delineated rigid parameters of the permissible for both sides: Moscow would not allow the PUWP to surrender power entirely, yet a prolonged violent conflict within Poland undermined the stability of the entire Eastern Bloc.

Within this geopolitical framework, spontaneous economic discontent among Polish workers—spurred by chronic shortages and price hikes—led to the abandonment of street demonstrations in favor of the tactics of occupation strikes (strajk okupacyjny) at major industrial enterprises. In the course of the protest's evolution, this forced defensive pattern was

conceptualized by the movement's expert wing as a strategy of a "self-limiting revolution" (rewolucja samoograniczająca się).

The internal resilience of this newly emerged counter-system rested upon a pragmatic alliance between the strike movement and the dissident intelligentsia, who succeeded in translating the demands of worker committees into systemic legal categories. The institutionalization of protest within the framework of the Independent Self-Governing Trade Union "Solidarity" (Niezależny Samorządny Związek Zawodowy „Solidarność”) enabled the creation of a parallel civic infrastructure equipped with its own logistical, financial, and media capacities—a network that the regime proved unable to eradicate even through the imposition of martial law.

When the chronic economic crisis and passive public non-cooperation escalated in the late 1980s due to failed government reforms and a sharp surge in prices, a new, uncontainable wave of nationwide strikes swept across the country. Recognizing the impossibility of suppressing this unrest solely through coercive methods, the party-state leadership was forced to engage in dialogue. The opposition entered the Round Table negotiations as an operationally viable partner. Possessing concrete, legally articulated programs for legal and economic reform enabled it to steer political bargaining with the nomenklatura into a step-by-step dismantling of single-party monopoly, securing the transfer of power while maintaining the operational capacity of the state apparatus.

2.1. Economic and Socio-Political Prerequisites for the Systemic Crisis of the PPR (1970–1979)

The political and economic crisis of the Polish People's Republic (PPR; Polska Rzeczpospolita Ludowa – PRL), which ultimately culminated in the dismantling of the monopoly of the Polish United Workers' Party (PUWP; Polska Zjednoczona Partia Robotnicza – PZPR), unfolded throughout the 1970s. The initial inflection point of destabilization occurred during the tragic events of December 1970. By that time, the autarkic model pursued by the First Secretary of the PUWP Central Committee, Władysław Gomułka, had exhausted its functional capacity. Seeking to curb inflation, the party leadership and the government of Józef Cyrankiewicz forcibly suppressed domestic consumption by announcing a sharp increase in retail food prices immediately prior to Christmas.

The working class responded rapidly. On December 14, 1970, workers at the Lenin Shipyard in Gdańsk initiated street demonstrations, which were quickly joined by workforces from enterprises in Gdynia, Elbląg, and Szczecin. Władysław Gomułka characterized the protests as anti-state riots and authorized the use of firearms by the military. The coercive operation was directed by Politburo member Zenon Kliszko and Minister of National Defense General Wojciech

Jaruzelski. On December 17, in Gdynia, military units opened fire on columns of shipbuilders walking to their morning shift from the Gdynia Stocznia railway platform. The suppression of protests along the Baltic coast resulted in 45 deaths and left over 1,000 people wounded.



Demonstrators carrying the body of the murdered worker Zbigniew Godlewski down a street in Gdynia. December 1970. Photo: European Solidarity Centre. https://wyborcza.pl/alehistoria/7,121681,26609323,grudzien-1970-r-zbyszek-godlewski-mial-18-lat-padly-strzaly.html

Against the backdrop of internal clashes within the party apparatus, key personnel shifts took place. A faction of functionaries headed by Edward Gierek, Stanisław Kania, and Wojciech Jaruzelski coalesced behind the First Secretary's back. The Soviet leadership—fearing the destabilization of Poland, which served as a vital transit corridor to the Group of Soviet Forces in Germany—recommended resolving the conflict peacefully. On December 20, 1970, Edward Gierek assumed the role of First Secretary of the Central Committee of the PUWP.

The tragedy of 1970 inflicted a profound psychological trauma on society, yet it simultaneously established the boundaries of future compromises. The working class became convinced of the efficacy of the strike mechanism, while Edward Gierek's administration acquired an enduring fear of street violence. To halt the recurring strikes in Szczecin and Łódź, the new government rescinded the price increases, effectively securing social peace at the expense of deteriorating macroeconomic indicators and triggering an inflationary spiral.

To maintain this compromise, Edward Gierek’s team and Prime Minister Piotr Jaroszewicz relied on accelerated modernization funded by foreign loans tied to export-oriented investments.

Western banks, accumulating petrodollars following the energy price surge in 1973, actively extended credit to the PPR under the assumption that the USSR would guarantee the solvency of Warsaw Pact countries in the event of a financial crisis. By the end of 1975, the external debt of the PPR had exceeded $8 billion, with foreign currency allocations controlled by Bank Handlowy in Warsaw.

The core design of Gierek's reform hinged on the import of Western equipment, licenses, and the subsequent export of manufactured goods for freely convertible currency—hard currency (dewizy). Key investment projects included the Katowice Steelworks in Dąbrowa Górnicza, the Northern Port in Gdańsk, and the modernization of the Ursus Tractor Factory. Borrowed funds were also used to purchase a license for the production of the Fiat 126p compact car ("Maluch"), which became the symbol of Gierek-era consumer prosperity.



Assembly of Fiat 126p cars on the conveyor line at the FSM factory. Having become a symbol of consumer prosperity in the Gierek era of the 1970s, the "Maluch" remained Poland's main mass-market car into the following decade as well. 1986. Photo: Stanisław Jakubowski / CAF / PAP.
https://www.forbes.pl/life/motoryzacja/najpierw-produkcje-przerwala-wojna-potem-sprzeciw-moskwy-w-koncu-polacy-dostali-swoj/220z7ms

However, the command-administrative model demonstrated its incompatibility with effective credit management. The allocation of funds turned into an arena for lobbying by regional party committees, which led to the dispersion of finances and the freezing of investments due to delays in the construction of hundreds of facilities. Modernization heightened Poland's technological dependence on Western raw materials. Wishing to avoid discontent, Edward Gierek maintained fixed meat prices through state subsidies, which absorbed over 12% of the national income by 1975. An inflationary overhang formed in the market. The recession in the West and protectionist tariffs in the US and Europe stripped Polish goods of competitiveness. This resulted in a covert default—a situation where debt servicing absorbed virtually all foreign currency earnings.

On the evening of June 24, 1976, Piotr Jaroszewicz announced on television the introduction of new food prices, with meat costs increasing by an average of 69%. At the same time, differentiated compensations protected the party apparatus at the expense of reducing the real incomes of workers. On the morning of June 25, 1976, workers at major enterprises in Płock, Radom, and Ursus went on strike. In Radom, workers set fire to the building of the Voivodeship Committee of the PUWP. To disperse the protesters, the authorities deployed ZOMO (Zmotoryzowane Odwody Milicji Obywatelskiej – ZOMO)—paramilitary motorized units of the Citizens' Militia. Simultaneously, workers at the Ursus factory blocked train traffic on the Warsaw–Poznań railway line.



June 1976 protests. Protesters outside the burning building of the Voivodeship Committee of the PUWP in Radom. June 25, 1976. Photo: East News / Solidarity Archives. https://www.newsweek.pl/historia/jak-powstal-komitet-obrony-robotnikow-40-rocznica-utworzenia-kor-u/ctgbmz2

Fearing a nationwide strike, the government rescinded the decision to raise prices, but launched repressions. In Radom and Ursus, the militia used physical violence known as "health paths" (ścieżki zdrowia)—a practice in which detainees were beaten with truncheons while forced to run through a gauntlet of militiamen. Over 2,000 workers were arrested. Dismissals began under Article 52 of the Labor Code of the PPR for gross breach of duty, depriving strike participants of their livelihoods with no right to re-employment.



Members of the paramilitary motorized units of the Citizens' Militia (ZOMO) before storming the positions of striking workers. Radom, June 25, 1976. Photo: Zbigniew Niemirski / Foto Gość. https://www.gosc.pl/doc/6947725.45-lat-temu-doszlo-do-protestow-robotniczych-m-in-w-Radomiu

These repressions prompted opposition forces to consolidate. During the 1968 student unrest and the 1970 strikes, the intelligentsia and the working class had acted in isolation. Now, repressions against workers triggered a reaction from intellectual elites. The signing of the Helsinki Accords by the PPR in 1975 served as an important external shield. Edward Gierek, who needed to restructure debts to the West, was constrained by international human rights obligations and could not employ large-scale terror.

Taking advantage of the regime's vulnerability, on September 22, 1976, a group of dissidents announced the creation of the Workers' Defense Committee (WDC; Komitet Obrony Robotników – KOR). For the first time in the Soviet bloc, a human rights organization emerged whose participants—Jacek Kuroń, Adam Michnik, Antoni Pajdak, Aniela Steinsbergowa, and others—openly listed their names and addresses. KOR emissaries launched assistance along three tracks: financial support for families, raised in part through the Literary Institute in Paris—a Polish publishing house in France that served as a bridge between the emigration and the underground; professional legal defense provided by KOR lawyers; and informational work through an independent second circuit (drugi obieg)—a network of underground printing presses that issued banned literature.



A meeting of members of the Workers' Defense Committee (KOR) in Jacek Kuroń's apartment. Pictured (left to right): J. J. Lipski, A. Michnik, S. Starczewski, M. Bejlin, J. Czaputowicz, S. Kowalski, J. Cywiński. Photo: Tomasz Michalak / Fotonova.
https://www.newsweek.pl/historia/kor-antoni-macierewicz-jakie-znaczenie-mial-komitet-obrony-robotnikow/mr79b2x

The success of these initiatives prompted the movement toward the systematic construction of a parallel civil society. On the initiative of Jacek Kuroń, emphasis was placed on self-organization from below. Underground publishing houses, such as the Independent Publishing House "NOWa" (Niezależna Oficyna Wydawnicza „NOWa”), established regular book publication. In September 1977, the organization reorganized into the Social Self-Defense Committee "KOR" (Komitet Samoobrony Społecznej „KOR” – KSS KOR), launching the publication of the newspaper Robotnik ("The Worker"). Student Committees of Solidarity (Studenckie Komitety Solidarności – SKS) and illegal Free Trade Unions of the Coast (Wolne Związki Zawodowe Wybrzeża – WZZW) crystallized around KSS KOR.

Repressions definitively destroyed society's trust in the state, compelling dissidents to seek an alliance with the second pole of resistance—the Roman Catholic Church. This was the sole social institution that maintained autonomy from the state, owing to the policies of Primate Stefan Wyszyński. The Church possessed independent print organs, including the journal Tygodnik Powszechny ("Universal Weekly"), and the Catholic University of Lublin. Having overcome their distrust of the religious institution, the opposition intelligentsia found a foothold within it. Church hierarchs condemned the militia brutality of 1976, and Catholic parishes were transformed into safe spaces for meetings between dissidents and workers.

This alliance received an external impulse on October 16, 1978, when Cardinal Karol Wojtyła—Archbishop-Metropolitan of Kraków—was elected as the new head of the Roman Catholic Church under the name of John Paul II. For the first time, a Slav who understood the nature of Eastern European authoritarianism ascended the See of St. Peter. For the PPR nomenklatura, this event posed an enormous threat. However, despite recommendations from Leonid Brezhnev to deny the Pontiff the right to visit his homeland, Edward Gierek consented to the visit, understanding that a refusal would provoke a social explosion and the revocation of Western credit lines.

The first apostolic visit of John Paul II to Poland took place from June 2 to June 10, 1979. These nine days dealt a severe blow to the party's ideological monopoly. During mass at Victory Square in Warsaw, the Pontiff uttered words perceived by Poles as a spiritual manifesto of rebirth: "Let Your Spirit descend and renew the face of the earth. This earth!" As part of the "Summer-79" („Lato-79”) operation, the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the PPR implemented strict censorship measures: television received instructions to broadcast close-up shots of the Pontiff while avoiding panoramic views of the gatherings of hundreds of thousands. Under these conditions, KSS "KOR" and the Free Trade Unions of the Coast acted as an alternative news agency, setting up press centers for foreign journalists and distributing the newspaper Robotnik among pilgrims.



The first apostolic visit of Pope John Paul II to Poland. Warsaw, June 1979. Photo: SETBOUN / SIPA / East News.
https://warszawa.wyborcza.pl/warszawa/7,34862,20160565,jan-pawel-ii-w-warszawie-w-1979-r-przypominamy-te-niezwykla.html

The Pope's route lay through Warsaw, Gniezno, Częstochowa, Kraków, and Nowa Huta. There, at the walls of the "Lord's Ark" church („Arka Pana”)—built following an exhausting struggle by believers against the administration for the right to have a parish in the "godless city" and consecrated by Karol Wojtyła back in 1977—thousands of steelworkers came out to greet the Pontiff. In total, approximately one-third of the population of Poland took part in the events. A crucial aspect was the self-organization of the people: order at the gatherings was maintained not by units of the Citizens' Militia or the Security Service (SB; Służba Bezpieczeństwa – SB), but by church stewards composed of laypeople, demonstrating society's capacity to function without direct state control.

The main outcome of the visit lay in overcoming the fear and atomization of Polish society. Millions of citizens suddenly realized their collective agency, having visually counted themselves in the streets. The experience of self-organization restored a sense of civic solidarity to society, definitively shattering the ideological monopoly of the PUWP four months before the start of a new wave of strikes and fourteen months before the emergence of the Independent Self-Governing Trade Union "Solidarity" (NSZZ "Solidarity"; Niezależny Samorządny Związek Zawodowy „Solidarność” – NSZZ Solidarność).

2.2. "Self-Limiting Revolution": August 1980 and the Birth of "Solidarity"

By the summer of 1980, the economic model of the PPR, built on irrationally utilized Western credits, reached a dead end. External debt exceeded 20 billion dollars. To stabilize the budget, Edward Gierek's government decided on measures that had previously led to social explosions in 1970 and 1976. Effective July 1, 1980, "commercial prices" on meat products were introduced without warning (a price increase of 60–90%), which acted as a social detonator.

Taking into account the tragic experience of 1970, the working class applied a new tactic. Instead of spontaneous street marches, which exposed people to fire from the Citizens' Militia (MO; Milicja Obywatelska) and ZOMO (Zmotoryzowane Odwody Milicji Obywatelskiej), the strikers chose the format of an occupation strike (strajk okupacyjny). The workers held factories, transforming them into civil fortresses. In total, over 170 enterprises came to a halt in July. The Politburo of the Central Committee of the PUWP made a mistake by extinguishing local hotspots with targeted pay raises, which only proved the effectiveness of joint resistance. In mid-July, the Lublin railway junction went on strike. The railway workers were the first to put forward political demands: safety guarantees and free elections to official trade unions.

The political maturity of the proletariat drew upon four years of systematic educational and organizational work by the Workers' Defense Committee (KOR; Komitet Obrony Robotników).

Since 1976, emissaries of the committee had been building bridges between the opposition intelligentsia and workers. Through the underground newspaper Robotnik, published within the framework of the "second circuit" (drugi obieg), activists trained leaders of grassroots cells in methods of legal self-defense, conspiracy, and the rules of collective resistance. KOR instilled in the working-class environment the understanding that a spontaneous assault on party headquarters leads to defeat, whereas an organized strike and precise demands compel the authorities to retreat.

In early August, the party leadership committed a second miscalculation. Seeking to preemptively decapitate the opposition core, the administration of the Lenin Shipyard in Gdańsk illegally dismissed crane operator Anna Walentynowicz on August 7—a leading worker employed since 1947 who, in 1978, had become a co-founder of the illegal Free Trade Unions of the Coast (FTUC; Wolne Związki Zawodowe Wybrzeża – WZZW). Electrician Lech Wałęsa was also one of the most authoritative WZZW activists at the shipyard. Due to his uncompromising human rights activities, he had been dismissed from the enterprise back in 1976 and remained under SB surveillance, yet he maintained the closest ties with the workforce.



Anna Walentynowicz surrounded by striking workers on the grounds of the Gdańsk Shipyard. August 1980. Photo: Witold Górka / Forum.
https://www.newsweek.pl/polska/spoleczenstwo/anna-walentynowicz-ikona-i-jej-zagadki/2wz606b

The plan for a retaliatory strike in defense of Anna Walentynowicz was developed by Bogdan Borusewicz—a strategist of the Baltic underground and member of the Social Self-Defense Committee "KOR" (KSS "KOR"; Komitet Samoobrony Społecznej „KOR” – KSS KOR). At dawn on August 14, WZZW activists halted work in three distant workshops. As soon as the shipyard was

paralyzed, Lech Wałęsa secretly entered the premises, climbed over the fence, and took charge of the strike committee.



Strike at the Lenin Shipyard in Gdańsk. August 1980. Photo: Stanisław Składanowski.
https://wzz.ipn.gov.pl/wzz/multimedia-1/fotografie-i-grafiki/2356,Kolekcja-zdjec-autorstwa-Stanislawa-Skladanowskiego-wykonanych-na-terenie-Stoczn.html



Lech Wałęsa at the Gdańsk Shipyard. August 1980. Photo: Jorma Puusa / Lehtikuva / AFP.
https://historia.interia.pl/kartka-z-kalendarza/news-16-sierpnia-1980-r-powstal-miedzyzakladowy-komitet-strajkowy,nId,1868284

Shipyard Director Klemens Gniech compromised, and by Saturday, August 16, the economic demands of the strikers were met. A majority of the committee members voted to end the action. However, activists Alina Pieńkowska and Anna Walentynowicz realized that this step would isolate other enterprises of Tricity that had halted work in solidarity. Pieńkowska called on the workers through loudspeakers to return. Wałęsa acknowledged the error and declared a solidarity strike (strajk solidarnościowy). Late in the evening of August 16, representatives of 21 enterprises established the Inter-Factory Strike Committee (MKS; Międzyzakładowy Komitet Strajkowy – MKS) led by Wałęsa, establishing the rule: no one terminates the strike until the demands of all participants are satisfied.



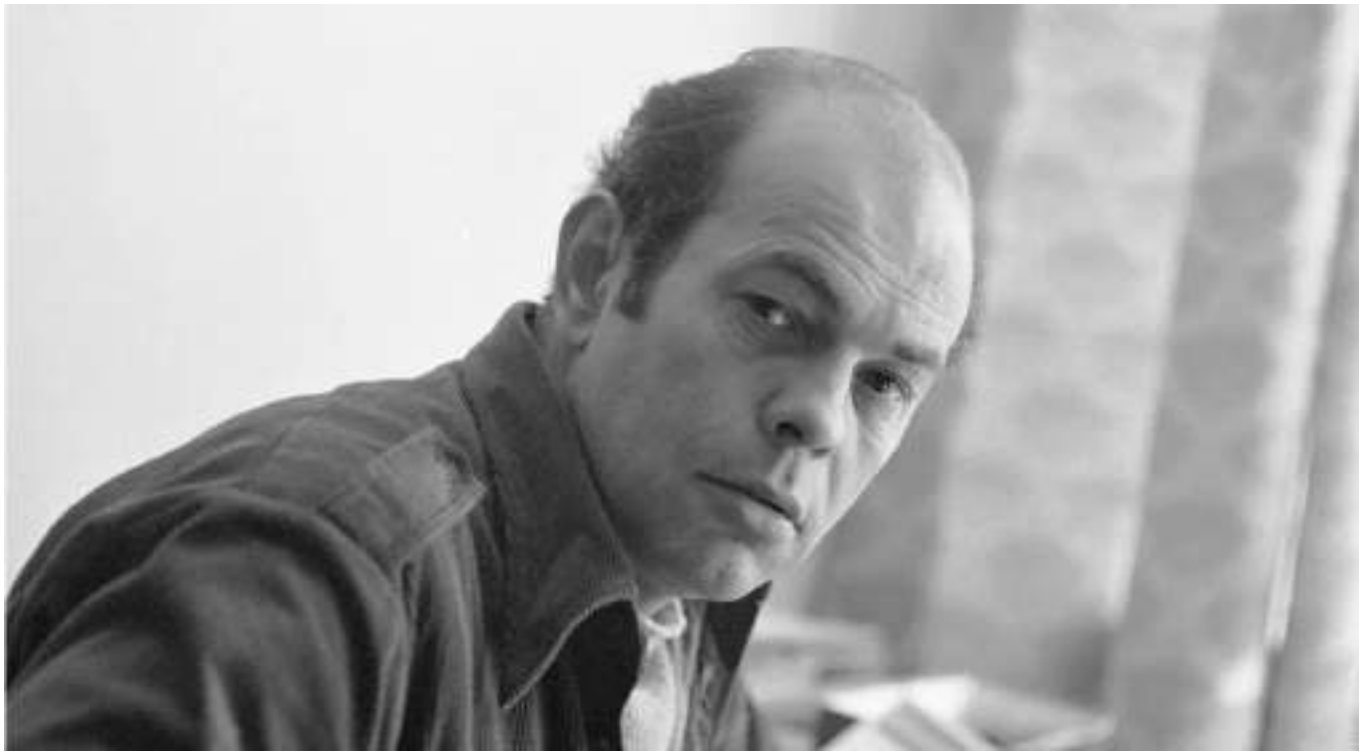
A crowd at the Gdańsk Shipyard listening to Lech Wałęsa announcing the end of the strike. Photo: Erazm Ciołek. https://wyborcza.pl/alehistoria/7,121681,26242326,sierpien-80-bez-mitow-solidarnosc-byla-populistyczna.html

On August 18, Western Pomerania went on strike, where an independent MKS arose at the Adolf Warski Szczecin Shipyard under the leadership of Marian Jurczyk. By August 21, this committee, uniting over 130 enterprises, formulated a list of 36 demands. The Gdańsk MKS expanded to 600 enterprises by the end of the month. The appearance of two powerful centers paralyzed the infrastructure of the North, blocking a resort to force by the authorities. The SB attempted to split the strike front by cutting telecommunications between cities and exploiting Jurczyk's distrust of the Warsaw intellectuals assisting Gdańsk, but this isolation merely led to the parallel construction of logistics systems by the striking centers.



Boards displaying the list of 36 demands of the striking workers of the Szczecin Shipyard. August 1980. Photo: Zbigniew Wróblewski. 7 https://przystanekhistoria.pl/pa2/tematy/sierpien-1980/85741,Szczecinski-strajk-1980-roku.html

In Gdańsk, the key factors in maintaining order were a strict prohibition on alcohol and the establishment of a workers' guard that blocked SB provocateurs. Supplies were provided by the residents of Tricity, the Catholic Church, and peasants, while the information blockade was broken by broadcasting the proceedings of the MKS over the factory public address system. In Szczecin, owing to its proximity to the GDR border and fears of Soviet intervention, logistics assumed the character of a militarized structure: the area was completely isolated, and supplies were organized along a closed chain of "strikers supplying strikers." The primary link was the underground network of KSS "KOR" in Warsaw. Jacek Kuroń's apartment was transformed into an information hub, from which data from striking cities was transmitted to Western correspondents, Radio Free Europe, and the BBC, returning to Poland via shortwave broadcasts and coordinating actions in real time.



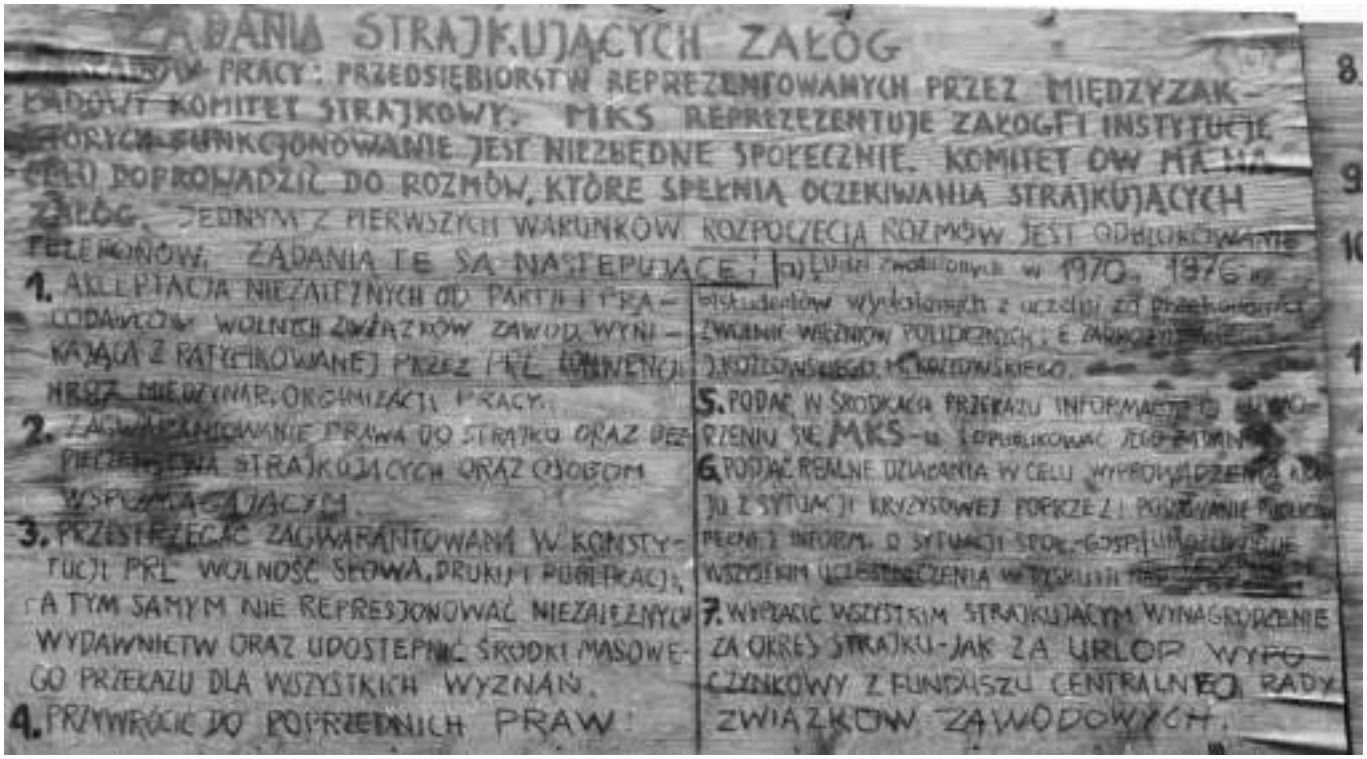
Jacek Kuroń in his apartment on Mickiewicz Street in Warsaw's Żoliborz district. Photo: Tomasz Michalak / PAP.
https://polskieradio24.pl/artykul/3388379,jacek-kuron-demokracja-jest-meczaca-ale-innego-wyjscia-nie-ma

Recognizing the impossibility of isolating the protest through the forces of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Politburo of the Central Committee of the PUWP recognized the MKS as a negotiating party. On August 21, government commissions arrived on the Coast: Kazimierz Barcikowski in Szczecin, and Deputy Prime Minister Mieczysław Jagielski in Gdańsk. The party negotiators attempted to fragment the strike by shifting the discussion into minor departmental disputes. The turning point came on August 22, when representatives of the capital's intelligentsia, Tadeusz Mazowiecki and Bronisław Geremek, brought Wałęsa the "Appeal of 64" (Apel 64) from prominent Polish intellectuals in support of the workers. At Mazowiecki's suggestion, a Commission of Experts (Komisja Ekspertów MKS) was established on August 24 under the Gdańsk committee, which included prominent intellectuals. The dissident professors received the status of consultants without the right to a decisive vote, which remained with the workers.

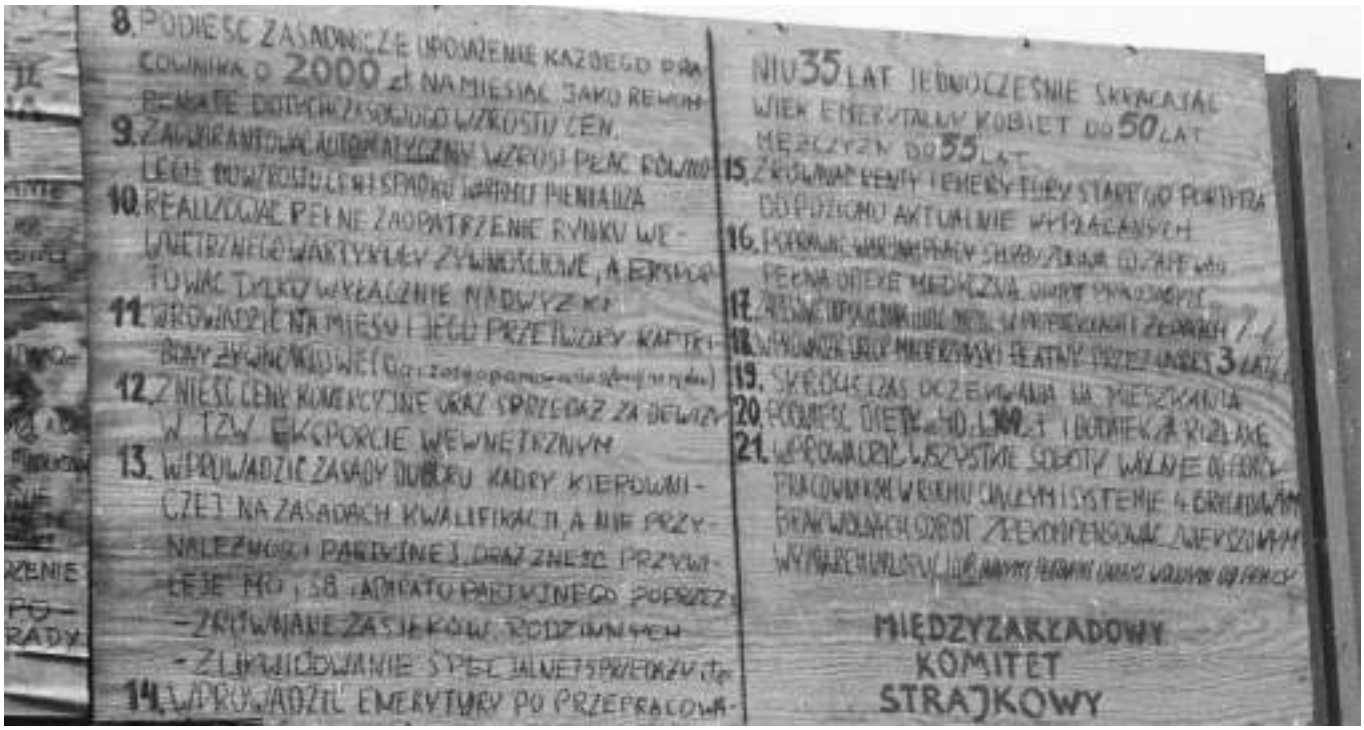


The Presidium of the MKS entrusted the mission of creating an expert commission to Tadeusz Mazowiecki and Bronisław Geremek. Gdańsk, August 1980. Photo: Marek Langda / CAF / PAP. https://jedynka.polskieradio.pl/artykul/1492898,Apel-64---bez-wsparcia-intelektualist%C3%B3w-nie-by%C5%82oby-Solidarno%C5%9Bci

The main task of the experts became the legal refinement of the list of "21 Demands" (21 postulatów MKS), which became the manifesto of civil resistance. Its crucial first point demanded the recognition of free trade unions independent of the party on the basis of Convention No. 87 of the International Labour Organization. The register also included guarantees of the right to strike, the abolition of censorship, freedom of speech, the release of political prisoners, the payment of wages for the duration of the strike by the Central Council of Trade Unions (CRZZ; Centralna Rada Związków Zawodowych), compensation for price increases, and the liquidation of the PUWP's nomenklatura principle—the party-political monopoly over appointments to any leadership positions. The social bloc demanded a reduction in the retirement age, improvements in healthcare, the introduction of maternity payments, and free Saturdays.



Wooden board displaying the first items (1–7) from the famous list of "21 Demands" of the striking workers. Gdańsk, August 1980. Photo: Stanisław Składanowski. https://wzz.ipn.gov.pl/wzz/multimedia-1/fotografie-i-grafiki/2356,Kolekcja-zdjec-autorstwa-Stanislawa-Skladanowskiego-wykonanych-na-terenie-Stoczn.html



Wooden board displaying the continuation of the list of demands (8–21) of the Inter-Factory Strike Committee. Gdańsk, August 1980. Photo: Stanisław Składanowski. https://wzz.ipn.gov.pl/wzz/multimedia-1/fotografie-i-grafiki/2356,Kolekcja-zdjec-autorstwa-Stanislawa-Skladanowskiego-wykonanych-na-terenie-Stoczn.html

Jagielski categorically refused to accept the first point, proposing to hold elections within the old CRZZ structures instead. To bypass this veto, the experts translated the workers' emotional slogan into strict constitutional language, inserting the formulation: Independent Self-Governing Trade Unions (Niezależne Samorządne Związki Zawodowe). This legally secured autonomy from the party apparatus and the right of the workers to draft their own statute. In Szczecin, Jurczyk rejected the assistance of experts due to his distrust of the intelligentsia. As a result, the Szczecin list took on a local syndicalist character, blending civil rights with the region's everyday needs, while the demand for the liquidation of the old trade unions provided the authorities with a pretext for bureaucratic delays through the Sejm of the PPR. Gdańsk, on the other hand, thanks to the experts, transformed the strike into a project of constitutional reform.

While discussions were underway, the PUWP rapidly lost control under the pressure of two factors: the Silesian ultimatum and the threat of military intervention by the USSR. On August 28, in the Upper Silesian Industrial Region—long considered loyal to the authorities—a strike broke out at the "July Manifesto" coal mine in Jastrzębie-Zdrój. On August 29, the Silesian miners established their own MKS led by Jarosław Sienkiewicz, and on August 30, they presented an ultimatum to the authorities, declaring that they would not resume work until agreements were signed with Gdańsk and Szczecin. The Silesian ultimatum became the economic point of no return: coal exports remained the sole source of hard currency for servicing the external debt, and a shutdown of the mines meant a technical default for the PPR.

The second vector was pressure from the Kremlin, which perceived the strikes as a "creeping counter-revolution." On August 20, by decision of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the CPSU, a Commission on Poland was created under the chairmanship of Mikhail Suslov (with the participation of Yuri Andropov, Dmitry Ustinov, and Andrei Gromyko), demanding that Warsaw introduce martial law. The USSR began preparations for Operation "Soyuz-80": divisions of the Carpathian, Baltic, and Belorussian Military Districts were brought to combat readiness. On the territory of the PPR, the Northern Group of Forces of the USSR initiated armored vehicle maneuvers.

The protest leaders' realization of this dual threat—Soviet tanks and economic collapse—gave rise to the phenomenon designated by sociologist Jadwiga Staniszkis as the concept of the "self-limiting revolution" (rewolucja samoograniczająca się). The key participants in the crisis exhibited pragmatism, which manifested in an agreement to wage the struggle strictly within the legal framework of the PPR. Within the Politburo of the Central Committee of the PUWP itself, a moderate line was headed by Stanisław Kania, who oversaw the army and state security. He and his deputy prime ministers entered into conflict with the "party concrete" (beton partyjny) led by Stefan Olszowski and Tadeusz Grabski, who were demanding an assault on the shipyards. Kania chose compromise for the sake of civil peace. The third force was the episcopate of the Catholic Church under the leadership of Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński. In a sermon at Jasna Góra

on August 26, the Primate—head of the country's episcopate—recognized the rights of the workers, yet called upon the nation for prudence, steering society away from radicalism.

This multilateral consensus enabled the signing of the historic August Agreements (Porozumienia sierpniowe). On August 30, the Szczecin Agreement (Porozumienie szczecińskie) was signed, and on August 31, the Gdańsk Agreement (Porozumienie gdańskie).



Deputy Prime Minister Mieczysław Jagielski and MKS Chairman Lech Wałęsa signing the Gdańsk Agreement. August 31, 1980. Photo: Zbigniew Trybek / CAF / PAP. https://www.newsweek.pl/historia/kiedy-polska-zobaczyla-walese-z-tym-dlugopisem-kazdy-chcial-go-miec/yq8e3q4

The final point in the strike front's victory was the Jastrzębie Agreement (Porozumienie jastrzębskie), signed by Aleksander Kopeć's government commission and the Silesian MKS on September 3, 1980. The miners of Silesia confirmed the Gdańsk postulates and expanded upon them. The main outcome of the Jastrzębie compromise was the legislative enactment of the right to free Saturdays and the introduction of a five-day work week for all citizens of the PPR.



Signing of the Jastrzębie Agreement. Government delegation led by Deputy Prime Minister Aleksander Kopeć and the presidium of the Inter-Factory Strike Committee led by Jarosław Sienkiewicz. September 3, 1980. Photo: Fotonova.
https://historia.interia.pl/kartka-z-kalendarza/news-3-wrzesnia-1980-r-porozumienie-jastrzebskie,nId,2260432

The capitulation before the workers triggered a crisis of power: on September 6, Edward Gierek, who had been hospitalized following a heart attack, was relieved of his duties as First Secretary of the Central Committee of the PUWP. Stanisław Kania became the new leader of the party.

The primary challenge for the opposition became the institutionalization of the movement. On September 17, 1980, a congress of delegates from workers' committees opened in Gdańsk. Opposition intellectual Karol Modzelewski demonstrated the necessity of creating a centralized structure, as regional unions would otherwise be crushed individually. At his suggestion, the organization was named the Independent Self-Governing Trade Union "Solidarity" (NSZZ "Solidarity"; Niezależny Samorządny Związek Zawodowy „Solidarność”), headed by Lech Wałęsa's National Coordinating Commission (Krajowa Komisja Porozumiewawcza). On September 24, the union's statute was submitted for registration to the Voivodeship Court in Warsaw.

The subsequent judicial process nearly derailed the compromise: on October 24, at a session of the Voivodeship Court in Warsaw, Judge Zygmunt Opala unilaterally inserted into the statute a paragraph regarding the leading role of the PUWP and struck out the right to strike. NSZZ "Solidarity" immediately responded by declaring pre-strike readiness for November 12. Simultaneously, a paralysis of the executive vertical began within the ruling party itself. "Horizontal structures" (struktury poziome) emerged within the PUWP—a grassroots reformist

movement during which rank-and-file communists and factory party cells en masse refused to obey Central Committee directives, demanded internal democratization of the party, and expressed solidarity with the independent trade union. Up to one-third of PUWP members joined NSZZ "Solidarity".

The secret services of the PPR and analytical divisions of the Ministry of Internal Affairs regularly supplied the Politburo with confidential reports regarding the state of personnel. This analytics recorded the total collapse of any military-police alternatives: the core of the Polish Army (Wojsko Polskie) consisted of conscripts whose families were on strike, and Minister of Defense Wojciech Jaruzelski warned of the risk of mass disobedience; ZOMO units lacked the resources to simultaneously assault thousands of enterprises, while the party apparatus was demoralized as a result of the "horizontal" split.

Facing the threat of total economic paralysis and understanding the internal unreadiness of the security structures, Stanisław Kania and Prime Minister Józef Pińkowski made concessions that the authorities viewed merely as a tactical respite. Following emergency consultations mediated by the episcopate, a compromise formula was devised: the thesis on the role of the PUWP was moved to an appendix to the statute as a direct citation from the Constitution. On November 10, 1980, the Supreme Court of the PPR (Sąd Najwyższy) officially registered NSZZ "Solidarity".



Lech Wałęsa carried on the shoulders of supporters outside the building of the Voivodeship Court in Warsaw after submitting the application for the registration of the "Solidarity" trade union. To his right are movement advisor Tadeusz Mazowiecki and Waldemar Stawicki. September 24, 1980. Photo: Jan Morek / PAP. https://polskieradio24.pl/artykul/2617185,solidarnosc-to-jest-nasza-gwarancja-na-przyszlosc

By late November, nearly 9.5 million people had joined the union's ranks—outnumbering the PUWP by nearly three to one and uniting all strata of society. Becoming a legal counterweight to the party-state monopoly, NSZZ "Solidarity" opened a period in Polish life that entered history as the "sixteen months of freedom" (karnawał Solidarności).

2.3. Point of No Return: From Functional Dual Power to Martial Law (1981)

The registration of NSZZ "Solidarity" in November 1980 did not stabilize the PPR, but rather fixed the transition of the crisis into a phase of functional dual power. A unique phenomenon emerged in the Socialist Bloc: parallel to the official party-state vertical, an alternative structure with immense mobilization potential took shape. By early 1981, "Solidarity" had outgrown the framework of a trade union, becoming a mass civic movement (a counter-system) capable of paralyzing state institutions and compelling the authorities to make concessions.

The specificity of "Solidarity's" institutionalization lay in its territorial-industrial structure. Unlike the sectoral trade unions of the PPR, the new movement was built on a regional principle. Grassroots cells merged into powerful regional boards (Zarządy Regionów) with high financial and operational autonomy. They were coordinated by the National Coordinating Commission (KKW / KKP) chaired by Lech Wałęsa in Gdańsk. This horizontal network model possessed exceptional resistance to pressure.

If the apparatus of the Polish United Workers' Party (PUWP) operated on the principles of centralism, "Solidarity" represented a flexible polycentric network. Attempts to block the decisions of the Gdańsk center triggered immediate mobilization by regional trade union centers. Horizontal ties linked the workers of the Coast and Silesia with the intelligentsia from the Workers' Defense Committee founded in 1976, later reorganized into the Social Self-Defense Committee "KOR" (KSS "KOR"; Komitet Samoobrony Społecznej „KOR” – KSS „KOR”)—a leading dissident organization that became the union's expert-consultative core.

Functional dual power in the first half of 1981 manifested itself in the loss of administrative control at the local level. Management decisions of voivodeship and municipal authorities required coordination with the regional leadership of "Solidarity." Upon a refusal to compromise, the trade union utilized local occupation strikes, paralyzing infrastructure.


Do Czytelników

TYGODNIK Solidarność

3 kwietnia 1981 roku
Cena 7 zł
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POCZĄTEK ROZMÓW

TADEUSZ MAZOWIECKI

The first issue of Tygodnik Solidarność (Weekly Solidarity), published on April 3, 1981 (from the archives of the Institute of National Remembrance / IPN). https://gdansk.ipn.gov.pl/pl2/aktualnosci/141512,40-lat-temu-3-kwietnia-1981-r-ukazal-sie-pierwszy-numer-Tygodnika-Solidarnosc.html

There was also an erosion of party ranks: by the spring of 1981, about a million members of the PUWP (up to a third of the party) belonged to "Solidarity." This gave rise to the phenomenon of horizontal structures—a movement of grassroots cells demanding the democratization of the PUWP, the electability of leadership, and sabotaging directives of the Central Committee (CC; Komitet Centralny – KC). In the information sphere, despite state control over television and radio, the counter-system deployed a publishing network, including Tygodnik Solidarność ("Solidarity Weekly"), which was published with a print run of half a million copies, depriving the party of its monopoly on information. Under these conditions, the conservative "party concrete" demanded an immediate transition to forceful methods.

Tensions reached their peak in March 1981 over the struggle for the legalization of "Rural Solidarity"—the Independent Self-Governing Trade Union of Individual Farmers "Solidarity" (NSZZ RI "Solidarność"; Niezależny Samorządny Związek Zawodowy Rolników Indywidualnych „Solidarność”). The Politburo of the CC PUWP categorically refused to register the farmers' union, fearing an alliance between the proletariat and the peasantry that would deprive the regime of control over the agrarian sector.

On March 19, 1981, at a session of the Voivodeship National Council (Wojewódzka Rada Narodowa) in Bydgoszcz, the presiding officer closed the meeting without granting the floor to invited "Solidarity" delegates led by Jan Rulewski and to striking farmers. Union delegates announced a sit-in strike. On the orders of Minister of Internal Affairs Mirosław Milewski, special

units of the militia and ZOMO resorted to overt physical violence—the activists were severely beaten.



Photograph of Jan Rulewski, beaten by security personnel, taken by "Solidarity" activists in the hospital and illegally distributed after the events in Bydgoszcz. March 1981. Photo: Grzegorz Rogiński / Agencja Forum. https://historia.interia.pl/kartka-z-kalendarza/news-19-marca-1981-r-prowokacja-bydgoska,nId,1359656

The Bydgoszcz crisis brought the country to the brink of an uprising. The National Coordinating Commission relocated to the Lenin Gdańsk Shipyard, declaring strike readiness. On March 27, "Solidarity" conducted a four-hour nationwide warning strike (strajk ostrzegawczy). Thousands of enterprises, mines, and transport systems halted simultaneously. Approximately 10 million people—virtually the entire working population—participated in the strike. The strike proved that real power in production belonged to the National Coordinating Commission.

General Wojciech Jaruzelski, who headed the Council of Ministers of the PPR in February 1981, and First Secretary of the CC PUWP Stanisław Kania opted for negotiations. On March 30, the Warsaw Agreement (Porozumienie warszawskie) was signed. Wałęsa and Deputy Prime Minister Mieczysław Rakowski reached a compromise: the authorities recognized the excesses in Bydgoszcz and agreed to legalize the farmers' trade union (it was registered in May).

Acting in circumvention of the National Coordinating Commission rules, Wałęsa unilaterally canceled the general strike. This deal averted a confrontation, but caused a split within "Solidarity." Radicals Andrzej Gwiazda and Karol Modzelewski accused Wałęsa of backstage collusion at a moment of regime weakness. In protest, Modzelewski resigned from the post of press secretary of the National Coordinating Commission.

From the spring to the autumn of 1981, the fragile equilibrium rapidly collapsed. The economy entered a tailspin: deficits grew, and rationing coupons for meat, sugar, and flour went unredeemed for weeks. In the summer, the country was swept by hunger marches (marsze głodowe).



"Hunger march" on the streets of Łódź in protest against food shortages and the rationing system. July 30, 1981 (photo: from the holdings of the Institute of National Remembrance / IPN). https://lodz.wyborcza.pl/lodz/7,35136,26171984,wolaly-chleba-i-wolnosci-spacer-sladami-lodzkich-opozycjonistek.html

The food collapse predetermined the radicalization of the First National Congress of Delegates of NSZZ "Solidarity" (I Krajowy Zjazd Delegatów NSZZ „Solidarność”), held in Gdańsk in two stages (September 5–10 and September 26 – October 7, 1981). On September 28, the self-dissolution of KSS "KOR" took place: its founders declared that the mission of protecting civil rights had been transferred to the multi-million-strong trade union.

The Congress adopted the program "Self-Governing Republic" (Samorządna Rzeczpospolita), which demanded alternative elections to councils and the Sejm, an act that would eliminate the PUWP's monopoly on power. In the economic sphere, worker self-management was proposed: the transfer of enterprises to Workers' Councils with the right to appoint directors, cutting off the party apparatus. Judicial reform implied the independence of courts and the abolition of censorship. On September 8, the Congress adopted the "Message to the Working People of Eastern Europe" (Posłanie do ludzi pracy Europy Wschodniej), calling on the workers of the USSR, the ČSSR, and the GDR to likewise establish independent trade unions.



Session of the First National Congress of Delegates of the "Solidarity" Trade Union at the "Olivia" sports and concert complex in Gdańsk. 1981. Photo: Stefan Kraszewski / CAF / PAP. https://www.fakt.pl/polityka/wiecej-pieniedzy-dla-dzialaczy-opozycji/pm12tlz

Moscow's reaction was harsh. Leonid Brezhnev, in a conversation with Kania, called the "Message" subversive. The USSR engaged in military-psychological pressure: the "Zapad-81" maneuvers (September 4–12) in the Baltic and in the Belorussian, Baltic, and Kiev Military Districts served as a demonstration of readiness for intervention. The PUWP declared the decisions of the congress to be a program for a counter-revolutionary coup. The Politburo of the party came to the conclusion that the mechanisms of maneuvering were exhausted, and that forceful suppression of the opposition by the army had become the sole means of retaining power.

In the autumn of 1981, the implementation of the forceful scenario that had been prepared since 1980 began. On October 18, at the 4th Plenary Session of the CC PUWP, Stanisław Kania was removed. The post of First Secretary was taken by General of the Army Wojciech Jaruzelski, who already combined the positions of Minister of National Defense and Prime Minister. The concentration of power in the hands of the military shifted the crisis into a military-strategic dimension.

The preparation of the forceful scenario was conducted under pressure from the USSR, the ČSSR, and the GDR. Coordination was carried out by the Commander-in-Chief of the Joint Armed Forces of the Warsaw Pact, Marshal Viktor Kulikov, who exerted pressure on the Polish General Staff. However, declassified documents (including records of meetings of the Politburo of the CC CPSU and the diaries of Major General Viktor Anoshkin) reveal that, in reality, the Soviet leadership—bogged down in Afghanistan and fearing Western sanctions—decided under no circumstances to introduce troops into Poland. This refusal was concealed from the Polish authorities while escalating the threat of intervention in order to compel Warsaw to act on its own.

Subsequently, Jaruzelski justified the introduction of martial law through the concept of the "lesser evil," which allegedly prevented Soviet occupation. However, documents prove that no real threat of invasion existed in December 1981, and the action served the purpose of preserving power for the PPR's nomenklatura.

On the night of December 13, 1981, the Military Council of National Salvation (WRON; Wojskowa Rada Ocalenia Narodowego) was created, consisting of 21 military officers under the leadership of Jaruzelski (popularly dubbed "The Crow" / WRONa). A retroactively signed decree of the Council of State on the introduction of martial law (Dekret o stanie wojennym) served as a legal screen. The sole individual who refused to sign the decree was Ryszard Reiff, head of the pro-communist Catholic PAX Association (Stowarzyszenie PAX), for which he was stripped of his posts.

The mechanics of the operation introducing martial law relied on two plans. Operation "Azalea" (Akcja „Azalia”), launched prior to midnight on December 12, severed communications. SB and communications groups blocked telephone exchanges, disconnected telephone lines, and took control of television centers and post offices. Transport movement between voivodeships was halted, and borders were closed. Information silence deprived "Solidarity" of the capability to coordinate resistance.

Simultaneously, Operation "Fir" (Akcja „Jodła”)—the internment of opposition leaders—was launched. The militia, SB, and ZOMO conducted mass night raids. The security services waited until the conclusion of the National Coordinating Commission meeting in Gdańsk on December 11–12, where calls for a referendum on trust in the authorities had been voiced. Members of the National Coordinating Commission were arrested directly in their hotels in Sopot and Gdańsk. Lech Wałęsa was isolated in his apartment and transported to a government villa. In Warsaw, Jacek Kuroń was arrested. Over the first night, more than five thousand people were dispatched to internment camps, and the opposition's infrastructure was paralyzed.



General Wojciech Jaruzelski announcing the introduction of martial law in Poland. Photo: IPN.
https://radio.opole.pl/548,6716,tego-dnia-nie-bylo-teleranka-41-lat-temu-wprowad

On the morning of December 13, Jaruzelski announced in a televised address the transfer of power to the WRON, a curfew, the prohibition of assemblies, the suspension of "Solidarity" activities, censorship, and the militarization of industry. Refusal to work was equated to desertion. Over 70,000 soldiers, tanks, and armored personnel carriers were deployed onto the streets.



The first days of martial law. Francis Ford Coppola's film Apocalypse Now was playing at the "Moskwa" Cinema. Warsaw, December 1981. Photo: Chris Niedenthal. https://culture.pl/pl/artykul/czas-apokalipsy-i-swinie-z-bagaznika-prl-w-10-zdjeciach-chrisa-niedenthala

Workers attempted to mount resistance, declaring sit-in strikes at shipyards, mines, and factories. Tanks battered down gates, while ZOMO cleared the premises using special equipment and water cannons. Strikes at the Gdańsk Shipyard, the Nowa Huta steel mill, and factories in Warsaw were suppressed.

The bloodiest point was the strike at the "Wujek" coal mine in Katowice. Miners protesting the arrest of committee chairman Jan Ludwiczak armed themselves with crowbars and chains. On December 16, the army and ZOMO launched an assault. Encountering resistance, a ZOMO platoon opened fire to kill. Nine miners were killed.



Surroundings of the "Wujek" mine being pacified by ZOMO forces and the army, a lone young man standing before advancing militiamen. Katowice, December 16, 1981. Photo: Marek Janicki. https://katowice.wyborcza.pl/katowice/51,35055,27606395.html#s=S.galeria-K.C-B.1-L.1.duzy

The tragedy at the "Wujek" mine and the suppression of the underground strike at the "Piast" mine (where two thousand miners spent two weeks underground) broke open resistance. "Solidarity" was crushed, and society sank into apathy. The short-term goal of Jaruzelski's coup was achieved at the cost of liquidating freedoms, interning ten thousand people, and establishing a military-police regime.

2.4. The "Underground State" and Forcing the Regime into Dialogue (1982–1988)

The imposition of martial law in December 1981 paralyzed the opposition. Deprived of communications and leadership, "Solidarity" activists were forced to swiftly reorganize a 10-million-strong legal movement into an underground organization, adapting the methods of the WWII Polish Underground State (Polskie Państwo Podziemne) under Nazi occupation to the struggle against the Security Service (SB) and the PUWP. Overcoming the administrative vacuum, the Temporary Coordination Commission (TKK; Tymczasowa Komisja Koordynacyjna) was established on April 22, 1982, headed by surviving regional leaders—Zbigniew Bujak, Bogdan Lis, Władysław Frasyniuk, and Władysław Hardek.

A tactical divergence quickly emerged within the underground. Publicist Jacek Kuroń formulated the concept of a controlled explosion (koncepcja wybuchu kontrolowanego), calling for the

preparation of a general strike to compel the PUWP to negotiate. Zbigniew Bujak and Wiktor Kulerski, with their "long march" strategy (długi marsz), proposed the concept of an underground society (koncepcja społeczeństwa podziemnego), placing their bet on the long-term creation of parallel civic institutions, independent education, and culture. A third position was taken by Kornel Morawiecki, who founded the radical organization "Fighting Solidarity" (Solidarność Walcząca) in June 1982; it rejected any compromise with the regime, deployed its own technical counterintelligence and SB radio interception service, and aimed for the complete dismantling of the Soviet system.

The instrument of the concept of an underground society was the second circuit (drugi obieg)—underground publishing. Alongside the Independent Publishing House "NOWa", hundreds of print shops emerged. Paper and ink were stolen from state warehouses or delivered from abroad, while mimeograph machines were smuggled in hidden compartments by Western trade unions. The mouthpiece of the underground was Tygodnik Mazowsze ("Mazowsze Weekly"), published with a circulation of 80,000 copies. A technological triumph was the launch of underground radio, organized by Zbigniew and Zofia Romaszewski. The first broadcast of Radio "Solidarity" (Radio „Solidarność”) took place on April 12, 1982, in Warsaw: in response to the announcers' call, thousands of apartments blinked their lights synchronously. The financial foundation of the underground was built on citizen contributions and grants from the American National Endowment for Democracy (NED), channeled through the Coordinating Office of NSZZ "Solidarity" Abroad in Brussels under the leadership of Jerzy Milewski.



Transmitter from which broadcasts of underground "Radio Solidarity" were transmitted. Photo: Grzegorz Jakubowski / PAP. https://www.polskieradio.pl/399/7979/artykul/3149825,41-lat-temu-w-warszawie-uruchomiono-podziemne-radio-solidarnosc

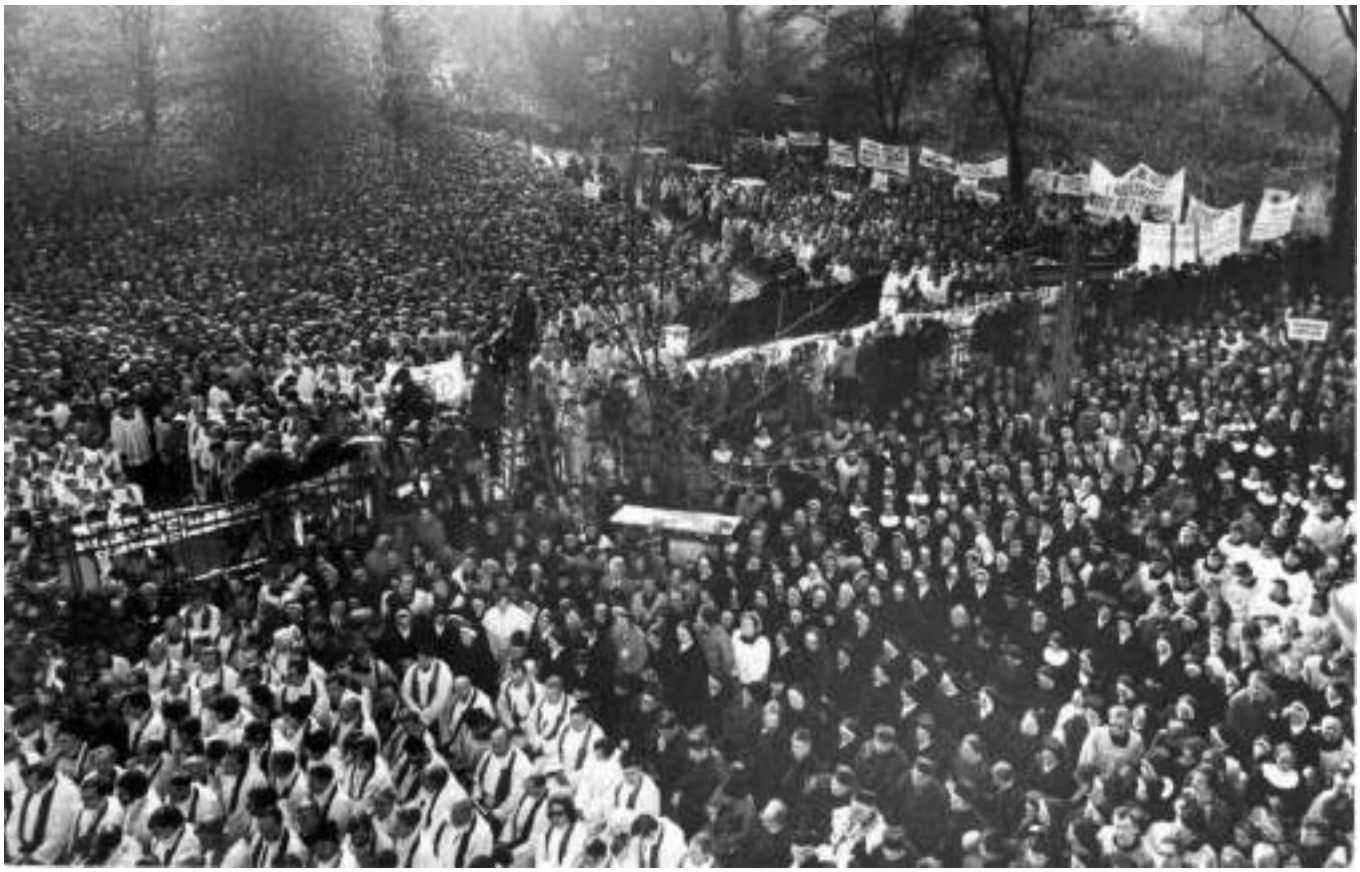
By the summer of 1983, General Wojciech Jaruzelski's regime found itself trapped in the vise of US sanctions. To demonstrate normalization, the authorities agreed to a second pilgrimage visit by Pope John Paul II to Poland on June 16–23, 1983. The pontiff's arrival turned into a multi-million-strong demonstration of civil society. His sermons legitimized the demands of the opposition, and the Pope's meeting with Lech Wałęsa in the Tatra Mountains solidified the trade union's status as the principal actor in national politics. On July 22, 1983, martial law was officially lifted, but in practice the PUWP preserved its dictatorship by embedding repressive legislation into the penal code and establishing the controlled All-Poland Alliance of Trade Unions (OPZZ; Ogólnopolskie Porozumienie Związków Zawodowych).



Pope John Paul II greets the faithful assembled at the Błonia Park in Kraków. June 22, 1983 (photo from the IPN archives, shelf mark: IPNBU-7-14-8-2). https://drugapielgrzymka.ipn.gov.pl/jp3/foto-i-grafiki/fotografie/fotografie-krakow-21-23/95082,22-VI-1983-r-Msza-sw-na-krakowskich-Bloniach.html

The principal niche of civil resistance and humanitarian activity was the Roman Catholic Church. Despite the compromise line of Primate Józef Glemp, the lower clergy assisted the opposition. Charitable committees operated at churches, the largest of which was the Primate's Committee for Assistance to Persons Deprived of Liberty. The symbol of spiritual resistance was "Solidarity" chaplain Father Jerzy Popiełuszko, whose "Masses for the Fatherland" at St. Stanislaus Kostka Church in Warsaw drew tens of thousands of people. The priest's growing

influence led to tragedy: on October 19, 1984, he was kidnapped and brutally murdered by officers of the IV Department of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the PPR. Popiełuszko's death caused a colossal shock, culminating in a funeral-demonstration attended by over 250,000 people. To prevent a social explosion, Jaruzelski agreed to an open judicial trial of Father Popiełuszko's killers.



Funeral of Father Jerzy Popiełuszko at St. Stanislaus Kostka Church. Warsaw, November 3, 1984. Photo: Erazm Ciołek.
https://sadeczanin.info/kultura/nie-wolno-zapomniec-milion-serc-na-zoliborzu-rocznica-pogrzebu-ks-jerzego-popieluszki-meczennika-prawdy

By the end of 1987, attempts at administrative economic stabilization had hit a dead end. The economic model of the PPR was in a state of paralysis, and external debt exceeded 35 billion dollars. Reforms declared as the "second stage of economic reform" (drugi etap reformy gospodarczej) were sabotaged by the nomenklatura. In an effort to balance the empty market, the government undertook a price-income operation (operacja cenowo-dochodowa) on February 1, 1988. A single-step price jump on food by 40% and utilities by up to 200% provoked an inflationary shock, the depreciation of the zloty, and a collapse in the supply of goods.

The social response manifested in two strike waves in 1988. The spring wave (wiosenna fala strajkowa) erupted on April 25 with transport worker strikes in Bydgoszcz and Inowrocław, engulfing the Vladimir Lenin Steelworks in Nowa Huta and the Lenin Shipyard in Gdańsk. The primary driving force behind the protest was a radical young generation of workers aged 18–25,

who had no memory of legal "Solidarity" and were unburdened by the psychological trauma of martial law. These youth held a critical attitude toward both the PUWP and Wałęsa's moderate tactics. The summer strike wave (letnia fala strajkowa), which began on August 15 at the "July Manifesto" mine in Jastrzębie-Zdrój, paralyzed the Upper Silesian Coal Basin and the ports of Szczecin. Demands escalated into a rigid ultimatum: the re-legalization of NSZZ "Solidarity."



Celebration of Holy Mass for striking workers at the Vladimir Lenin Steelworks in Nowa Huta. Photo: Andrzej Stawiarski. https://www.radiokrakow.pl/audycje/kapelani-solidarnosci

The scale of the strikes confronted General Wojciech Jaruzelski and Minister of Internal Affairs Czesław Kiszczak with an inescapable reality: the coercion apparatus could no longer maintain control over the country. A second imposition of martial law threatened to trigger an uprising and financial default. The only force capable of reining in the radical working-class movement remained the moderate group led by Lech Wałęsa and his advisors. On August 31, 1988, General Kiszczak officially announced his readiness for negotiations, conducting the first confidential meeting with Wałęsa that very day with the mediation of the Church. Having secured a commitment to initiate a deep political dialogue, Wałęsa assumed the risk and called for an end to the strikes, laying the groundwork for the convocation of the historic Round Table.

2.5. Architecture of the Transition: From Magdalenka to the Outcomes of the Round Table (Autumn 1988 – Spring 1989)

The transition to the dismantling of the single-party system in Poland was preceded by closed backstage "talks in Magdalenka" (Rozmowy w Magdalence)—at the suburban complex of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the PPR near Warsaw. They represented positional bargaining under conditions of deep mutual distrust. The foundation for the dialogue was laid by a secret meeting on August 31, 1988, at the MIA "Zawrat" villa in Warsaw, where the formula of the Round Table emerged for the first time. Only four people attended this initial meeting: Kiszczak, Wałęsa, Secretary of the PUWP Central Committee Stanisław Ciosek, and representative of the Catholic Church Bishop Jerzy Dąbrowski. Kiszczak proposed organizing a broad discussion meeting between representatives of the authorities and various societal circles. At the same time, the party leadership initially viewed the Round Table as an instrument for the personal co-optation of moderate opposition leaders into the Sejm or government-controlled advisory councils, but without the legal restoration of the trade union itself. Wałęsa accepted the proposal as a working platform for bargaining, but put forward a counter-condition: he would call on workers to end the strikes, provided the regime guaranteed the initiation of a real dialogue. In early September, owing to Wałęsa's personal authority, strikes across the country were brought to an end.

The second round at the "Zawrat" villa on September 15, 1988, brought Professor Andrzej Stelmachowski from the Catholic Intelligentsia Club (KIK; Klub Inteligencji Katolickiej) and Father Alojzy Orszulik into the negotiations. As the number of experts grew and the small urban villa could neither accommodate the working groups nor ensure isolation from the press and radical party functionaries, the negotiation process was relocated on September 16, 1988, to a closed forest complex in Magdalenka. In total, 13 large-scale sessions involving 42 participants took place within this format between the autumn of 1988 and April 1989.

The autumn stage of negotiations revealed the incompatibility of the parties' starting positions. The PUWP delegation (Kiszczak, Ciosek, Professor Janusz Reykowski, Aleksander Kwaśniewski) sought to share the responsibility for the economic crisis and hyperinflation with the opposition while preserving PUWP control over the military, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and foreign policy. At the same time, they refused to restore the legal status of the independent trade union "Solidarity" in its former structure, offering instead the creation of local trade union cells unlinked by a central organization.

The opposition (Wałęsa, Stelmachowski, Władysław Frasyniuk, Lech Kaczyński), with the mediation of Father Orszulik and Gdańsk Bishop Tadeusz Gocłowski, firmly insisted on the

judicial re-legalization of "Solidarity." The process was complicated by the All-Poland Alliance of Trade Unions (OPZZ; Ogólnopolskie Porozumienie Związków Zawodowych), which feared losing its monopoly.

In late October 1988, negotiations hit a dead end following Prime Minister Mieczysław Rakowski's decision to liquidate the Lenin Shipyard in Gdańsk—the primary symbol of the opposition. Contacts were severed for two months. Unblocking the process became possible owing to an intra-apparatus crisis within the PUWP at the X Plenum of the Central Committee (December 1988 – January 1989), where the "party concrete" (beton partyjny) sabotaged the course toward compromise. On the night of January 18, 1989, Jaruzelski, Kiszczak, Minister of National Defense Florian Siwicki, and Prime Minister Rakowski resorted to blackmail, threatening collective resignation if the Central Committee did not approve the legalization of "Solidarity."

The decisive element was the geopolitical factor: the USSR leadership under Mikhail Gorbachev dismantled the "Brezhnev Doctrine" for the sake of Perestroika and detente with the US, replacing it with the principle of non-interference (the so-called "Sinatra Doctrine"). As early as July 1988, during a visit to Poland, Gorbachev gave Jaruzelski a carte blanche for dialogue, provided that control over the security apparatus was maintained. Therefore, upon receiving Jaruzelski's ultimatum, the "party concrete," lacking any hope of Soviet assistance, capitulated. The Plenum resolution authorizing the legalization of "Solidarity" and the launch of the Round Table was adopted by a majority vote.



General Secretary of the CPSU Central Committee Mikhail Gorbachev and First Secretary of the PUWP Central Committee General Wojciech Jaruzelski during the Soviet leader's official visit to Poland. July 1988. Photo: AFP.
https://historia.interia.pl/kartka-z-kalendarza/news-11-lipca-1988-r-michail-gorbaczow-w-polsce,nld,1848748

In parallel, Wałęsa neutralized the radicals within his own camp (the "Working Group of the National Commission" led by Andrzej Gwiazda and Marian Jurczyk), who demanded a general strike. Relying on Bronisław Geremek and Jacek Kuroń, Wałęsa isolated his opponents through the Citizens' Committee "Solidarity" (KO "Solidarity"; Komitet Obywatelski „Solidarność” – KO „Solidarność”), created on December 18, 1988, thereby stripping the radicals of access to Western funds and printing presses. This enabled the resumption of contacts in Magdalenka in January 1989 and the alignment of the transition agenda.



January 27, 1989. Commemorative photograph following the conclusion of one of the meetings in Magdalenka. From the opposition ("Solidarity"): Prof. Bronisław Geremek, Prof. Andrzej Stelmachowski, Mieczysław Gil, Zbigniew Bujak, Lech Wałęsa, Władysław Frasyniuk, Lech Kaczyński, Jacek Ambroziak, Tadeusz Mazowiecki. From the authorities of the PPR: Krzysztof Dubiński, Gen. Czesław Kiszczak, Prof. Jan Janowski, Bogdan Królewski, Prof. Janusz Reykowski, Stanisław Ciosek, Andrzej Gdula. Mediators from the Roman Catholic Church: Bishop Tadeusz Gocłowski, Fr. Alojzy Orszulik. Photo: from the AIPN archives.
https://ipn.gov.pl/pl/dla-mediow/komunikaty/196935,TEKST-AUDIO-35-lat-temu-w-Magdalence-odbylo-sie-spotkanie-komunistycznej-ekipy-r.html

On February 6, 1989, the Round Table opened in the Warsaw Palace of the Council of Ministers. Its symbol—an oak table 6.2 meters in diameter—marked the transition of the crisis into the channel of legal bargaining. Over 59 days of work under the co-chairmanship of Kiszczak and Wałęsa, a three-tiered structure emerged. Key compromises were worked out at three "Main Tables" (stoliki). At the Table on Political Reforms (co-chaired by Bronisław Geremek and Janusz Reykowski), the PUWP demanded the establishment of the post of President with extraordinary powers and the reservation of 65% of Sejm seats for the ruling coalition. In response, Geremek proposed re-establishing a freely elected Senate as a legal counterweight to the Sejm quotas. The Table on Trade Union Pluralism (co-chaired by Tadeusz Mazowiecki and Aleksander Kwaśniewski) secured the organizational continuity of "Solidarity" under its 1980

statute in exchange for a pledge to refrain from pre-election strikes. At the Table on the Economy, economist Witold Trzeciakowski and Deputy Prime Minister Władysław Baka agreed to cap the automatic wage indexation (proposed by the OPZZ) at an 80% threshold, which entered history as the "Kuroń scale."



A session of the Round Table in the Palace of the Council of Ministers. Warsaw, 1989. Photo: Krzysztof Miller / Agencja Wyborcza.pl. https://wyborcza.pl/alehistoria/7,162654,24437569,dlaczego-okragly-stol-i-wybory-czerwcowe-nie-staly-sie.html

Beneath them operated 10 working sub-committees (podstoliki). The Media Sub-Committee (Adam Michnik and Jerzy Urban) legalized Gazeta Wyborcza under Michnik's editorship (with a print run of 500,000 copies) and allocated 45 minutes per week on state central television to "Solidarity" for the broadcast of Studio Solidarność. The Law Reform Sub-Committee (Adam Strzembosz and Łukasz Balcer) restored the judges dismissed during martial law for refusing to pass political sentences. The Agriculture Sub-Committee (Andrzej Stelmachowski) secured the registration of "Rural Solidarity" and the property rights of private farmers. The Mining Sub-Committee agreed on a five-day workweek, while the Ecology Sub-Committee negotiated the closure of environmentally hazardous industrial plants and the suspension of construction on the Żarnowiec Nuclear Power Plant. The sub-committees on healthcare, housing, associations, labor law, and youth—which legalized the Independent Students' Association (NZS; Niezależne Zrzeszenie Studentów)—drafted corresponding regulatory reforms and legislative proposals.

The analytical back-office for the opposition was the Primate's Committee for Assistance to Persons Deprived of Liberty, based at St. Martin's Church. Whenever negotiations reached a stalemate at the formal Round Table, disputed issues were transferred back to Magdalenka. This informal Magdalenka track functioned as the executive coordination center. In total, 5 emergency rounds of meetings took place in Magdalenka during the operation of the Round Table: on January 27, March 2 and 7, March 29, and April 5, 1989.



Adam Michnik, expert of the "Solidarity" Mazowsze region and member of the Citizens' Committee, during the plenary sessions of the Round Table. April 1989. Photo: Krzysztof Miller / Agencja Wyborcza.pl.
https://wyborcza.pl/alehistoria/7,121681,24417020,adam-michnik-o-okraglym-stole-polska-jest-dla-wszystkich.html

On April 5, 1989, the Final Protocol of the Round Table Meetings (Protokół końcowy posiedzeń Okrągłego Stołu) was signed. This extraconstitutional pact predetermined a radical reform of Poland's state system, limiting the PUWP's monopoly during the formation of the 10th Term Sejm—the so-called "Contract Sejm" (Sejm Kontraktowy). 65% of the seats (301 mandates) were allocated to the coalition led by the PUWP, the United People's Party (Zjednoczone Stronnictwo Ludowe), and the Democratic Party (Stronnictwo Demokratyczne). 35% of the seats (161 mandates) remained open for the Citizens' Committee "Solidarity" (Komitet Obywatelski „Solidarność”). For the regime's leadership, a "national list" (lista krajowa) of 35 figures (including Rakowski and Kiszczak) was introduced, standing uncontested subject to a 50% vote

threshold. However, the authors did not provide a second round for this list, which later paralyzed the elections after citizens crossed out nomenklatura leaders from the ballots.



The day of the signing of the Round Table Agreements. From left to right: Minister of Internal Affairs Czesław Kiszczak, observer from the Catholic Church Fr. Alojzy Orszulik, and leader of "Solidarity" Lech Wałęsa. Warsaw, April 5, 1989. Photo: Łoziński / REPORTER.
https://wyborcza.pl/alehistoria/7,121681,24436911,miedzy-kiszczakiem-a-walesa-siedzieli-biskupi-kosciol.html

The Senate (100 seats) was elected freely: two senators from each of the 47 voivodeships, and three each from the Warsaw and Katowice voivodeships. Party lawyers calculated that the coalition's 65% of seats in the Sejm would make it possible to block a Senate veto, which required a two-thirds vote in the Sejm (66.7%). The main safeguard was the post of President with arbiter powers (dissolution of parliament, martial law, nomination of the prime minister). The election of the President by the National Assembly (Zgromadzenie Narodowe) by a simple majority guaranteed victory for Jaruzelski, owing to the coalition's quota of 301 votes out of a total of 560 parliamentarians.

The most sensitive and non-public element of the Round Table Agreements became the security guarantees for the nomenklatura—a consensus based on the formula of "evolutionary transition," which excluded immediate lustration, criminal prosecution of party functionaries for repressions during the martial law period, and mass purges in the state apparatus. Maintaining Generals Kiszczak and Siwicki's control over the security ministries guaranteed the entire power

and intelligence apparatus protection from dissolution and the immunity of the secret service archives, the destruction and evacuation of which began immediately with the silent consent of the moderate wing of the opposition.

The final compromise was based on mutual miscalculations. Jaruzelski and his circle overestimated the durability of party structures: the PUWP viewed the Round Table as a tool for co-opting the opposition to share the burden of the crisis, planning to retain power until the mid-1990s relying on its political satellites. The opposition (Wałęsa, Geremek, Mazowiecki) underestimated the wear of the regime and the protest potential of society. By agreeing to 35% of the seats, they anticipated a step-by-step transition of power over several years. No one expected that this entire complex system of compromise would collapse in the elections of June 4, 1989, when the triumph of "Solidarity" would turn the electoral quotas for the PUWP into a fiction, destroy the communists' alliances with satellite parties, and trigger an avalanche-like end of the regime.

2.6. Dismantling the System: "Contractual" Elections and the Birth of the Third Republic (1989–1990)

The official launch of the campaign that crushed the one-party monopoly in the PPR was the adoption of the April Amendment (Nowela kwietniowa) by the Sejm on April 7, 1989. The document implemented the decisions of the Round Table into the 1952 Constitution, restoring the institutions of the President of the Republic and the Senate, and approved the electoral law (Ordynacja wyborcza) for the elections to the 10th Term Sejm ("Contract Sejm"). On April 13, the Council of State of the PPR scheduled the elections for June 4, 1989. Contrary to the administrative and media superiority of the PUWP, the Citizens' Committee "Solidarity" deployed a highly effective campaign. The opposition's platforms were Gazeta Wyborcza, edited by Adam Michnik, and Tygodnik Solidarność. The visual symbols of the electoral campaign were posters featuring joint photographs of candidates with Lech Wałęsa and Tomasz Sarnecki's campaign poster "At High Noon" featuring the logo of the independent trade union.



The famous election poster of "Solidarity" "High Noon. June 4, 1989", created by the artist Tomasz Sarnecki. Photo: Beata Zawrzel / Reporter. https://wydarzenia.interia.pl/kraj/news-zmarl-tomasz-sarnecki-autor-slynnego-plakatu-w-samo-poludnie,nId,2504216

The elections of June 4, 1989, ended in an electoral triumph for the opposition with a turnout of 62%. "Solidarity" won all seats available to it under the quota in the Sejm (160 out of 161 in the first round, and the last one in the second round) and 99 out of 100 seats in the Senate. A catastrophe for the regime was the failure of the "national list" of 35 PPR leaders, who ran uncontested but failed to secure the mandatory 50% of the votes due to mass crossing-out by voters. Among them, Prime Minister Mieczysław Rakowski and Minister of Internal Affairs General Czesław Kiszczak lost. This fiasco deprived the coalition of its guaranteed 65% of seats and caused a legal deadlock: the law required the Sejm to be constituted of exactly 460 deputies, but 33 seats of the nomenklatura remained vacant without a lawful mechanism for by-elections. To save the transition from collapsing, "Solidarity" made a tactical compromise: the Council of State of the PPR altered the electoral rules between rounds by extraordinary decree, allowing the vacancies to be filled in the second round on June 18 with new coalition candidates.



The first session of the "Contract Sejm". Pictured: Bronisław Geremek and Lech Wałęsa. Photo: Tomasz Wierzejski / Agencja Wyborcza.pl. https://wyborcza.pl/alehistoria/7,162654,26003857,propagandysci-z-ipn-wygumkowali-walese-z-wyborow-4-czerwca.html

The crushing election results paralyzed the executive branch. President Jaruzelski's attempt to appoint General Kiszczak as head of the cabinet failed: the communists' satellites—the United People's Party and the Democratic Party—refused to join a government under the auspices of the PUWP. The way out of the deadlock was proposed by Adam Michnik in his July 3, 1989 article "Your President, Our Prime Minister" (Wasz prezydent, nasz premier). The formula envisaged a division of spheres of influence: the opposition agreed to the election of Jaruzelski as President of the Republic (for the PUWP to retain control over the security forces and maintain loyalty to the USSR), while a representative of "Solidarity" received the right to form the government. On July 19, 1989, the National Assembly elected Jaruzelski president by a minimal majority of 270 votes, enabled by a portion of the opposition lowering the quorum. Wałęsa formed a coalition with the former communist satellites, and on August 24, the Sejm approved Tadeusz Mazowiecki, a representative of the moderate Catholic wing of "Solidarity," as Prime Minister.



Tadeusz Mazowiecki showing the victory sign ("V") after the Sejm approved the composition of his government. Warsaw, September 12, 1989. Photo: Chris Niedenthal / FORUM. https://dzialam.um.warszawa.pl/spacer-sladami-tm-czas-przemian

Mazowiecki's coalition government, approved on September 12, 1989, set a course for the peaceful dismantling of the system while adhering to the principle of continuity of state power (ciągłość władzy państwowej). The security ministries—the Ministry of National Defense headed by General Florian Siwicki and the Ministry of Internal Affairs under the leadership of General Kiszczak—temporarily remained under PUWP control, guaranteeing Warsaw Pact loyalty to Moscow. At the same time, the cabinet carried out the departyization of the state apparatus, liquidating PUWP cells in the army, militia, courts, and enterprises by early 1990. In the spring of 1990, the Sejm abolished the repressive Security Service, creating the State Protection Office (Urząd Ochrony Państwa—UOP) with mandatory personnel vetting of the former staff.

The main economic challenge was the threat of hyperinflation caused by Rakowski's decision to implement the "marketization" (urynkowienie) of the food sector from August 1, 1989, without subsidies and ration cards. Under automatic wage indexation, inflation exceeded 500% annually. Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance Leszek Balcerowicz developed a radical program of shock market transformation. A package of ten laws (the "Balcerowicz Plan") entered into force on January 1, 1990, eliminating price controls, introducing currency convertibility, and restricting income growth through a tax on excess wage increases (popiwek).

The legal foundation of the transition became the December Amendment (Nowela grudniowa) to the Constitution of December 29, 1989. The Sejm deleted the articles on the "leading role of the PUWP," the "socialist system," and the "dictatorship of the proletariat," proclaiming Poland a "democratic state ruled by law, implementing the principles of social justice." The Constitution legally enshrined the transition to political pluralism, freedom of entrepreneurial activity, and guaranteed equal judicial protection for all forms of property, including private property.

A critically important geopolitical step amid the ongoing collapse of the socialist system was the removal from the Constitution of all references to mandatory "friendship and cooperation with the USSR." The state was officially restored to its historical name—the Republic of Poland (Rzeczpospolita Polska)—and the traditional Polish eagle with a golden crown returned to the coat of arms of the country. These constitutional amendments drew a definitive legal line under the forty-year period of the PPR's existence and legally finalized the birth of the democratic Third Polish Republic (Trzecia Rzeczpospolita).

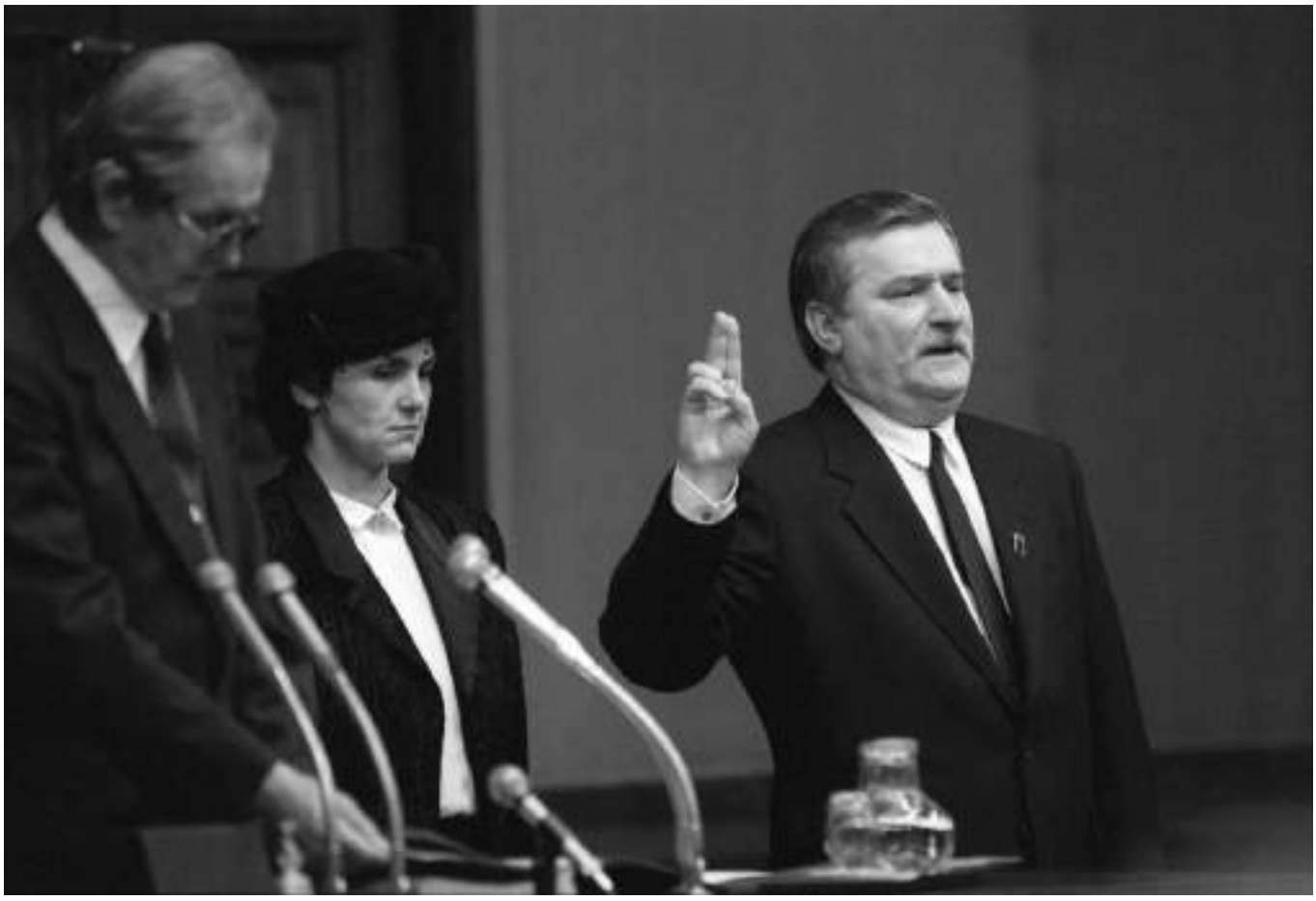


Warsaw, January 1990. A workshop producing signboards and plaques. On December 31, 1989, an amendment to the Constitution came into force, restoring the crown to Poland's coat of arms. Pictured: painted addition of the crown onto plaques with the white eagle following the change to the state coat of arms. Photo: Ireneusz Sobieszczuk, Jan Bogacz / PAP.
https://magazyn.naostro.info/35-lat-temu-polski-orzel-odzyskal-korone-a-polska-rzeczpospolita-ludowa-stala-sie-rzeczpospolita-polska/

The institutional transition was completed during 1990. The first factor was the collapse of the discredited PUWP: on January 29, at its XI Congress, which went down in history as the Last Congress (Ostatni Zjazd), the Communist Party decided on self-dissolution, and from its ruins arose the Social Democracy of the Republic of Poland (Socjaldemokracja Rzeczypospolitej

Polskiej—SdRP) led by Aleksander Kwaśniewski. This voided the practical purpose of nomenklatura quotas in parliament. The second factor was the decentralization of power: in March 1990, the Sejm adopted the Law on Gmina Self-Government, which abolished the Soviet-style model of local national councils and transferred real authority to independent gminas. In the first free local elections (wybory samorządowe) on May 27, 1990, "Solidarity" won a majority in municipal government bodies.

The final chord of the transition was the elimination of executive dualism. Under the pressure of reforms, Jaruzelski resigned, and in September 1990, the Sejm approved amendments establishing direct general elections for the President of the Republic of Poland. Following two rounds of voting (November 25 and December 9, 1990), Lech Wałęsa secured victory with 74.2% of the vote.



Lech Wałęsa takes the oath of office. December 22, 1990. Photo: AFP.
https://historia.interia.pl/historia-na-fotografii/news-walesa-prezydentem-rp-przekazanie-insygniow-wladzy,nld,7732519



Lech Wałęsa and President in Exile Ryszard Kaczorowski during the transfer of the presidential insignia. Warsaw, Royal Castle, December 22, 1990. Photo: Jan Morek / Agencja FORUM. https://historia.interia.pl/historia-na-fotografii/news-walesa-prezydentem-rp-przekazanie-insygniow-wladzy,nId,7732519

The historical point of transition was Wałęsa's inauguration ceremony on December 22, 1990, at the Royal Castle in Warsaw. The last President of Poland in exile, Ryszard Kaczorowski, handed over the presidential insignia of the pre-war Second Republic (Druga Rzeczpospolita) to Wałęsa. This symbolic act established continuity with the pre-war state, nullified the legitimacy of the communist period, and marked the final institutional establishment of the Third Republic.

Relevant Lessons for Belarus

Lesson 1. Counter-System as a Guarantee of Power Interception and Cadre Survival

The Polish experience demonstrates that the strategic success of a transition depends not so much on the triggers of its onset as on the opposition's ability to construct a viable counter-system in advance. "Solidarity" prevailed because, by the time the transition window opened, it possessed not merely protest potential, but a parallel infrastructure of civil society backed by its own cadre and expert capacity. Within this counter-system, professional

commissions had been formed in advance, reform programs drafted, and specialists prepared to assume the reins of government. For Belarus, this implies that the formation of a managerial reserve, the drafting of legislation, and the preparation of sectoral teams must take place long before negotiations, ensuring that at the decisive moment ("Moment X"), the initiation of transition does not result in organizational chaos and a cadre vacuum.

Lesson 2. Technology of Scalable Inclusiveness under Strict Isolation of Radicals

The Round Table eliminated the threat to the transition's legitimacy stemming from suspicions of an "elite conspiracy" by establishing a structure of 10 subgroups that engaged over 700 participants—ranging from lawyers to trade union activists. This transformed backstage bargaining into a nationwide forum, instilling professional circles with a sense of co-authorship of the new statehood. Furthermore, broad inclusiveness was combined with the strict isolation of radicals on both sides—party "hawks" and the uncompromising underground. In the Belarusian context, this underscores the necessity of engaging civil experts at lower negotiation tiers while maintaining a firm mandate for leaders to isolate fringe groups capable of disrupting the deal with ultimatums.

Lesson 3. Compulsion to Dialogue through Irreversible Damage to the Real Sector of the Economy

Authoritarian regimes almost never make concessions under the influence of moral demands or media pressure alone. Jaruzelski’s system survived for years under deficit conditions by cutting social spending and financing the security apparatus. What compelled the nomenklatura to initiate dialogue was the economic impasse caused by strikes at key enterprises, which paralyzed exports and raw material extraction. For the Belarusian situation, this is the primary marker: a transition begins when maintaining the security and bureaucratic apparatus becomes financially unsustainable for the budget due to critical, irreparable internal economic damage—irrespective of whether it is caused by societal pressure, external sanctions, or an internal systemic crisis.

Lesson 4. Neutralization of the External Geopolitical Donor and Calculation of Intervention Costs

The external factor that made the Round Table possible was the dismantling of the "Brezhnev Doctrine" by Moscow. The Polish elite lost the will to resist following confidential notification

from the Kremlin that Soviet tanks would not come to the regime's rescue. For Belarus, this is a stark lesson: a peaceful transition remains blocked as long as Minsk is backed by an external donor in the form of the Russian Federation, which compensates the Belarusian system for any economic and security losses. A shift toward dialogue will become possible either during an internal crisis within the donor itself or through the creation of conditions under which intervention proves unacceptably costly for Moscow.

Lesson 5. Construction of a "Golden Bridge" and a Strategy of Controlled Elite Retreat

The Polish "65 to 35" quota in the Sejm and the institution of the presidency tailored to the figure of Jaruzelski were not weaknesses of the opposition, but elements of a pragmatic design. These steps allayed the old elites' fear of change, stripping them of the motivation to fight to the end. Experience teaches that for the sake of dismantling a dictatorship, it is vital in the first stage to provide the outgoing leadership with guarantees of personal security, asset protection, and a temporary presence in power. This splits the nomenklatura monolith, separating radical "hawks" from pragmatic officials ready for compromise.

Lesson 6. The Principle of Legal Seamlessness and the Reformatting of Legal Institutions

The transition in Poland proceeded not through the destruction of the state machine, but through its reformatting from within. The opposition utilized existing legal frameworks (the Sejm, established procedures, registration mechanisms) to legitimize its demands. This eliminated any legal vacuum, preserved the continuity of state administration, and ensured the international recognition of changes. For Belarus, this serves as a lesson in procedural faultlessness: the transitional period must be perceived by society and the bureaucracy not as a seizure of power, but as the phased restoration of legality and temporarily blocked institutions.

Lesson 7. Leadership as Willingness to Accept Responsibility for an Unpopular Compromise

Wałęsa’s willingness to engage in secret negotiations in Magdalenka with regime leaders acted as a catalyst for the transition. He took this step despite fierce criticism from radicals who accused him of "colluding with executioners." A transitional leader must possess the will to make strategically sound yet unpopular decisions, recognizing that civil peace is more precious

than popular applause. The primary competency of a leader of change is the ability to convert crisis into constructive negotiating positions in a timely manner.

Lesson 8. Institutions of Independent Mediators as an Ethical and Procedural Buffer

The participation of Catholic Church hierarchs as intermediaries provided the Round Table with an ethical framework and stability. Under conditions of absolute distrust, the Church offered both sides a guarantee that confidential agreements would not be violated. For the Belarusian movement, this experience highlights the importance of proactively identifying authoritative domestic or international actors (humanitarian, religious, or intergovernmental) capable of acting as neutral mediators, verifying commitments, and dampening inevitable crises.

Summary

The success of the Polish model was based on a balance between mass pressure from "below" and highly professional expert engineering from "above." Poland proved that even after a decade of repression and martial law, an organized society is capable of imposing a parity agreement on the regime if it possesses developed horizontal ties and a clear vision of the future.

The Round Table became not merely a site of political bargaining, but a mechanism for restarting statehood, where the inclusiveness of the process served as a safeguard against a social explosion, and the detailed development of reforms in subgroups provided a cadre resource for the new country. This experience teaches that the path to democracy lies through the recognition of society's agency and a readiness for complex, often exhausting, yet necessary work in pursuit of national consensus.

The Polish People's Republic ceased to exist not as a result of external intervention or violent seizure of power, but as a consequence of the intellectual and moral superiority of an organized counter-system and the conclusion of a nomenklatura pact, under which the communist elite agreed to the peaceful dismantling of its monopoly in exchange for guarantees of personal security and subsequent integration into the economic reality of the Third Polish Republic.

Chapter 3. The Spanish Transition (1975–1982): A Model of Controlled Transformation

Introduction

The Spanish transition, known in world political science under the terms La Transición or the "Spanish transition," represents a historical precedent of institutional transformation implemented on the principle of a "legal revolution." In contrast to the Polish scenario, where the transition was the result of frontal pressure from an organized alternative civil society ("Solidarity"), the Spanish model was based on the concept of Reforma pactada (agreed reform). This was a process of deep dismantling of an authoritarian regime carried out primarily by a section of its own elites, who consciously and pragmatically used the legal mechanisms of the dictatorship for its consistent legal liquidation.

The key formula of this period was the maxim formulated by professor of law Torcuato Fernández-Miranda: De la ley a la ley a través de la ley ("From law to law through law"). This approach made it possible to avoid a situation of Ruptura (a radical and instantaneous break in the legal field), which was fraught with a legal vacuum, loss of state controllability, an outbreak of civil violence, and complete economic collapse.

The most important conceptual lesson of Spain lies in the fact that the transition was the result of reciprocal movement and a complex symbiosis of pressure from below and a pragmatic response from above. The protest activity of civil society ("the square") created a situation for the ruling class in which maintaining the status quo became impossible, which stimulated the emergence within the system itself of an agentic "group of reformers." These individuals, possessing real levers of power and understanding the dead-end nature of isolation, embarked on a controlled dismantling of the regime, entered into confidential contacts with the opposition to prevent a revolutionary explosion, and ensured a peaceful interception of power without the collapse of state institutions.

3.1. Economic Prerequisites of the Transition and the Collapse of the Francoist Continuity Scenario

The success and depth of the reforms launched after the death of Francisco Franco in November 1975 were prepared by a hidden evolution of the Spanish elites that began back in the late 1950s. Up until that point, Spain's economy was in a state of deep stagnation caused by the policy of autarky (self-sufficiency) imposed by Franco.

This isolationist line was fiercely defended by ideologized Francoist Falangists—"old shirts" (Camisas viejas), the ultraconservative wing of the sole legal party, the Spanish Traditionalist Phalanx of the Councils of the National Syndicalist Offensive (FET y de las JONS—Falange Española Tradicionalista y de las Juntas de Ofensiva Nacional Sindicalista), which later became the core of the state syndicate "National Movement" (Movimiento Nacional). They viewed the free market and foreign investment as a threat to the country's sovereignty. However, by 1957, the autarky model had exhausted itself: the state treasury was depleted, inflation had become uncontrollable, shortages of goods emerged, and the country found itself on the brink of default.

Under these conditions, Franco removed the orthodox Falangists from the economic leadership and granted management access to technocrats—young professionals associated with the secular Catholic organization Opus Dei. Beginning with the landmark "Stabilization Plan" of 1959, the technocrats, whose key figures included Minister of Commerce Alberto Ullastres and Minister of Finance Mariano Navarro Rubio, conducted a systemic economic reform. They eliminated state control over prices and imports, devalued the peseta, opened the country to foreign capital, and secured Spain's integration into the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank.



Minister of Commerce Alberto Ullastres boards a plane bound for Paris to meet with Prime Minister Charles de Gaulle, October 18, 1958. Photo: Iglesias / EFE Agency. https://politicaprosa.com/es/el-legado-de-alberto-ullastres/

This led to the "Spanish economic miracle" of the 1960s, with average GDP growth of around 7% per year. From a backward agrarian country, Spain transformed into a developed industrial power. However, along the way, the technocrats created a social shift fatal to the dictatorship: a powerful middle class and a new generation of big business emerged in the country, whose well-being depended on economic ties with Europe. The authoritaria superstructure of Francoism became an obstacle to development: the European Economic Community (EEC) refused to admit Spain into its ranks until democratic institutions were introduced.

The prohibition of independent trade unions and strikes meant that local economic disputes were criminalized and spilled over into spontaneous wildcat strikes. A rift emerged within the government: pragmatists and the young nomenklatura realized that to preserve capitalism, assets, and legitimacy, they would have to sacrifice the rigid political dictatorship, which no longer corresponded to the level of development of Spanish society.

To understand the scale of subsequent events, it is necessary to reconstruct the original continuity plan that Francisco Franco had methodically constructed for years. The dictator sought to guarantee the ultraconservative preservation of Francoism after his death. According to the design, future power was meant to rest upon a rigid duumvirate: King Juan Carlos I and Admiral Luis Carrero Blanco.



Luis Carrero Blanco and Prince Juan Carlos, June 9, 1973 / ARCHIVE.
https://www.elperiodico.com/es/politica/20231220/carrero-blanco-perfil-biografia-96000812

The role of Juan Carlos in this plan was decorative and legitimizing. Under the Law of Succession of 1947, Franco declared Spain a kingdom, leaving the throne vacant. In 1969, Juan Carlos publicly swore allegiance to the Principles of the National Movement and the Fundamental Laws of Francoism, confirming his readiness to safeguard the legacy of the dictatorship. The Caudillo calculated that the restoration of a loyal monarchy would return legitimacy to the regime in the West, while the King himself would remain a controlled figure.

Reference Note:

– National Movement (Movimiento Nacional) – the sole legal political organization of Francoist Spain, created by Franco in April 1937. It represented an extensive state corporation uniting civil officialdom, official "vertical" trade unions (syndicates), Falangists, and local municipal bureaucracy.

– Fundamental Laws of the Realm (Leyes Fundamentales del Reino) – a body of normative acts replacing a classic constitution. At the time of Juan Carlos's oath (1969), there were seven such laws (the eighth, in 1977, would be the Law for Political Reform—Ley para la Reforma Política, developed by the government of Adolfo Suárez and Torcuato Fernández-Miranda, which dismantled the entire system). These laws consolidated the authoritarian model of the state:

1. *Labor Fuero (Fuero del Trabajo, 1938) – prohibited strikes and free trade unions, forcing workers into the state-controlled "Vertical Syndicate."*
2. *Law Establishing the Cortes (Ley Constitutiva de las Cortes, 1942) – created a decorative parliament, to which deputies (procuradores) were appointed from municipalities, the Church, and trade unions.*
3. *Fuero of the Spaniards (Fuero de los Españoles, 1945) – a formal declaration of rights and duties, which were invalidated if they "threatened the social and spiritual unity of the nation."*
4. *Law on the National Referendum (Ley del Referéndum Nacional, 1945) – allowed Franco to enact laws bypassing the Cortes through state-controlled plebiscites.*
5. *Law of Succession to the Headship of the State (Ley de Sucesión en la Jefatura del Estado, 1947) – proclaimed Spain a kingdom, but left the throne vacant, making Franco a life-long ruler with the right to choose a successor.*
6. *Law on the Principles of the National Movement (Ley de Principios del Movimiento Nacional, 1958) – required every official, military officer, and monarch to swear allegiance to the official ideology of Francoism.*
7. *Organic Law of the State (Ley Orgánica del Estado, 1967) – fixed the structure of power, separating the posts of Head of State and Prime Minister for the period following the dictator's death.*

The actual architect of executive power and the guarantor of the immutability of the course under the Monarch was to be Admiral Luis Carrero Blanco. Carrero Blanco was Franco's closest confidant, his "right hand," and a committed ideologist of the regime's preservation, possessing indisputable authority among the army generals and special services. In June 1973, Franco separated the posts of Head of State and Head of Government, officially appointing Carrero Blanco as Prime Minister. It was precisely the Admiral who was intended to possess the full measure of real power, control the military, and severely suppress any attempts at liberalization.

This continuity scenario was completely derailed on December 20, 1973, when the Basque left-radical organization ETA (Euskadi Ta Askatasuna) carried out an assassination of Admiral Luis Carrero Blanco as part of Operation "Ogro." As a result of the detonation of a massive dynamite charge planted underneath the roadway, the Head of Government died on the spot.



This is how the site of the assassination of Carrero Blanco outside building No. 104 on Claudio Coello Street in Madrid looked following the explosion of 50–70 kg of dynamite. Photo: EFE.
https://muyinteresante.okdiario.com/historia/asi-se-produjo-el-atentado-mortal-de-eta-contra-carrero-blanco-el-sucesor-natural-de-franco.html

The death of Carrero Blanco dealt a critical blow to the Francoist regime, destroying the original formula of the transition. The system was left without an executive leader capable of keeping the military high command under control after the caudillo's death. Appointed in his place, the new Prime Minister, Carlos Arias Navarro, proved to be a weak and vacillating politician, incapable of uniting the ultra-right conservatives.

As a result, a two-year period of political waiting emerged (December 1973 – November 1975). This interval, accompanied by Franco's protracted illness and physical decline, played a saving role for future democracy. Over these two years, the moderate wing of the nomenklatura and big business definitively realized the inevitability of the system's end and began preparing the ground for a legal transition, understanding that a forceful scenario of preserving Francoism without Carrero Blanco held no historical prospect. This opened the way for the future King

Juan Carlos I, who gained room for maneuver and began formulating a plan for controlled democratization.

However, during this very period, the ultimate consolidated emergence of the ultra-right, irreconcilable wing known as "The Bunker" (El Búnker) also took place. This actor represented a monolithic reactionary coalition that united the top military high command (the "bunker generals"), the leadership of the official Francoist syndicates, the conservative judiciary, and the orthodox wing of the Falange.

The strategic goal of "The Bunker" was the preservation of the dictatorship in its repressive form and the total blocking of any reform initiatives from above. Possessing control over the security agencies and the Cortes (the Francoist quasi-parliament), "The Bunker" became the main background threat to the future transition: any departure by the reformers from the Fundamental Laws of Francoism could trigger this bloc to launch a military coup scenario.

3.2. The "Motor of Transition" and Opposition Consolidation: The Birth of the Reformist Triumvirate and the United "Platajunta"

After the death of Franco on November 20, 1975, control passed to a triumvirate of figures who possessed in-depth knowledge of the regime's inner workings.

Ascending the throne on November 22, 1975, King Juan Carlos I assumed the role of supreme arbiter (Árbitro y moderador). His legitimacy in the eyes of the military was flawless, owing to his training in military academies in accordance with Franco's will. Leveraging his status as Commander-in-Chief (Capitán General), the King demanded strict adherence to the principle of single command and non-interference in politics from the high command, equating any coup attempt to treason against the oath. This shielded the cabinet of ministers and preempted a coup by the ultra-right "Bunker."

The legal architect of the process was Torcuato Fernández-Miranda, who headed the Cortes (Presidente de las Cortes) and the Council of the Realm (Consejo del Reino). A professor of constitutional law and former Minister-Secretary General of the National Movement (Ministro-Secretario General del Movimiento), he enjoyed the full confidence of the King as his mentor. Knowing the vulnerabilities of Francoist legislation, Fernández-Miranda devised a strategy to reform the system through its own normative mechanisms, depriving conservatives of legal grounds to block reforms.

The executive arm was Adolfo Suárez, appointed President of the Government (Presidente del Gobierno) in July 1976. A product of Francoist institutions—former Civil Governor of Segovia, Director-General of state television (Radiotelevisión Española—RTVE), and Minister-Secretary General of the National Movement—he understood how to reform the system from within, guarantee security to the elites, and convince functionaries of the inevitability of concessions in the face of the threat of revolution.

In this linkage, dubbed the "motor of transition" (el motor de la Transición), Suárez was responsible for compromises, Fernández-Miranda for legal legitimacy, and the King for control over the military.



Torcuato Fernández-Miranda, Juan Carlos I, Adolfo Suárez, and their spouses at Barajas Airport (photo: Janel Cuesta). https://conversacionsobrehistoria.info/2020/04/29/la-historia-de-la-transicion-una-propuesta-critica/

Suárez's appointment took place against the backdrop of the awakening of the "street." Franco's death triggered a wave of strikes coordinated by underground left-wing forces. The entire year of 1976 passed under the sign of this pressure, which made one thing obvious: maintaining the status quo by force was impossible. In 1976 alone, 150 million work hours were lost due to strikes; in January in Madrid, over 400,000 workers went on strike. Underground trade unions transformed economic protests into an instrument for demanding amnesty and freedoms.

The bloodiest manifestation of the crisis and a turning point that demonstrated the impasse of the power apparatus were the events in the Basque city of Vitoria-Gasteiz, known as the Vitoria Massacre of March 3, 1976. During a general strike, more than five thousand workers assembled inside the Church of Saint Francis of Assisi. Law enforcement forces blocked the exits, deployed tear gas inside the sanctuary, and opened fire to kill as people broke out in panic. Five workers lost their lives, and over 150 were injured.



Workers' demonstration in Vitoria on the day of the general strike, shortly before the tragic shooting. March 3, 1976 (photo: Juan Muñiz Zapico Foundation / CCOO). https://noticiasobreras.es/2026/03/vitoria-3-de-marzo-de-1976-la-matanza-que-acelero-la-transicion/

The punitive apparatus reached an impasse, which was corroborated by several factors:

- The Minister of the Interior (Ministro de la Gobernación), Manuel Fraga Iribarne (author of the slogan "The street is mine"), had anticipated that the crackdown would cool the protests. However, instead of fear, Vitoria triggered an explosion of solidarity strikes across the entire country. Each new act of violence expanded the geography of the protest, radicalizing the "moderate majority."
- Transcripts of police radio communications containing statements such as "We caused a real massacre here" leaked into public circulation. This served as a signal to the King and Suárez: the security forces were acting as executioners, destroying the legitimacy of the state.

- Temporarily serving as acting Minister of the Interior due to Fraga's absence from the country, Suárez faced pressure from "The Bunker," which demanded tanks be deployed to Vitoria. Suárez exhibited firmness, forbidding the army from intervening and blocking Prime Minister Arias Navarro's proposal to declare a state of emergency. He realized: if the regime continued to disperse strikes using regular army forces, the country would slide into a civil war.
- For Francoism, which relied upon "Catholic nationalism," the church was sacred. Violence within a sanctuary outraged the episcopate. Cathedrals across the country turned into venues for worker assemblies, depriving the regime of its ideological pillar.



Police dispersal of participants in the funeral procession following the funeral of the workers killed in Vitoria. March 1976 (photo: Germán Gallego). https://noticiasobreras.es/2026/03/vitoria-3-de-marzo-de-1976-la-matanza-que-acelero-la-transicion/

Vitoria proved to the reformers the necessity of changing the political framework, predetermining the imminent resignation of the conservative Prime Minister Carlos Arias Navarro. The tragedy also accelerated the consolidation of the anti-Francoist camp. The fragmented opposition realized that overcoming divisions was the only way to force the authorities to make concessions. Up until that point, the opposition had been divided into two competing blocs.

The first bloc—the Democratic Junta of Spain (Junta Democrática de España)—was created in 1974 at the initiative of the Communist Party of Spain (PCE; Partido Comunista de España) under the leadership of Santiago Carrillo. It wagered on a nationwide strike (Huelga Nacional) and relied upon the underground Workers' Commissions (CCOO; Comisiones Obreras).

Reference Note:

The coalition also included:

- *The Popular Socialist Party (PSP; Partido Socialista Popular) led by Enrique Tierno Galván;*
- *The Labor Party of Spain (PTE; Partido del Trabajo de España) led by Eladio García Castro;*
- *The Carlist Party (Partido Carlista) led by Carlos Hugo of Bourbon-Parma;*
- *The judicial association "Democratic Justice" (Justicia Democrática);*
- *Independent liberal monarchist Antonio García-Trevijano, who served as the official spokesperson (portavoz) of the Junta.*

The second bloc—the Platform of Democratic Convergence (Plataforma de Convergencia Democrática)—formed in 1975 around the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE; Partido Socialista Obrero Español) led by Felipe González.

Reference Note:

The platform also included:

- *"Democratic Left" (Izquierda Democrática, ID) led by Joaquín Ruiz-Giménez;*
- *The Liberal Union (Unión Liberal, UL) led by Ignacio Camuñas;*
- *The Federation of Democratic and Liberal Parties (Federación de Partidos Demócratas y Liberales) led by Joaquín Garrigues Walker;*
- *A group of intellectuals centered around the journal Notebooks for Dialogue (Cuadernos para el Diálogo) led by Pedro Altares.*

Participants of the Platform oriented themselves toward a scenario of sequential reforms and enjoyed the support of Europe's social-democratic elites. Unification was impeded by mutual distrust: the PSOE feared the monopolization of the protest by the communists, while the PCE criticized the socialists for compromises.

The tragedy in Vitoria forced the leaders of the blocs to engage in direct negotiations. The merger was coordinated through the mediation of Alejandro Rojas-Marcos, Joaquín Ruiz-Giménez, and Enrique Tierno Galván. On March 26,1976, a unified coordinating body emerged—"Democratic Coordination" (Coordinación Democrática), which went down in history under the informal name "Platajunta" (Platajunta). It was headed by a parity executive committee that balanced the influence of the PCE and the PSOE.


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JUNTA Y PLATAFORMA SE UNEN

COORDINACION DEMOCRATICA

Front page of the underground issue of the Communist Party of Spain's newspaper "Mundo Obrero" dated March 31,1976, featuring the historic headline: "Junta and Platform Merge: Democratic Coordination" ("Platajunta"). Source: PCE Archive / Mundo Obrero.
https://www.nortes.me/2026/04/11/la-primavera-que-acelero-el-final-del-franquismo-sin-franco/

Thanks to the "Platajunta," the protest acquired a unified agency. In the manifesto "To the Peoples of Spain" ("A los pueblos de España") of March 26, 1976, alongside demands for amnesty, the legalization of political parties, and the convocation of a Constituent Assembly, the document declared the dissolution of Francoist trade unions, the right to strike, autonomy for Catalonia, the Basque Country, and Galicia, the secularization of the state, the independence of the judiciary, and the withdrawal of the military from politics.

For the sake of preserving the coalition, left-wing leaders temporarily removed the demand for the immediate proclamation of a republic from the manifesto, replacing it with the formulation "Constitutional Process" (Proceso constituyente). The question regarding the form of government was deferred to a future referendum. This transformed the opposition from a revolutionary threat into a negotiable political force.

The emergence of the "Platajunta" deprived the regime of the ability to divide the opposition and accelerated the resignation of Prime Minister Carlos Arias Navarro, who was proposing merely a cosmetic overhaul of Francoism. Operating under pressure from "The Bunker," he had developed

a draft law on "political associations" while maintaining a ban on the communist party and left-wing trade unions, which was driving the street toward radicalization.

Operating within the framework of Francoist regulations, the King could not dismiss the Prime Minister by simple decree. Navarro stated that his mandate expired in 1979. A resignation required the consent of the Council of the Realm, the majority of whose members were Francoists. A direct dismissal could trigger a coup. Thereupon, the King attacked the Prime Minister in the foreign press: in April 1976, during a visit to the United States, Juan Carlos I gave an interview to The New York Times, calling Arias Navarro an "absolute disaster."

The removal of Navarro was executed by Torcuato Fernández-Miranda. At a meeting on July 1, 1976, he presented the Prime Minister with an ultimatum: voluntary resignation or public dismissal with full responsibility for the bloodshed in Vitoria laid upon him. The King neutralized the military top brass of "The Bunker," and Navarro signed his letter of resignation.

To advance Adolfo Suárez, Fernández-Miranda masterfully manipulated the voting of the Council of the Realm on forming the shortlist of three candidates (the "terna"). The Francoist majority voted for conservatives Federico Silva Muñoz and Gregorio López Bravo, while Suárez—having been pre-agreed upon with the King—became the third candidate. Fernández-Miranda uttered the historic phrase: "I am ready to offer the King what he has asked of me."



Adolfo Suárez takes the oath of office upon assuming the position of President of the Government on July 5, 1976.Source: EFE. https://www.elmundo.es/espana/2026/07/03/6a46c3d8fdddfff13e8b45ce.html

The appointment of Suárez in July 1976 transformed the dynamics of the transition. Meanwhile, the emergence of the "Platajunta" provided the government with a reliable negotiating partner capable of guaranteeing compliance with future agreements.

In the autumn of 1976, the "Platajunta" merged with regional platforms into a broader coalition—the Platform of Democratic Organizations (Plataforma de Organismos Democráticos, POD). The necessity arose to translate street manifestos into the language of concrete legislative agreements. For this purpose, on December 10, 1976, the Commission for Negotiations with the Government was established, going down in history as the "Commission of Nine" (Comisión de los Nueve / Comisión de los 9). It became the first legitimate, though officially not yet recognized, collective representative of the opposition before the executive branch.

> *Reference Note*:
>
> *The composition of the commission included key figures from across various political flanks: Felipe González (socialists, PSOE); Santiago Carrillo (communists, PCE; in the initial stages, due to his underground status and brief arrest in December 1976, his associate Simón Sánchez Montero participated in the negotiations); Enrique Tierno Galván (Popular Socialist Party, PSP); Joaquín Satrústegui (liberal monarchists); Joaquín Ruiz-Giménez (Christian democrats, ID; later replaced by Antón Cañellas); Francisco Fernández Ordóñez (social democrats, PSD); Jordi Pujol (Catalan nationalists, CDC); Julio de Jáuregui (Basque nationalists, PNV); Valentín Paz-Andrade (Galician nationalists).*

To lend maximum weight to the negotiation process, the "Nine" closely coordinated their actions with the leaders of the largest, still semi-legal trade unions—Marcelino Camacho (Comisiones Obreras—CCOO) and Nicolás Redondo (Unión General de Trabajadores—UGT). It was precisely this united coalition, which journalists at the negotiating table dubbed the "Commission of Ten," that formulated the package of minimum requirements for participation in future elections: general amnesty, the legalization of all political parties and trade unions without exception, the dissolution of the Francoist "National Movement" (Movimiento Nacional), and equal access for the opposition to state media.



Meeting of the Negotiation Commission of the democratic opposition (the "Commission of Nine / Ten") with the participation of leaders of leading parties and trade unions. Madrid, December 1976. Source: EFE Agency Archive.
https://elpais.com/economia/2023-01-04/la-vida-del-historico-lider-de-ugt-nicolas-redondo-en-imagenes.html#foto_gal_2

Suárez acquired a unified, structured counterpart representing both the political wing and the working-class "street." This enabled the transition to be shifted from the realm of forceful confrontation to that of institutional compromise.

3.3. Suárez's Secret Diplomacy and the "Suicide of the Cortes"

In parallel with establishing an official dialogue with the collective representative of the opposition in the form of the "Commission of Nine," Adolfo Suárez initiated a highly complex backchannel operation. Launching the reforms required the President of the Government to maintain direct communication channels with opposition leaders, many of whom officially remained underground or in exile. Suárez's apparatus background in the "National Movement" (Movimiento Nacional) provoked deep distrust among anti-Francoists, who viewed the new Prime Minister as a stooge of "The Bunker" (El Búnker). However, his insider knowledge of the system became the Prime Minister's key advantage. While reassuring the military generalate

with traditional Francoist rhetoric, behind closed doors he combined recognition of the "Commission of Nine" with secret separate diplomacy aimed at depriving the opposition of unnecessary monolithic cohesion. Leveraging the threat of a revolutionary explosion and left-wing terror as a bargaining chip in negotiations with the military, Suárez concluded package deals with key participants of the "Platajunta" individually—primarily with the Socialists and Communists—thereby steering street ultimatums into the channel of a legal political process.

The first step along this path was taken as early as August 1976, when a personal meeting between Suárez and PSOE leader Felipe González took place at a safe house. Responding to the Socialists' demand for the immediate proclamation of a republic, the Prime Minister pragmatically countered, utilizing intelligence service data regarding sentiments within the military: "If we remove the King, the army will take to the streets. We need the Monarch as a shield against the generals." Ultimately, the PSOE temporarily dropped its demand for a republic, recognizing Juan Carlos I as a guarantor of stability. In return, Suárez guaranteed the party legalization, informal access to state media, and fair elections. The deal was secured through the mediation of the Socialist International and SPD leader Willy Brandt via the Friedrich Ebert Foundation. Brandt guaranteed González's moderation to Suárez, while the FRG conditioned financial aid to the PSOE on the obligation to contain street protests. The PSOE was intentionally granted most-favored status, forming a moderate center-left counterweight to the Communist Party.



President of the Government Adolfo Suárez speaks with PSOE Secretary General Felipe González before the start of negotiations at the Moncloa Palace in Madrid. Photo: EFE.
https://www.eldiario.es/sociedad/historiadores-desmontar-mito-transicion-pacifica-policia-importo-metodos-violentos-franquismo_1_11312613.html

Contacts with the Communist Party of Spain (PCE) constituted the most dangerous stage of the transition, as for the military, the Communists remained the principal enemy dating back to the Civil War. Non-public dialogue commenced in the autumn of 1976 through the head of the influential news agency Europa Press, José Mario Armero. His country house served as a clandestine venue for negotiations. Fully aware of the colossal risks, PCE leader Santiago Carrillo conveyed key guarantees to Suárez: in the event of legalization, the Communists pledged to integrate into the legal framework, recognize the constitutional monarchy, accept the official red-and-yellow national flag of Spain (instead of the revolutionary tricolor), and halt destructive political strikes by trade unions under their control. This secret deal predetermined the legalization of the PCE in the spring of 1977.



Communist leader Santiago Carrillo and President of the Government Adolfo Suárez speak in the Congress of Deputies. Photo: Historical Archive / Archivo. https://www.elespanol.com/porfolio/revision/20211113/falangista-comunista-carrillo-legalizaron-pce-democracia-secreto/626437745_0.html

In parallel, Suárez neutralized the risks of regional separatism. Beginning in late 1976, the government, through the Catalan publicist Carlos Sentís, established secret contact with Josep Tarradellas—the President of Catalonia in exile, who had not set foot in his homeland for 38 years. Non-public meetings led to the formula "Autonomy in exchange for loyalty": Tarradellas pledged to support the territorial integrity of Spain and recognize the monarchy in exchange for the subsequent restoration of the Generalitat (Generalitat de Catalunya)—the historic

government of Catalonia. This made it possible to isolate radicals and integrate moderate regional elites.

Having secured these external guarantees from the leaders of the "Nine," the reformers proceeded to dismantle Francoism by the hands of the Francoists themselves. In this process, the efforts of Suárez and Torcuato Fernández-Miranda, President of the Cortes Generales and Council of the Realm, converged. The difficulty lay in the fact that under the 1942 Constitutive Law of the Cortes, any alteration to the constitutional structure required a two-thirds majority vote of the deputies (procuradores). The majority consisted of Francoists and generals under the patronage of the reactionary "Bunker" (El Búnker). The opposition demanded a revolutionary break (ruptura democrática), but the forcible abolition of laws would have inevitably triggered a military coup.

The legal solution was formulated by Fernández-Miranda, who articulated the principle: "From law to law through law" (De la ley a la ley a través de la ley). As a constitutionalist, he understood the necessity of liquidating Francoist law according to its own rules in order to avert a military mutiny. Fernández-Miranda utilized the 1947 Law of Succession (Ley de Sucesión en la Jefatura del Estado), which permitted amendments to the Fundamental Laws via a referendum following the approval of the draft by the Cortes. He personally drafted the bill for the Eighth Fundamental Law—the Law for Political Reform (Ley para la Reforma Política).



Torcuato Fernández-Miranda and Adolfo Suárez. Source: Agencia EFE.
https://www.diariodesevilla.es/espana/juan-carlos-motor-cambio-arriesgado_0_2005282988.html

The draft of 5 short articles formally remained an superstructure over the system, but in essence liquidated it, laying the structural framework for the 1977 elections:

- Article 1 proclaimed popular sovereignty, the rule of law, and political freedoms.
- Article 2 established the new Cortes Generales (Cortes Generales), consisting of the Congress of Deputies (Congreso de los Diputados) and the Senate (Senado).
- Article 3 introduced universal, direct, and secret suffrage based on proportional and majority systems, with the obligation to hold elections within a year.
- Article 4 empowered the King to submit any constitutional issues directly to a referendum, bypassing the Cortes.
- Article 5 regulated the procedure for the drafting and parliamentary approval of a new Fundamental Law.

Introducing the bill to the Cortes, Suárez launched a multi-week campaign to win over deputies at the Moncloa Palace, guaranteeing the apparatus compromise terms:

- Institutional continuity: the exclusion of lustration. Civil servants, military officers, and judges—including judges of the subsequently abolished repressive Public Order Tribunal (Tribunal de Orden Público, TOP)—were guaranteed the retention of their ranks, pensions, salaries, and assets.
- Political integration: moderate Francoists were invited to pursue their careers within the center-right bloc of reformers—the future Union of the Democratic Centre (Unión de Centro Democrático, UCD).
- Systemic threats: Suárez appealed to Ministry of Interior reports on strikes, demonstrating that blocking the reforms would trigger revolutionary chaos and expropriation. Reforms "from above" were declared the sole path to preserving statehood. Pious Francoists perceived the controlled changes as an act of fidelity to the testament of Franco, who had transferred power to Juan Carlos I.

At the historic session of the Cortes on November 16–18, 1976, Fernández-Miranda paralyzed the resistance of "The Bunker" by declaring amendments to be voted on as a package and shifting the speeches of radicals to the end of the agenda. Concurrently in the corridors, Suárez gave the generals final guarantees of stability. On November 18, 1976, 425 out of 497 deputies present voted "in favor" of the law (with 59 voting "against" and 13 abstentions), effectively liquidating their own powers. The event entered political science as the "Suicide of the Cortes" (Suicidio de las Cortes) or "the harakiri of Francoism." The regime dismantled itself legally, leaving the army with no cause for a mutiny.



Institutional suicide. By passing the Law for Political Reform, the dictatorship's Cortes approved what was later called "the harakiri of Francoism." Photo: EFE. https://www.lavanguardia.com/politica/20161211/412533530909/asi-liquido-franquismo.html

To ensure full legitimacy, a referendum was scheduled for December 15, 1976. The campaigns of the three main forces were aligned as follows:

- "The Bunker" campaigned against the reform under the slogan "Franco would have voted against," scaring citizens with the prospect of a new civil war.
- The left-wing opposition (the "Platajunta" / "Commission of Nine"), while supporting the dismantling of the dictatorship, criticized the draft bill for the absence of immediate party legalization and called for a boycott (abstención).
- The government utilized TV (Televisión Española, TVE) and radio, promoting simple slogans ("Your vote is your choice," "If you want democracy, vote") and the song "Habla, pueblo" ("Speak, People").

With a turnout of 77.8%, 94.45% of voters (over 16.5 million people) supported the bill, with only 2.6% voting against it. The results of the referendum altered the political landscape:

- The right lost the authority to speak on behalf of the "silent majority," while the military recognized the absence of public support for the old regime.
- The failure of the boycott proved to the leaders of the "Platajunta" the citizens' reluctance to pursue a radical break, inclining them toward compromises.
- Juan Carlos I consolidated his status as the primary guarantor of the transition.



President of the Government Adolfo Suárez votes in the 1976 referendum. Photo: EFE / Archive.
https://www.lavanguardia.com/politica/20161215/412619206584/referendum-ley-reforma-politica-1976-television-campana.html

The Law for Political Reform opened the path to the first competitive elections. Deprived of legal leverage for struggle, both right-wing and left-wing radical forces transitioned to extra-systemic pressure, which provoked a wave of terror and violence in early 1977.

3.4. Radical Provocations, Legalization of the PCE, and the First Free Elections

The transfer of the confrontation to the extra-systemic field made January and February 1977 a period of severe trials for the reforms. Confronted with defeat in the December referendum, radicals from both flanks synchronously intensified terror. Ultra-right and left-wing extremists pursued a common tactical goal—to destabilize public order, provoke the military into intervention, and disrupt the general elections scheduled for the summer, the regulatory framework of which had been established by the Law for Political Reform.

On January 24, 1977, Madrid was shaken by the "Atocha Massacre" (Matanza de Atocha). Gunmen from the ultra-right group "Anticommunist Apostolic Alliance" (Alianza Apostólica Anticomunista, Triple A), enjoying the support of conservatives within the security apparatus, stormed an office of labor lawyers at 55 Atocha Street. The attackers opened fire at point-blank range, killing five people and severely wounding four. The victims were activists of the

Communist Party of Spain (Partido Comunista de España, PCE) and defended workers from the underground trade union "Workers' Commissions" (Comisiones Obreras, CCOO). The organizers' calculation was to provoke the left into retaliatory street lynchings and provide the military high command with a pretext to declare a state of martial law.

At this critical moment, the PCE leadership headed by Santiago Carrillo demonstrated restraint. Although the party was part of the "Platajunta" platform, politically it found itself in isolation. Its key partners (above all the PSOE), whose legal status was already recognized by the authorities, focused after the referendum on their own electoral campaigns and refrained from solidarity actions. Under conditions of the paralysis of the united front, the PCE responded to the challenge independently.

Realizing that the party was being drawn into an escalation, the communist leadership rejected calls for strikes and revenge. The funeral of the lawyers on January 26 turned into a massive, silent procession: between 100,000 and 150,000 people marched through the center of the capital in protest against the terror. A key factor in stabilization was the strict discipline of the march. Since the police refrained from providing security, the PCE, together with CCOO, mobilized their own security force. Thousands of worker stewards formed human chains, suppressing any provocations.



A silent demonstration of thousands during the funeral of the labor attorneys murdered on Calle de Atocha. Madrid, January 26, 1977 (Photo: Ricardo Martín). https://fototrans.umh.es/project/entierro-abogados-atocha-madrid-enero-1977/

This made a profound impression on moderate Francoists. The authorities recognized that the communists and their affiliated labor structures possessed powerful organizational resources and were capable of acting as a disciplined, systemic counterparty controlling mass protest within peaceful limits.

Left-wing radicals and regional separatists also attempted to disrupt the transition. The Basque terrorist organization ETA (Euskadi Ta Askatasuna / "Basque Country and Freedom") remained the primary threat. Its leaders viewed Suárez's reforms as cosmetic touch-ups to Francoism and, in the winter of 1977, launched a campaign of assassinations and bombings against security personnel in Bilbao, San Sebastián, Vitoria, and Tolosa.

Simultaneously, the urban guerrillas of GRAPO (Grupos de Resistencia Antifascista Primero de Octubre / "First of October Anti-Fascist Resistance Groups") were active. They made an attempt to exert physical pressure on the government by kidnapping the President of the Council of State, Antonio María de Oriol, and subsequently the head of the Supreme Council of Military Justice, General Emilio Villaescusa, demanding an amnesty for their prisoners in exchange for their lives.



Antonio María de Oriol immediately after his rescue by police from captivity by the GRAPO group. Madrid, February 11, 1977. / Photo: Agencia EFE. https://elpais.com/diario/2007/02/11/domingo/1171169558_740215.html

Prime Minister Adolfo Suárez refused to make concessions that could undermine his authority among the military. On February 11, 1977, a special police unit raided GRAPO safe houses in Madrid and Alcorcón. The hostages were liberated alive, and the GRAPO leadership was arrested. This success expanded Suárez's leeway for maneuver: by demonstrating to the security apparatus the state's capability to suppress left-wing radical terror, the Prime Minister secured political space for the legalization of the moderate opposition.

The legalization of the PCE became the most complex challenge for the Suárez government. For the military high command, recognition of the Communist Party was unacceptable, as it undermined the ideological pillar of the regime—the doctrine of the "crusade" against communism—and violated Franco's testament on denying power to the forces that had lost the Civil War (1936–1939). The process demanded precise legal decisions and non-public consultations from the executive branch.

The catalyst was the actions of the PCE itself. General Secretary Santiago Carrillo, realizing that Suárez was delaying the decision out of fear of the military, illegally arrived in Madrid and on December 10, 1976, held a high-profile clandestine press conference for foreign journalists, demonstrating the helplessness of the security services. His arrest by the police on December 22 presented the government with a dilemma. Carrillo's imprisonment transformed him into a "political martyr," deprived the upcoming elections of legitimacy, and provoked the left into disrupting the reform. On December 30, Carrillo was released on bail, which de facto signified the inevitability of the PCE's integration into the legal process.

On February 27, 1977, Adolfo Suárez and Santiago Carrillo met secretly in Madrid. The communist leader confirmed the commitments previously conveyed through secret channels: the PCE undertook to recognize the constitutional monarchy, Juan Carlos I, the territorial integrity of Spain, and to replace the Republican tricolor in its symbolism with the red-and-yellow national flag.

Direct registration of the PCE by the Ministry of the Interior could have been blocked by the Council of the Realm. To overcome this obstacle, the Suárez government altered the regulatory framework: on February 8, 1977, the Council of Ministers approved Royal Decree-Law No. 12/1977 "On the Right to Political Associations." This act replaced the authorization-based system of party legalization with a declaration-based system. The Ministry of the Interior was required to automatically register any party within 20 days, provided its statutes contained no evidence of a criminal offense (and articles penalizing Marxism had previously been removed from the Penal Code). The burden of proving violations was transferred to the state.

On February 11, 1977, the PCE leadership submitted its application to the Ministry of the Interior. The head of the department, Rodolfo Martín Villa, seeking to shield the ministry from the backlash of right-wing security officials, refused to register the party unilaterally and

redirected the documents to the Fourth Chamber of the Supreme Court. This maneuver shifted the responsibility onto the judges.

The Supreme Court of Francoist appointment found itself under intense pressure: the military leadership demanded the prohibition of the PCE, while the government insisted on a rapid verdict to avoid disrupting the election schedule and provoking street violence. Attempting to evade the role of arbitrator, on April 1, 1977, the court delivered an evasive verdict of non liquet (due to the unclarity of the case), ruling that the PCE's statutes contained no evidence of a crime, but that the final decision lay within the administrative competence of the executive branch.

Then Suárez turned to the Prosecution Service of the Realm. The Board of Senior Prosecutors prepared an opinion: since the court had found no corpus delicti in the PCE's statutes, the Ministry of the Interior had no legal grounds for refusal, and delaying registration would violate the decree-law of February 8.

Based on this position, Suárez registered the party on the Saturday evening of April 9, 1977. This day entered history as "Red Holy Saturday" (Sábado Santo Rojo). The timing (18:30) was calculated perfectly: Spain had gone on Easter break, government offices were empty, newspaper printing offices were closed for two days, and the general staff had left Madrid, which precluded their rapid coordination for protest.

Nevertheless, the legalization of the PCE provoked an acute crisis in the military. The leaders of the new right-wing conservative bloc "People's Alliance" (Alianza Popular – AP), headed by Manuel Fraga Iribarne (a former Minister of the Interior), subjected Suárez to harsh criticism, calling the decision a "coup d'état and a legal farce." On April 12, the Supreme Council of the Army openly declared a loss of confidence in the Prime Minister, and the Minister of the Navy, Admiral Gabriel Pita da Veiga, immediately submitted his resignation.



In the foreground: Adolfo Suárez and General Manuel Gutiérrez Mellado. Source: Marian Rosado / EFE.
https://www.elnortedecastilla.es/fotos/valladolid/201410/03/manuel-gutierrez-mellado-capitan-3091559245333-mm.html

At this critical moment, the Crown and the First Deputy Prime Minister for Defense Affairs, General Manuel Gutiérrez Mellado, kept the army within the legal framework. Gutiérrez Mellado decisively suppressed the statements of radicals at the Council meeting, reminding the generals of the regulations' requirements and the impermissibility of interference in state governance. Concurrently, King Juan Carlos I personally contacted the commanders of the military regions. The monarch appealed to their oath of allegiance, making it clear that action against a government decree bearing his signature would be treated as treason. Ultimately, the Supreme Council of the Army declined military intervention, issuing a communiqué in which the military stated that they were submitting to the decision "solely out of patriotic duty and discipline to the Crown," while expressing their "deep repugnance" (repugnancia) toward the legalization of the PCE.

The legal compromise was solidified on April 15, 1977, at the first legal meeting of the Central Committee of the PCE at the Meliá Castilla Hotel in Madrid. Santiago Carrillo confirmed the terms of the agreement: the presidium convened beneath the red-and-yellow flag of Spain. The PCE's renunciation of the revolutionary dismantling of the system and its integration into the legal framework of the reformed monarchy legitimized the left in the eyes of the middle class and deprived the military opposition of grounds to accuse the authorities.



Handshake between Santiago Carrillo and Adolfo Suárez following the legalization of the Communist Party in April 1977. Photo: EFE / Archive. https://www.publico.es/opinion/columnas/jugando-palabras-concordia-verdadera-falsa-concordia.html

The legalization of the opposition presented the reformers with a new problem. The coordination platform "Platajunta" collapsed in the spring of 1977: the transition to legal competition dismantled the forced unity of the left-wing forces, and the parties preferred to compete independently for voter support. The opposition landscape fractured into competing PSOE and PCE, both possessing powerful organizational structures. At the same time, Suárez and his reformist supporters within the Francoist nomenklatura lacked a party base of their own. A threat emerged that the left would win an absolute majority in the elections, which could have provoked the army's conservative wing into launching a coup.

To overcome this weakness, the government initiated the behind-the-scenes engineering of a loyal center-right force. The primary architect of the project was the Minister of the Prime Minister's Office, Alfonso Osorio. During the first phase (January–March 1977), Osorio conducted non-public negotiations with the leaders of minor center-right, liberal, and social-democratic groups. Key figures in this integration were Pío Cabanillas (representing moderate Francoist reformers) and Joaquín Garrigues Walker (Federation of Democratic and Liberal Parties). Through their efforts, a coalition named "Democratic Centre" (Centro Democrático), consisting of 15 micro-parties, was established in March.

At this stage, the security services joined the coordination effort. Operatives from the Central Documentation Service (Servicio Central de Documentación – SECED), under the leadership of General Andrés Cassinello, provided direct organizational assistance to the coalition. Conflicts among leaders were suppressed by the security services through bureaucratic and economic

levers: controlling the distribution of electoral funds, positions on candidate lists, and guaranteeing posts in the future state apparatus.

A crucial factor in the coalition's viability was hidden financial support from the largest banks—the so-called "Banking Seven" (Los Siete Grandes). Financial magnates, fearing the rise of Marxists to power, allocated multi-million subsidies to the centrists, securing them a material advantage over the left-wing opposition.

On May 3, 1977, Adolfo Suárez announced in a televised address his decision to participate in the elections as an independent candidate, heading the reorganized bloc—the Union of the Democratic Centre (Unión de Centro Democrático – UCD). The entry of the incumbent Prime Minister transformed a fragmented conglomerate of political clubs into a powerful government party of stability.

The official campaign demonstrated a deep divergence in the political programs of the key participants:

- **Union of the Democratic Centre (UCD):** A platform of centrism, gradual legal integration into European institutions, and the preservation of civil peace as an alternative to dictatorship or revolutionary chaos.
- **Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE):** Shifted its emphasis from orthodox Marxism toward Western European social democracy, demanding deep reforms while guaranteeing respect for private property and the monarchy.
- **Communist Party of Spain (PCE):** Advocated for working-class rights, broad amnesty, and the legalization of all labor unions, while entirely eliminating slogans of armed overthrow of the state.
- **People's Alliance (AP):** The neo-Francoist wing of Manuel Fraga Iribarne, which advocated for conservative values, strong state authority, and order, criticizing the government for concessions to the left.

Elections to the General Cortes took place on June 15, 1977, with a voter turnout of 78.8%. Voting was conducted under a mixed electoral system: proportional representation for the Congress of Deputies (Congreso de los Diputados) and a plurality system for the Senate (Senado). The elected parliament de facto acquired the status of Constituent Cortes (Cortes Constituyentes) tasked with drafting the Constitution.



The first free elections of June 15, 1977. Leader of the UCD coalition and Prime Minister Adolfo Suárez casts his ballot into the ballot box. Source: EFE. https://www.lasexta.com/noticias/nacional/asi-voto-espana-elecciones-generales-1977-cuando-democracia-tardofranquismo-enfrentaron-urnas_201911095dc7156f0cf26ce4558dd258.html

The rules of the game were determined by Royal Decree-Law No. 20/1977 "On Electoral Regulations." This act laid the foundations of an electoral system that combined the proportional principle with mechanisms designed to guard against left-wing radicalism. The province was designated as the electoral constituency, with each guaranteed a minimum of two seats in the legislature regardless of population size. As a result, a malapportionment emerged: in sparsely populated agrarian provinces, electing a deputy required several times fewer votes than in large industrial metropolises.

This mechanism functioned in accordance with the authorities' calculations: it aligned with the actual public demand of the Spanish populace seeking stability, while safeguarding the system against a left-wing imbalance. Rural conservative provinces provided the UCD with a maximum coefficient of representation, offsetting the left's advantage in industrial centers.

As a result of the vote, the UCD under Suárez took first place, securing 34.4% of the vote (165 seats in the Congress of Deputies). The main opposition force was Felipe González's PSOE with 29.3% (118 seats). The PCE, led by Carrillo, took third position with 9.3% (20 seats). Fraga Iribarne's right-wing AP bloc secured the support of 8.2% of the electorate (16 seats). The remaining mandates were distributed among regional and nationalist parties of Catalonia and the Basque Country.

The UCD achieved victory but fell short of an absolute majority (176 seats), forcing Suárez to form a minority government and rendering the practice of compromise the cornerstone of domestic policy. The primary electoral beneficiary was the socialist PSOE, which made the transition from the underground to the position of leading opposition force and marginalized minor left-wing groupings. The communists took only third place, proving that radical Marxist ideas had lost their monopoly among the proletariat, which opted for a more moderate path. On the opposite flank, the AP suffered a defeat: Fraga's conservative rhetoric remained firmly associated with the old regime.

The electoral map divided Spain: the UCD took the majority in agrarian, traditionally religious regions (Castile, León, Galicia, and Navarre). Industrial centers—Madrid, Valencia, as well as industrial Andalusia—predominantly cast their votes for the socialists. The communists recorded their primary results in the industrial suburbs of Madrid (the so-called "red belt") and certain industrial zones of Andalusia, where the positions of their trade union networks were strongest. In Catalonia and the Basque Country, local nationalists achieved victory.

Building upon the election results, Suárez played the Catalan card. In September 1977, he received Josep Tarradellas, the President of Catalonia in exile, in Madrid. By special decree, the historic self-governing body—the Generalitat (Generalitat de Catalunya)—was officially restored even prior to the adoption of the Constitution. Tarradellas returned to Barcelona under the formula "Autonomy in exchange for loyalty to the unified Spanish state." This made it possible to diminish the influence of radical Basque separatists at the national level, as moderate regional elites were integrated into the legal framework.



Meeting of Prime Minister Adolfo Suárez with the President of the Generalitat, Josep Tarradellas, at the Moncloa Palace, September 1977. Photo: EFE. https://www.lavanguardia.com/politica/20170627/423710141481/tarradellas-suarez.html

The elections of June 15, 1977, drew a line under the pre-constitutional transition period. The newly elected Cortes obtained popular legitimacy. However, the deputies and the government faced urgent challenges: covert sabotage by the Francoist bureaucracy and a profound macroeconomic crisis. By the summer of 1977, inflation in the country had exceeded the critical threshold of 26%, foreign exchange reserves were depleted, and unemployment was rising, posing a threat to stability.

To preserve the state's course, the opposing elites were compelled to reach a new level of consensus. This led to the elaboration of mutual legal security guarantees within the framework of large-scale package deals: the adoption of the Amnesty Law and the signing of agreements on economic and political stabilization—the famous Moncloa Pacts.

3.5. System Stabilization: The Amnesty Law, the Moncloa Pacts, and the Transition Finale

The logic of the Spanish transition dictated that the drafting of legal acts be preceded by informal consensus. A crucial step toward national reconciliation (reconciliación nacional) was the emergence of the "Pact of Forgetting" (Pacto del Olvido)—a behind-the-scenes consensus among elites that evolved into a broader societal norm. Spanish society in the second half of

the 1970s was united by a deep-seated fear of repeating the trauma of the 1936–1939 Civil War. Recognizing that the dictatorship's repressive apparatus possessed the capacity to block reforms or stage a coup d'état, key political actors agreed to mutual concessions.

Through leading media outlets, including the newspaper El País and the public broadcaster RTVE, the narrative was promoted that settling historical scores was unacceptable. The symbol of the transition became the 1976 song "Libertad sin ira" ("Freedom Without Anger") by the group Jarcha, which called for relinquishing vengeance for the sake of the future. The formula "Amnesty from all and for all" (Amnistía de todos y para todos) entered the discourse, reinforced by the idiom echar pelillos a la mar, which denoted consigning the past to oblivion for the sake of civil peace.

The legal codification of this agreement was the Amnesty Law of October 15, 1977 (Ley 46/1977, de 15 de octubre, de Amnistía). Adolfo Suárez's Union of the Democratic Centre (UCD) coalition served as the moderator of the process. The initiative came from the PSOE and the PCE, for whom the amnesty was a central demand that enabled the return of exiled leaders and the release of hundreds of activists convicted under the dictatorship for "illegal association" and "political propaganda." The government drafted the text in a manner designed to satisfy the opposition while reassuring the military command.



The passage of the 1977 Amnesty Law. EFE Archive.
https://www.lavanguardia.com/historiayvida/historia-contemporanea/20231111/9369504/amnistia-sello-transicion-solo-dos-votos-socialista-1977-arias-salgado.html

The price paid by the left-wing forces was the inclusion of Article 2 in the act ("Artículo segundo. En todo caso quedan comprendidos en la amnistía..."—"In any case, the amnesty covers..."). The provision was reciprocal in nature: it encompassed both participants in the anti-Francoist underground and civil servants, army officers, officers of the Civil Guard (Guardia Civil), judges of the Public Order Court (Tribunal de Orden Público), and agents of the Social-Political Brigade (Brigada Político-Social). Article 2 guaranteed criminal immunity to Francoist officials, effectively blocking investigations into official misconduct and abuses by the dictatorship's repressive apparatus committed prior to 1977.

The passage of the law was accompanied by a symbolic address by the communist leader Marcelino Camacho, who had spent fourteen years in prison. He publicly extended the hand of reconciliation to his opponents, stating that the victims of the regime chose forgiveness for the sake of overcoming the legacy of the Civil War. The consensus vote demonstrated that the Amnesty Law became the price for returning the military to external defense functions and securing its non-intervention in civil governance. Having received safety guarantees, the Francoist bureaucracy ceased to view democratization as an existential threat, which stabilized the transition.

The economic crisis severely threatened the stability of the new institutions. The model of Franco's technocrats, which had previously driven the "Spanish economic miracle" (ranking fifth in Europe by GDP), was dependent on raw material imports, tourism, and migrant remittances. The 1973 global oil crisis dealt a heavy blow to this system, as Spain imported over 70% of its energy resources. The situation was exacerbated by the government of Arias Navarro (1974–1975), which artificially subsidized fuel prices using reserves in an attempt to contain protests. By the summer of 1977, Spain had depleted its foreign exchange reserves, inflation had reached 26%, and the balance of payments deficit had brought the country to the brink of collapse.

The architect of the stabilization program was the Second Deputy Prime Minister for Economic Affairs, Enrique Fuentes Quintana. He demonstrated to Suárez and the opposition leaders that the absence of rigorous reforms and wage growth controls would lead to a default and social explosion.



Second Deputy Prime Minister for Economic Affairs Enrique Fuentes Quintana. Photo: Europa Press / ContactoPhoto.
https://historia-hispanica.rah.es/biografias/17149-enrique-fuentes-quintana

On October 25, 1977, at the Moncloa Palace, Adolfo Suárez and the leaders of the parliamentary forces signed the Moncloa Pacts (Los Pactos de la Moncloa), which laid the foundations of civil society:

- **Macroeconomic Package:** The leaders of the PSOE and the PCE agreed to cap wage increases, indexing them to projected inflation rather than past price rises. Santiago Carrillo bound the Workers' Commissions union (CC.OO. – Comisiones Obreras) to this decision. Conversely, the socialist union, the General Union of Workers (UGT – Unión General de Trabajadores), refused to endorse the agreements, accusing Felipe González of making concessions to the bourgeoisie, and initiated strikes, temporarily severing the link between the PSOE and its trade union base. The left formally recognized private property and the market economy. In exchange, the authorities introduced a progressive income tax, expanded unemployment benefits, and established transparency in the banking system.
- **Political-Legal Package:** The pacts mandated the dismantlement of Francoist repressive legislation. Freedom of assembly and association were codified, media censorship was abolished, the penal code was reformed (decriminalizing political criticism), and police detention powers were restricted.



Photograph taken during the signing of the Moncloa Pacts in 1977, depicting representatives of the parliamentary groups. From left to right: Enrique Tierno Galván (Popular Socialist Party – PSP), Santiago Carrillo (Communist Party of Spain – PCE), José María Triginer (Catalan Federation of the PSOE), Joan Reventós (Socialist Party of Catalonia – PSC), Felipe González (Spanish Socialist Workers' Party – PSOE), Juan de Ajuriaguerra (Basque Nationalist Party – PNV), Adolfo Suárez (Union of the Democratic Centre – UCD), Manuel Fraga Iribarne (People's Alliance – AP), Leopoldo Calvo-Sotelo (Union of the Democratic Centre – UCD), and Miquel Roca (Catalan Minority). Photo: EFE. https://elpais.com/economia/negocios/2022-03-20/el-exito-de-los-pactos-de-la-moncloa.html

The Moncloa Pacts halted the collapse of the financial system, lowered inflation from 26% to 15%, and restored creditor confidence, enabling the Constituent Cortes to proceed with long-term state-building.

The elections of June 15, 1977, formed the General Cortes (Cortes Generales), vested with constituent status (Cortes Constituyentes). Their mission was to draft a constitution legitimizing the transition to democracy. To write the text, a commission of seven deputies was created—the "Fathers of the Constitution" (padres de la Constitución):

- Miguel Herrero y Rodríguez de Miñón, José Pedro Pérez-Llorca, and Gabriel Cisneros Laborda—representing the UCD;
- Gregorio Peces-Barba Martínez—representing the PSOE;
- Jordi Solé Tura—representing the PCE;
- Manuel Fraga Iribarne—representing People's Alliance (Alianza Popular);
- Miquel Roca i Junyent—representing Catalan nationalists.

The work was built upon behind-the-scenes consensus. The left agreed to the restoration of the monarchy and a special status for the Catholic Church, while the center-right conceded to a

package of social rights, the legalization of trade unions, and regional autonomy. Article 2 of the Constitution proclaimed the unity of the nation and initiated decentralization.

In the referendum of December 6, 1978, with a voter turnout of 67.1%, citizens overwhelmingly approved the Constitution (88.5% of votes cast). The new basic law proclaimed Spain a social and democratic state governed by the rule of law, established the status of the King as guarantor of state institutions, and instituted the model of the "State of Autonomies" (*Estado de las Autonomías*).



King Juan Carlos I signs the 1978 Constitution of Spain. Photo: Manuel H. de León / EFE.
https://www.surinenglish.com/lifestyle/201912/05/december-1978spain-ratifies-constitution-20191205194739-v.html

However, decentralization destabilized the periphery. Radical Basque nationalists from ETA regarded autonomy as a deception. The period from 1978 to 1980 entered history as the "years of lead" (los años de plomo), during which ETA militants carried out regular assassinations targeting military officers and judges. In 1980, nearly 100 people were killed at their hands.

Terror compounded the internal crisis of the UCD coalition, which was fragmenting into Christian democrats, liberals, and former Francoists. A leadership struggle erupted within the party. The second oil shock of 1979–1980 spiked inflation and drove unemployment up to 15%. Loss of party control and economic hardship forced Adolfo Suárez to resign in January 1981.

This crisis culminated in an attempted military coup d'état on February 23, 1981, known as the 23-F putsch (el Tejerazo / 23-F). During a session of the Cortes convened to confirm the government of Leopoldo Calvo-Sotelo, a group of Civil Guard officers led by Lieutenant Colonel Antonio Tejero took the deputies hostage. Simultaneously, General Milans del Bosch deployed armored units onto the streets of Valencia.



The 23-F putsch (February 23, 1981). Prime Minister Adolfo Suárez protects Lieutenant General Manuel Gutiérrez Mellado from an attack by the putschists in the chamber of the Congress of Deputies (photo: Manuel H. de León / EFE). https://elpais.com/politica/2014/03/23/actualidad/1395615410_606291.html

The rebellion was suppressed through the actions of King Juan Carlos I. On the night of February 24, the Monarch, wearing the uniform of Captain General, delivered a televised address. As Commander-in-Chief, he ordered military district commanders to return their troops to barracks, declaring that the Crown would not tolerate any disruption of the democratic process. The army honored its oath of allegiance, and the conspirators surrendered.

The transition officially concluded in October 1982. General elections resulted in the defeat of the UCD and a landslide victory for Felipe González's PSOE, which secured an absolute majority in the Congress of Deputies (202 seats out of 350).

The victory of the Socialists—the pivotal Republican force in the Civil War—demonstrated that the historic divide had been overcome. The transfer of power from the reformed nomenklatura

to yesterday's representatives of the underground marked the definitive end of the transition. Spain's experience demonstrated that institutional restructuring grounded in compromise ensures the long-term stability of a democratic order.

Relevant Lessons for Belarus

Lesson 1. Legal "Camouflage" and the Method of Legal Transformation

The experience of Spain demonstrates that the most resilient transition is achieved not through the instantaneous destruction of old laws, but by leveraging them for the legal self-abolition of the dictatorship. For Belarus, it is advisable to utilize the formal procedures of the current Constitution (including the version featuring the All-Belarusian People's Assembly – ABPA) to legitimize changes, rather than resorting to its revolutionary annulment. Transitional acts—such as a law on political reform—must be enacted through existing institutions of power. This accomplishes two primary objectives:

- It preserves the appearance of procedural legitimacy for the nomenklatura, thereby mitigating the risk of sabotage.
- It deprives the security services (siloviki) and external allies of a legal pretext for intervention under the guise of "defending the regime," given that the "regime" itself legally votes in favor of the alterations.

Lesson 2. Compromise Pragmatism and "Amnesty as a Deal"

The Spanish transition points to the necessity of a compromise analogous to the "Pact of Forgetting" (*Pacto del Olvido*). If security officials and bureaucrats are convinced of the inevitability of criminal prosecution, they will defend the regime to the end. Democratic forces require a pragmatic model of amnesty for individuals who have not committed severe crimes against the person. During a transitional period, judicial justice enters into tactical conflict with stability. A peaceful transition is an agreement in which the price paid to prevent violence is a temporary renunciation of prosecution against representatives of the executive vertical in exchange for loyalty. Without security guarantees, the transition risks escalating into a civil conflict.

Lesson 3. The Search for "Internal Reformers" and the Elite Split Strategy

The transition in Spain demonstrated the importance of a reformist wing within the system—functionaries capable of dismantling institutions from within through dialogue with the opposition. For Belarus, this underscores the necessity of engaging pragmatists from the state apparatus who recognize the dead-end nature of isolation. The regime is not monolithic: it is vital to distinguish between pragmatic technocrats and the Belarusian equivalent of "The Bunker" (El Búnker)—the radical security wing. The success of a transition hinges on isolating this reactionary bloc by extending guarantees to the moderate nomenklatura. Democratic forces must send clear signals to officials ready to exchange loyalty to the leader for professional survival. A transition is not a mass overhaul of personnel, but a capture of control achieved through an elite split and the enlistment of technocrats in driving change.

Lesson 4. Secret Communication Channels and Backchannel Diplomacy

Public activity serves as an instrument of pressure, but the terms of the transfer of power and mutual guarantees are negotiated behind closed doors. A Belarusian transition requires confidential channels of communication between leaders of change and key factions within the ruling class. Compromises are forged when both sides are shielded from the pressure of radicals within their own respective camps. "Quiet diplomacy" establishes the rules of the game before public speculation can ensue. To achieve this, the opposition requires an equivalent to the Platajunta—a unified coalition acting as a consolidated negotiator. As long as the opposition remains fragmented, the nomenklatura lacks a single interlocutor for secret negotiations regarding safety guarantees, while the security wing exploits this split to perpetuate the status quo.

Lesson 5. Economic "Day One Package" (The Moncloa Method)

Political transformation in Belarus will coincide with a structural economic crisis (default risks, sanctions, loss of markets). The experience of the "Moncloa Pacts" demonstrates that a transitional administration must possess a ready-made stabilization program. This necessitates unpopular measures (budgetary spending constraints, wage growth suppression, tax reforms) in exchange for transparent rules of the game and targeted social support. New institutions must prove their economic viability within the very first weeks to prevent social protests.

Lesson 6. Integration, Not Total Lustration

In Spain, supporters of the former order were not marginalized: they established legal parties (such as the People's Alliance) and evolved into the systemic right. For Belarus, it is critical that representatives of the former vertical and their supporters retain the right to legal political representation. Discrimination against them will create a breeding ground for underground revanchism. The objective of the transition is to compel opponents to abide by rules that exclude violence. Lustration must be strictly targeted, applying solely to individuals who have committed documented grave crimes.

Lesson 7. Risk Management of Multi-Vector Destabilization

The Spanish experience shows that a consensus among moderate forces does not halt attacks by radicals. For Belarus, it is vital to proactively neutralize three destructive factors:

- Resistance from forces oriented toward an external actor, aimed at blocking the country's exit from its sphere of influence.
- Sabotage by outgoing elites seeking to demonstrate the incompetence of the new authorities.
- Protests by victimized groups within the camp of change. Demanding retribution, they may view concessions as collusion, threatening vigilante justice and civil disobedience.

The transitional authorities require mechanisms to isolate destructive elements from negotiations, a strategy for communicating the cost of compromise to society, and a readiness to use force to suppress attempts to derail the dialogue.

Lesson 8. The Role of the Institutional Arbiter and External Guarantees

In Spain, the monarch guaranteed the immutability of the rules of reform, deterring the military from intervention. In Belarus, where there is no internal arbiter possessing unquestioned authority over the security services (siloviki), oversight of agreement compliance must be assumed by a consortium of international partners (the EU, the US, and regional players). External security guarantees for outgoing elites, combined with a financial assistance package for the new authorities, constitute crucial conditions for stabilizing the transition under conditions of mutual distrust.

Summary

The Spanish model of La Transición demonstrates that the path from dictatorship to democracy lies through the utilization of legal instruments and a willingness to make difficult moral compromises. Spain chose peace at the cost of silence regarding the past, and stability at the cost of systemic integration of representatives of the former repressive apparatus into new democratic institutions. This scenario demands from transition leaders not only courage, but also pragmatism, enabling the transformation of yesterday's enemies into partners in constructing a new country. For Belarus, this serves as a lesson that democracy is born not from the absolute victory of one side over another, but from the collective recognition that such a victory is impossible without destroying the state as a whole.

Thus, the Spanish experience of Reforma pactada demonstrates that the key condition for a successful transition is not the violent destruction of the state apparatus, but the creation of an inclusive legal framework that transforms the institutions of dictatorship into instruments of democracy—rendering this scenario a fundamental basis for developing a framework model to overcome the systemic crisis in Belarus.

Chapter 4. Comparative Analysis and the Draft "Belarusian Model

4.1. Analytical Matrix: Comparison of Models and Selection of Relevant Tools for the Belarusian Context

A comparison of transitions in the GDR, Poland, and Spain demonstrates that none of the examined models can be directly transplanted to Belarus. Each model took shape under specific historical conditions and relied on a unique combination of factors that is not fully present in Belarus. The GDR found itself in a situation marked by the rapid collapse of the party vertical and the Soviet Union's virtual abandonment of further support. The Polish transition resulted from years of pressure by an organized society, a severe economic crisis, and the gradual emergence of a willingness to negotiate within the regime. In Spain, transformations began following the death of the head of state and were largely initiated by reformers operating from within the authoritarian system itself.

Consequently, the task of comparative analysis lies in isolating specific instruments that can be synthesized into a distinct Belarusian model. Such a model must take into account the personalistic nature of the current regime, the level of repression, the weakness of domestic

civic structures, the preservation of the state apparatus, and the unique role of the Russian Federation.

The analytical matrix is structured around seven primary elements.

1. Conditions under Which the Regime Agrees to Negotiations

In the GDR, the window for negotiations opened as a consequence of mass protests, a migration crisis, the loss of administrative control, and the vanishing willingness of the USSR to defend the country's leadership by force. In Poland, the decisive factor was a combination of economic impasse, societal pressure, and the regime's inability to permanently eliminate Solidarity (Solidarność). In Spain, the initiative came primarily from above: a segment of the ruling elite concluded that preserving the Francoist model posed a threat to the state and to the future of the elite itself.

For Belarus, all three sources of change are possible: internal crisis, shifts in external support, and a split within the state apparatus. However, the most likely dynamic is not the isolated action of a single factor, but their convergence. Economic difficulties alone will not prompt a dialogue so long as the regime retains access to Russian support and remains capable of passing the costs onto society. Societal discontent will not serve as a sufficient condition unless it achieves organizational and political representation. Even the emergence of pragmatists within the state apparatus will not alter the situation if they lack a reliable counterpart and a safe exit from the existing system.

Consequently, the Belarusian model must proceed from establishing a situation in which maintaining the status quo becomes less attractive for a segment of the nomenklatura than a limited and controlled dialogue. This entails creating a clear alternative between further isolation and dependence on the one hand, and gradual normalization on the other.

2. Formation of a Negotiating Actor

The Polish experience demonstrates the most highly developed model of a societal counter-system. Solidarity (Solidarność) approached the negotiations as an organization possessing political leadership, subject-matter experts, media channels, and established links with professional communities. In the GDR, the societal alternative formed substantially faster, amidst the unfolding crisis itself, while the Round Table served as the mechanism for its institutionalization. In Spain, opposition forces likewise underwent a process of consolidation; however, a decisive role was played by their capacity to engage in negotiations with the reformist faction of the former system and to accept inevitable compromises.

In Belarus, the primary institutions of the democratic forces already exist. However, the presence of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya's Office, the United Transition Cabinet, the Coordination Council, political parties, civic initiatives, and expert organizations does not yet equate to the existence of a unified negotiating entity. Jurisdictions among them are not fully delimited, while the procedure for establishing a joint stance on issues of dialogue, security guarantees, and the transitional period remains unformalized.

Consequently, the most relevant approach for Belarus is not the creation of a new "unified center," but rather the granting of an agreed-upon negotiating mandate to a joint delegation. Such a mandate must define its composition, powers, procedure for ratifying decisions, and the bounds of permissible compromise. The democratic side must be capable not only of articulating demands, but also of guaranteeing the fulfillment of its own obligations under the agreement, including societal endorsement of the transitional model and the coordination of external support.

3. Engagement with the State Apparatus and Internal Reformers

The Spanish experience demonstrates that the transformation of an authoritarian system becomes less conflictual if a segment of its institutions and representatives participates in drafting the new rules. The Polish transition was likewise accompanied by the preservation of a significant portion of the administrative apparatus. In the GDR, state agencies continued to ensure the operation of transport, municipal infrastructure, healthcare, and other systems even amidst rapid political collapse.

For Belarus, preserving a professional state apparatus is a vital prerequisite for the stability of a transition. A mass overhaul of civil servants is unfeasible for both personnel and political reasons. It would create the threat of sabotage, the breakdown of public services, and the consolidation of the bureaucracy around the most hardline faction of the regime.

The Belarusian model must proactively distinguish between the political leadership, individuals complicit in repression, and ordinary civil servants. The majority of state apparatus employees must receive guarantees of continued employment, preservation of social rights, and freedom from prosecution for the mere fact of state service. Concurrently, it is necessary to prepare a mixed personnel reserve comprising specialists from the democratic forces, independent experts, former civil servants, business representatives, and professionals who continue to work inside the country.

Identifying internal reformers is of particular importance. Democratic forces must appeal not only to society, but also to those representatives of the apparatus for whom preserving the independence of Belarus, the stability of state institutions, and their own professional future take precedence over personal loyalty to the incumbent leadership.

4. Legal Mechanism of the Transition

The Spanish model provides Belarus with the most critical tool for legal transformation: utilizing existing procedures to legally alter the system itself. The Polish experience similarly demonstrates that transitional arrangements can be codified through the existing parliament and current legislation. In the GDR, the decisions of the Round Table attained practical effect through their subsequent formalization by state bodies and the conduct of free elections.

For Belarus, a revolutionary annulment of the entire existing legal framework would create a legal vacuum and intensify resistance from the bureaucracy and the security apparatus. Furthermore, it would facilitate external propaganda regarding a "coup d'état" and an "illegal seizure of power." A more resilient path appears to be one in which national dialogue decisions are enacted through procedures established by law: presidential acts, parliamentary resolutions, amendments to electoral legislation, and other instruments existing within the legal framework of the Republic of Belarus.

This approach does not imply political recognition of the current system as democratic or legitimate. Existing state bodies serve merely as a technical bridge. The ultimate legitimation of the transition must occur through the free exercise of the will of the citizens.

5. Guarantees and Limits of Responsibility

The Polish and Spanish models demonstrate the importance of guarantees for representatives of the former regime. Poland's communist elite secured the opportunity to maintain a temporary presence in power and to participate in the new political and economic system. In Spain, a significant portion of Francoist state officials was integrated into the new institutions. This diminished the likelihood of organized armed resistance.

At the same time, it is essential for the Belarusian model to develop its own approaches, which may either replicate historical precedents or synthesize distinct hybrid frameworks tailored to the specific context.

6. Control over the Security Apparatus and Archives

The experience of the GDR demonstrates that during a transition, the primary objective is not the immediate dissolution of all security structures, but rather establishing control over their operations, archives, and chains of command. Preserving documentation prevents the destruction of evidence and the exploitation of classified information for blackmail. At the same time, the operational continuity of conventional law enforcement agencies is essential for preventing surges in crime and vigilantism.

For Belarus, this task will represent one of the most formidable challenges. In the initial phase, efforts must focus on halting politically motivated cases, securing archives, and introducing civilian oversight. Security structures must continue to maintain public order and state border security, while being stripped of the capacity to independently influence the political process.

7. Economic and International Components

None of the examined transitions was an exclusively internal political process. The GDR relied on the economic resources of the FRG; Poland secured international financial assistance and debt restructuring; Spain utilized the prospect of European integration as an incentive for reform and societal consolidation.

For Belarus, the economic dimension of a future agreement must be prepared prior to the onset of a full-scale transition. Measures are required to support the state budget, the banking system, state-owned enterprises, employment, and social transfers. The EU and the US must predefine the terms for a phased lifting of sanctions alongside the volume of aid to be provided in response to the implementation of a political roadmap.

Thus, from the Polish experience, the most relevant aspects for Belarus are the formation of an institutional counter-system, confidential preparations for negotiations, a broad network of thematic working groups, and the search for an independent mediator. From the Spanish model, one should borrow legal continuity, engagement with internal reformers, the integration of the moderate segment of legacy elites, and the preparation of an economic pact. The GDR experience is critical for organizing a Round Table, controlling the repressive apparatus, securing archives, and ensuring the continuity of public administration.

At the same time, the dissolution of the state along the East German scenario remains inapplicable to Belarus. The Belarusian model must utilize selective instruments from these transitions while maintaining its primary objective: restoring democracy while simultaneously safeguarding the independence and unitary character of the Republic of Belarus.

4.2. Geopolitics and Security

The Russian Factor

The Russian factor constitutes the primary external difference between Belarus and the examined historical cases. The Russian Federation acts not only as a political and economic partner of the incumbent regime, but also as a state exercising significant influence over the Belarusian military infrastructure, information space, security system, and economy.

Consequently, any internal crisis could be leveraged for the further restriction of Belarusian sovereignty or for the annexation of Belarus.

The legal continuity of the process represents one of the crucial means to deprive Russia of formal arguments for intervention. If changes are enacted by existing state bodies on the basis of Belarusian legislation, depicting them as the destruction of statehood or an illegal coup will be far more difficult.

At the same time, adherence to legal procedures does not in itself guarantee non-interference. Moscow will act primarily out of its own strategic interests. Legal validity must therefore be augmented by an internal political settlement, the preservation of a unified chain of public administration, and international guarantees.

The Belarusian transition must be built upon several core principles:

1. Political transformation is an internal process of the Republic of Belarus and cannot be conducted under the direction of any foreign state.
2. Decisions of the national dialogue shall be enacted within the framework of the Belarusian legal system and obtain ultimate legitimacy through free elections.
3. Transitional bodies shall not adopt irreversible decisions regarding the country's long-term foreign policy course, unless such decisions are directly linked to safeguarding sovereignty and terminating participation in military aggression.
4. The state apparatus, the Armed Forces, the border guard service, and conventional law enforcement agencies shall maintain institutional continuity and remain subordinate to unified governing authorities.
5. Any foreign military intervention or attempt to impose a political system on Belarus from the outside shall be regarded as a violation of its sovereignty.

Preserving the existing legal shell is also capable of reducing anxiety within the state apparatus. For civil servants, military personnel, and law enforcement officers, implementing decisions adopted through established formal procedures is psychologically and legally distinct from defecting to an alternative power center. For this precise reason, the decisions of the national dialogue must obtain official legal codification rather than existing merely as a political declaration by its participants.

A distinct imperative is safeguarding the process from informational and organizational interference. Russia may deploy dependent media outlets, select political factions, economic leverage, and influence networks to depict the national dialogue as a Western-imposed project. The countermeasure must be the maximum Belarusian agency of the process. The EU and the US can serve as guarantors and partners, but the signatories to the agreement on the country's internal structure must be Belarusians themselves.

The Role of the European Union and the United States

The EU and the US possess distinct yet complementary capabilities. The United States holds substantial sanction leverage and maintains channels of direct communication with Minsk. The European Union serves as the primary potential source of economic assistance, trade normalization, and institutional support for reforms. Without coordination between them, the incumbent regime will be able to exploit divergences in their approaches, securing isolated concessions without altering domestic policy.

The role of the EU and the US must encompass four strategic dimensions:

1. **Political Recognition of the Process.** International partners must recognize the national dialogue as a legitimate means of resolving the internal crisis and confirm that an agreement reached by the Belarusian parties will receive international support. However, recognition of the process must not degenerate into the imposition of its outcomes.
2. **Coordination of Sanctions Policy.** For every verifiable action by the authorities, a clear reciprocal step must be envisaged. The release of political prisoners, the cessation of repression, the legalization of political activity, and the holding of elections can be accompanied by the incremental easing of specific restrictions. In the event of a breach of the agreement, a rapid sanctions snapback mechanism must apply.
3. **Economic Support.** The EU, the US, and international financial institutions must prepare a program for the initial months of the transition. It must include measures to maintain financial stability, access to credit, assistance to enterprises, the restoration of trade links, and the protection of the population against a sharp decline in income.
4. **International Guarantees.** Partners must affirm their support for the independence and territorial integrity of Belarus, as well as the political cost of any external intervention. Regional security issues must be discussed with Ukraine, Poland, Lithuania, and other neighboring states, albeit without granting external parties the right to determine Belarus's internal political model.

When calibrating sanctions, a distinction must be made between restrictions imposed for domestic repression, participation in Russian aggression, and hybrid actions against EU member states. The release of political prisoners may serve as grounds for reviewing sanctions linked to repression, but it should not automatically lead to the repeal of restrictions conditioned on military cooperation with Russia or threats to neighboring countries.

4.3. Framework Model of the "Belarusian Path"

The proposed model rests upon a phased transition from humanitarian de-escalation to technical dialogue, followed by a political settlement. The sequencing of stages is necessary, as an immediate transition to debating power distribution, the Constitution, and elections amidst ongoing repression is virtually impossible. At the same time, preliminary contacts should not be contingent upon the prior fulfillment of all future demands; otherwise, the primary output of the dialogue effectively turns into a prerequisite for its initiation.

Stage 1. De-escalation

The initial stage aims to reduce the level of mutual threat and establish a baseline of trust. The core issues at this stage are political prisoners, the cessation of repression, and humanitarian measures.

The onset of official de-escalation may be preceded by confidential consultations among authorized representatives of the incumbent regime, democratic forces, and international partners. Their task is to verify the authenticity of the mandates held by the respective parties, determine a potential sequence of actions, and devise a verification mechanism.

During this stage, democratic forces should refrain from demanding the immediate resolution of all transition-related matters, while upholding fundamental prerequisites for further progress: the cessation of repression, the compilation of a comprehensive roster of political prisoners, their release, and the transition to official dialogue.

The outcome of the first stage should not be the restoration of trust in the full sense of the word, but rather confirmation of the parties' capacity to fulfill limited agreements. Advancement to the second stage becomes feasible following the cessation of new waves of repression and the provision of guarantees to the dialogue participants.

Stage 2. Technical Dialogue and Agenda Coordination

The second stage is designed to establish the ground rules for future political negotiations. At this point, the parties are not yet required to reach agreement on power distribution, but must define who participates in the process, which issues are included on the agenda, and how decisions are adopted and implemented.

The incumbent system must be represented by individuals possessing actual authority and access to decision-making. The participation of diplomats, experts, or representatives of dependent non-governmental organizations alone would reduce the process to mere simulation.

The democratic forces must act through a unified delegation mandated by the principal political institutions.

The technical dialogue must approve procedural rules, timeframes, and decision-making protocols. Major political agreements should ideally be adopted by consensus, given that their implementation is impossible in the face of direct opposition from any key stakeholder.

It is likewise necessary to determine the balance between confidentiality and public disclosure. Personal guarantees, security issues, and preliminary compromise options may be discussed behind closed doors, while finalized decisions, the roster of participants, timetables, and outcomes must be made public. This structural framework will allow for genuine negotiations while mitigating the risk of the process being perceived as a secret deal among elites.

The outcome of the second stage should be a framework document detailing the composition of the dialogue platform, the list of agenda items, the negotiation timetable, a mechanism for international facilitation, and an obligation by the parties to refrain from actions capable of disrupting the process. Upon its adoption, work begins on the political settlement.

Stage 3. Political Agreement

The third stage entails negotiating the conditions for the transformation of the political system. Its outcome should be not a definitive blueprint for the future organization of Belarus, but rather a legal and political roadmap that enables citizens to establish legitimate governing authorities.

The political agreement must encompass several interconnected components:

1. **Cessation of Repression and Restoration of Rights.** The release of all political prisoners, termination of politically motivated cases, rehabilitation of victims of repression, and the removal of restrictions on the activities of political parties, public organizations, and independent media.
2. **Transitional Legislation.** Revision of laws governing elections, political parties, media, mass events, and local self-government. Formation of an independent electoral administration and provision of equal access for political forces to information and campaigning.
3. **Interim Administration.** Preservation of the operations of the government, ministries, and local authorities under the introduction of agreed-upon control mechanisms in the spheres of security, justice, elections, and public finance. Mass replacement of civil servants is not conducted during this period.
4. **Security Sector and Archives.** Discontinuation of political activities by security forces, preservation of archives, prohibition of document destruction, introduction of civilian oversight, and individual vetting of officials applying to serve within the new system.

5. **Economic Stabilization.** Phased easing of sanctions, international financial support, protection of the banking system, state enterprises, employment, and social transfers. Economic reforms must account for societal interests and be accompanied by targeted assistance to the population.
6. **Transitional Justice.** Rejection of collective lustration and provision of guarantees to the vast majority of civil servants.
7. **Elections.** Adoption of a mandatory timetable for free parliamentary and presidential elections. Their sequence may be subject to agreement, but the complete electoral cycle must conclude within a predetermined deadline. International observation is permitted at all stages of preparation and voting.

Decisions stemming from the political settlement must be codified through existing legal procedures of the Republic of Belarus. Depending on their substance, these may take the form of acts of release and rehabilitation, legislative amendments, parliamentary decisions, or presidential decrees. Where the existing legal framework does not directly permit the implementation of agreed-upon measures, the parties must utilize the statutory procedures for amendment provided therein.

Following free elections, the temporary dialogue platform ceases its political functions. Subsequent constitutional reform, determination of the form of government, foreign policy priorities, and the long-term economic model fall under the jurisdiction of the newly elected parliament and other legitimate institutions.

Thus, the "Belarusian Path" constitutes a phased model of pacted transition. Its underlying logic is to couple the cessation of repression and the restoration of political competition with the preservation of public administration, economic stability, and national independence. Incumbent institutions ensure legal continuity, the national dialogue establishes the ground rules of transition, and free elections generate new democratic legitimacy.

Such a model does not eliminate all risks. The incumbent regime may exploit negotiations to play for time and extract sanctions concessions. Democratic forces may face internal division over the issue of guarantees for the legacy elite. Russia may attempt to disrupt the process or impose its own terms upon it. Finally, economic deterioration could erode public support even amidst the successful launch of political reforms.

Mitigating these risks is achievable only through a predefined sequence of actions, independent verification, the reversibility of sanctions relief, a unified mandate for the democratic delegation, and the legal codification of each stage. In this event, the national dialogue can serve not as a means to preserve the incumbent system under a new banner, but as a mechanism for its peaceful transformation and the restoration of Belarusian citizens' right to independently determine the future of the Republic of Belarus.

Conclusion

The historical cases of the GDR, Poland, and Spain examined in this study demonstrate that a peaceful transition from an authoritarian system to democracy does not unfold according to a single, uniform scenario. In each of the three instances, the catalysts of the crisis, the balance of power between the regime and society, the role of external states, and the legal mechanism of transformation differed substantially. Nevertheless, behind these variations lies a common dynamic: political dialogue commenced when preserving the existing order became more perilous for a significant segment of the ruling system than managing controlled change, while on the opposing side an actor emerged capable not only of demanding reform, but also of assuming responsibility for its execution.

In the GDR, the transition was initiated as a result of the rapid erosion of the party apparatus, massive societal pressure, and the withdrawal of the Soviet Union's willingness to defend the regime by force. In Poland, the regime entered negotiations following a prolonged confrontation with an organized civil society, set against the backdrop of an economic crisis and the loss of capacity to govern the country through established methods. In Spain, the initiative largely stemmed from within the system itself: a reformist faction of the elite utilized existing state institutions to dismantle the authoritarian order and gradually open up political competition.

Thus, the onset of transformation may be linked to societal pressure and a crisis of public administration, as well as to split-offs within ruling elites or shifts in the posture of an external patron. Yet none of these factors in isolation guarantees a peaceful and democratic outcome. The weakening of authority in the absence of a prepared alternative risks leading to chaos, conflict between competing power centers, or external intervention. An organized opposition lacking a rift within the system may remain isolated from real mechanisms of governance for years. An economic crisis without a political blueprint is capable not of accelerating democratization, but rather of intensifying repression and deepening the country's dependence on external backing.

The primary universal lesson lies in the fact that a national dialogue requires the emergence of viable contracting parties. An authoritarian system begins to perceive the opposition as a viable counterparty not because it acknowledges its moral rectitude, but because it recognizes in it a political entity capable of representing a substantial segment of society, monitoring compliance with reached agreements, and offering a realistic model of the future. In this sense, the system is indeed inclined to speak only with another system—not necessarily equal to it in resources, but organized sufficiently to assume binding commitments.

For democratic forces, this implies that societal support and international recognition alone are insufficient. A unified negotiating stance, drafted decision proposals, a talent reserve, and a policy program for the initial months of the transition period are indispensable. When a political window of opportunity opens, there may be no time left to align mandates, distribute responsibilities, or formulate economic policy. If these issues are not resolved in advance, the negotiation process will transpire on the terms of the more organized party, and the onset of transformations could rapidly encounter an administrative vacuum.

The second general conclusion concerns the posture of the ruling elites. In all the cases examined, transition became feasible after factions emerged within the state apparatus that were motivated not by preserving the regime at any cost, but by preserving the state, their own professional standing, and the country's governability. This does not imply that such groups proactively became proponents of democracy. More frequently, they were driven by pragmatic calculation: an understanding of the limitations of the legacy model and a desire to avert an uncontrolled crisis.

Therefore, a peaceful transition presupposes not only pressure on the system, but also the creation of an acceptable prospect for its moderate elements. This entails preserving the state apparatus, the professional status of the majority of civil servants, the continuity of social transfers, the execution of lawful contracts, and the repudiation of collective responsibility. Total lustration or the threat of indiscriminate criminal prosecution is capable of uniting the nomenklatura and security structures around resistance to change. At the same time, guarantees must not degenerate into a denial of justice. Amnesty may extend to individuals not complicit in grave crimes against the person, but it must not bar the possibility of investigating torture, extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, and other gross human rights violations. A viable compromise must separate political and administrative accountability from grave criminal offenses.

The third conclusion concerns legal continuity. The Polish and Spanish experiences demonstrate that utilizing existing procedures can substantially diminish bureaucratic resistance and facilitate international recognition of the transition. For Belarus, this implies that the current parliament, the All-Belarusian People's Assembly, and other formal institutions may be employed to enact transitional decisions: terminating repression, amending electoral legislation, legalizing political organizations, and scheduling election dates. However, such utilization must not signify recognition of the incumbent system as democratically legitimate. Old institutions can provide the legal transition "from law to law," but ultimate legitimacy can be conferred upon the new rules solely by free elections and the governing authorities constituted through their outcomes.

The Belarusian model must therefore be grounded in a combination of legal continuity and new democratic legitimation. Incumbent authorities may legally pave the way for transformation, the national dialogue can negotiate its terms, and a freely elected parliament can define the long-term organization of the country. Transitional bodies should not pre-emptively lock in decisions that exceed the bounds of their temporary mandate, particularly regarding a new Constitution, the form of government, or long-term geopolitical alignments. Their primary objective consists in halting repression, preserving the state, and creating conditions under which citizens can independently determine the future of the nation.

The economic dimension of the transition carries distinct significance. The experience of all three countries demonstrates that societal support for political change depends on the new system's capacity to ensure baseline stability. Citizens will evaluate the outcomes of transformation not only by the status of political freedoms, but also by price levels, employment, income, and the accessibility of public services. Therefore, the transitional program must encompass not only draft laws and institutional reforms, but also a concrete economic package: measures to stabilize the budget and financial system, preserve enterprises, protect the most vulnerable groups, and restore access to external markets.

As applied to Belarus, a portion of the requisite preconditions already exists. Following 2020, political institutions of the democratic forces were established, including the Office of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, the United Transition Cabinet, and the Coordination Council. Independent media, human rights initiatives, professional communities, and expert centers have persisted, even though a significant share of these structures is compelled to operate outside the country. Draft reforms, transitional period concepts, and individual draft legal acts have been prepared. Democratic forces maintain relations with the European Union, the United States, the Council of Europe, the OSCE, and national parliaments of democratic states.

An external economic resource also exists. The European Union has declared its readiness to provide large-scale assistance to a democratic Belarus, while sanctions can be phased out and reviewed in response to the cessation of repression, the release of political prisoners, and the initiation of a genuine political process. Contacts between Minsk and Washington—which resulted in the release of detainees and targeted sanctions relief—demonstrate that the incumbent regime is capable of adopting limited decisions under the influence of a combination of pressure and incentives. However, for now, these contacts remain a form of bilateral bargaining and do not lead to structural changes within the domestic political system.

Concurrently, a number of conditions remain absent, without which a transition to a full-fledged national dialogue remains unlikely. Democratic forces do not yet possess a unified negotiating mandate or an agreed-upon mechanism for adopting binding decisions. It has not been defined who precisely can represent them in negotiations, agree upon the terms of transition, and assume responsibility for implementing the settlement. Expert and legal frameworks remain fragmented across various organizations and have not been consolidated into a unified package. A fully fledged talent reserve bringing together specialists from democratic structures, former civil servants, business representatives, and professionals continuing to operate inside Belarus has not yet been created.

Within the incumbent system, a publicly discernible reformist wing has not yet materialized. The presence of officials and technocrats concerned over international isolation, the state of the economy, and deepening dependency on Russia may be presumed; however, they lack the capacity to act as an autonomous political faction. Ongoing repression hinders the emergence of such signals and simultaneously dismantles the civic space capable of participating in a future dialogue.

The most substantial difference between Belarus and the historical examples examined is the Russian factor. The incumbent system's dependency on the Russian Federation is not merely political and economic, but also military in nature. Russia is interested in preserving its influence over Belarus and may view internal democratization as a threat to its own geopolitical positions. Therefore, a Belarusian transition requires not only an internal settlement, but also international mechanisms to safeguard sovereignty. Crucially, Russia must not be granted the right to dictate Belarus's internal organization or block decisions adopted by Belarusian society.

From this it follows that conditions for a national dialogue will not emerge automatically; they must be systematically cultivated. Preliminary confidential contacts may commence without public preconditions, given that their primary objective is to verify the readiness of the parties and explore potential subjects of negotiation. However, the transition to official dialogue will necessitate tangible de-escalation measures: the cessation of new politically motivated prosecutions, the initiation of political prisoner releases, security guarantees for negotiation participants, and the formal recognition of democratic forces as a party to the process. The complete release of political prisoners must serve as one of the first mandatory decisions of the dialogue, backed by a firm execution deadline.

Above all, democratic forces must establish a unified negotiating mandate. This does not strictly require creating yet another political body; an agreement among the principal institutions defining the delegation's composition, authority, decision-making protocols, and red lines for potential compromise is sufficient. Concurrently, an initial de-escalation

package, draft transitional legal acts, an economic stabilization program, and principles of accountability for representatives of the legacy regime must be prepared. Particular attention should be devoted to engaging with the state apparatus. Civil servants and technical specialists must receive a clear signal in advance: democratic transformations do not imply the destruction of the state, mass layoffs, or persecution solely for the fact of employment within state institutions.

The incumbent authority must acknowledge that preserving the current status quo does not restore stability to Belarus. It prolongs the internal crisis, deepens international isolation, and progressively narrows the scope of state sovereignty. A first step could be a consistent de-escalation: the cessation of new waves of repression, the release of political prisoners, the provision of safety guarantees to consultation participants, and the appointment of negotiators possessing actual authority. It is likewise in the self-interest of the system to preserve state archives, prevent the destruction of evidence, and create space for the emergence of a pragmatic wing within the apparatus.

The European Union ought to translate its general political support for a democratic Belarus into a concrete, transparently articulated package. A step-by-step roadmap linking actions by the regime with temporary and reversible relief of specific restrictions must be prepared. Crucially, sanctions for domestic repression, participation in Russian aggression, and hybrid actions against neighboring states cannot be treated as a monolithic bloc: their revision requires distinct conditions. Concurrently, the EU, alongside international financial institutions, must update the transition support program and define measures capable of immediate launch following the reach of a political settlement.

The United States possesses a channel of communication with Minsk and can therefore play a distinct role during the preliminary phase. However, it is vital to progressively evolve humanitarian agreements regarding the release of detainees into a broader process aimed at halting repression and initiating an internal dialogue. US sanctions decisions must be coordinated with the European Union to ensure the incumbent regime cannot extract separate concessions without systemic changes. Washington is also positioned to convey a clear signal to the Belarusian nomenklatura regarding the possibility of international reintegration in the event of a peaceful transition—and, simultaneously, the persistence of personal liability for grave crimes and complicity in external intervention.

The most realistic Belarusian model will not entirely replicate any single transition examined in this study. It may integrate the Polish experience of a negotiated pact, the Spanish mechanism of legal transformation within the existing system, and the East German experience of public oversight over the repressive apparatus. Its foundation must be a

national dialogue owned by Belarusians themselves, yet secured through international mediation, economic assistance, and guarantees against external intervention.

Belarus is not yet at the stage of an immediate launch of such a dialogue; nevertheless, the necessary elements of the future process have already been partially forged. A democratic institutional alternative exists, international attention persists, a substantial volume of expert materials has been prepared, and the incumbent authority has demonstrated the capacity for limited agreements under the influence of external incentives. The primary task of the subsequent stage consists in consolidating these fragmented resources into a unified political framework.

A peaceful transition will become viable upon the alignment of four conditions outlined in the study's initial hypothesis: the consolidation and preparation of a democratic actor, the emergence of a pragmatic wing within the state apparatus, shifts in the external environment that constrain the feasibility of maintaining the regime by force, and the presence of a legal roadmap that preserves state continuity. If these conditions are established in advance, national dialogue can serve not as a temporary compromise between political adversaries, but as a mechanism for restoring Belarusian statehood, safeguarding independence, and returning to citizens the right to independently determine the future of the Republic of Belarus.