

REVIEWS

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BOOK REVIEW: BREACH IN THE SYSTEM? POLISH DIASPORA FIRMS IN THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF POLAND

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Abstract: The collected volume *Wylom w systemie? Firmy polonijne w PRL* [Breach in the System? Polish Diaspora Firms in the People's Republic of Poland], edited by Jerzy Kochanowski and Lars Fredrik Stöcker, was published in 2025 in Warsaw by Wydawnictwo Scholar] thoroughly analyses the phenomenon of Polonia firms. These companies allowed Polish citizens living abroad or foreign citizens of Polish descent to invest in state socialist Poland and engage in small-scale manufacturing and trade. This review points to the skillful situating of the companies in the social and political history of Poland and to the relevance of the volume within international debates over marketization and globalization of state socialism.

Keywords: Polonia firms; late socialist Poland; marketization processes; foreign capital; economic transformation

"Polonia firms were a phenomenon rooted in the past, yet simultaneously heralded changes looming on the horizon—enigmatic, uncertain, and dangerous, but ones which also gave hope" writes Jerzy Kochanowski in his contribution to the edited volume *Wylom w systemie? Firmy polonijne w PRL* (Kochanowski and Stöcker, 2025: 53). This book, a result of a Polish-Austrian research project, focuses on these companies (*przedsiębiorstwa polonijno-zagraniczne*), which, starting in 1976, enabled Polish citizens living abroad or foreign citizens of Polish descent to invest in communist Poland and engage in small-scale manufacturing and trade.



The thematic scope of the volume reflects the quote mentioned above. On the one hand, the authors skillfully situate the phenomenon in the past, the history of late socialist Poland. The authors argue that although Polonia companies statistically played only a small role in the state-run economy on a macro scale, the presence, advertising, and market prices of consumer goods they offered, such as cosmetics, food, and clothing, contributed to a growing perception of inequality in Poland. It is in this area that the book's findings are most solid and innovative. On the other hand, as part of an ongoing debate (Piątkowski, 2019; Bartel, 2022; Przeperski, 2024; Tomka, 2024), the authors underline the domestic roots of Polish post-1989 transformation and globalization. On the example of the Polonia firms, they show that market ideas, practices, and the capital itself were not brought to Poland only after 1989, but incrementally introduced under state socialist conditions. Boundaries between the planned economy and markets were blurred through government policies, which invited limited foreign capital, as well as bottom-up entrepreneurship of the population.

Polonia companies, and especially the complicated, often informal or illicit relations between private capital and the communist state, are still a controversial topic. As the authors note, supplementing archival documents and press materials with oral history interviews proved to be very difficult. Former owners, managers and employees were hesitant to talk to researchers about their experiences in the 1970s and 1980s, demanded anonymization of their statements, or even withdrew their consent to use their interviews.

Some of the volume's chapters treat Polonia companies as an invitation to discuss broader issues (Jasiecki, 2025; Stöcker, 2025), while others thoroughly analyze their particular aspects. These range from the pluralism of the press and popular discussions around the companies during the 1970s and 1980s (Kochanowski, 2025), the attempts to narratively legitimize the companies as part of a socialist economy (Jastrzab, 2025), to their adaptation to the realities of martial law, and the changing economic and fiscal policies of the communist government (Gumiela, 2025). The chapter about Ignacy Z. Soszyński of "Inter-Fragrances" offers a case study of an individual company and its founder (Weismann, 2025). The last chapter reconstructs the life trajectories of people engaged in Polonia companies, based on oral history interviews with 12 individuals (Gałęziowski, 2025).

Overall, this collection of solid, well-researched individual contributions sometimes misses the forest for the trees. While we learn many

specifics and details, the character of the Polonia companies and their role domestically and in the post-1989 transformation remains rather nebulous. Basic information about their *modus operandi*, their complicated and dynamic legal framework (especially the differences between the 1976 and 1982 regulations), administrative oversight, employees, etc., is scattered among individual chapters. Different chapters provide conflicting numbers on the market share of these companies in relation to other economic actors. We also learn that foreigners were often mere figureheads in businesses owned and operated by local actors. Was this the dominant mode of operation? Did the authorities know about it and accept it?

Concrete links, other than anecdotal, between Polonia companies and later marketization and privatization processes (especially direct foreign investments) in Poland are also not clear. The authors label the Polonia firms as “cradles” or “nuclei” (Kochanowski and Stöcker, 2025: 43, 46) of post-1989 capitalism. Alternatively, they are described as “bridgehead” (Kochanowski and Stöcker, 2025: 126) or “outpost” (Kochanowski and Stöcker, 2025: 172) of foreign capital in Poland. But major Western corporations were already present in Poland and invested in state-owned industries (Komornicka, 2024). There was also a considerable private sector of small manufacturing and services (Kochanowski, 2017). What was the relationship and interactions between these economic phenomena and the Polonia firms? When the authors point to the need for further research into the topic, one would wish for a more definite account and for tying up various loose ends.

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