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STARTING POINT OF THE TRANSFORMATION.
IN A CIRCLE
OF SHORTAGES, RATIONING AND PRIVILEGES:
POLISH AND UKRAINIAN EXPERIENCES
AND THE DEBATES
ABOUT CENTRAL PLANNING AND SOCIAL EQUALITY

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Abstract: The article tries to systematize the mechanisms behind durable inequalities and societal differentiation in the centrally-planned economies of the Soviet type, using the examples of Poland after 1945 and the Soviet Ukraine. It tries to contradict the theses present in the popular discourse (and some recent revisionist literature as well) about the so-called real socialism as a system ensuring equality combined with adequate level of social services. The text is based mainly on the existing, although dispersed, literature on the issue, often written by sociologists, but also economic historians and economists. The need to obtain access to scarce consumer goods was decreasing substantially the real incomes of the part of the population having no formal or informal access privileges given by the authorities, thus skewing the relatively equal distribution of nominal incomes. Different forms of networking and informal deals were also distracting the labour force from normal duties, which resulted in significant supply-side inefficiencies, not only in the income inequality.

Those burdens on the centrally planned economy were, in some extent, advantageous to the maintenance of the political control of the communist party over society. A brief comparison of Polish and Ukrainian experiences shows much greater dependency of population from the authorities in that dimension in Soviet Ukraine, which reflects the greater scope of authoritarianism in the political system of Soviet Union. That was meaning also the worse starting point for systemic transformation for the economy of newly independent Ukraine than it used to be in the case of Poland.

Keywords: Planned economy; black economy; Poland; Soviet Union; Ukraine

INTRODUCTION

The article discusses the issues of existing inequalities in the economies and societies of communist states. The transformation of the post-communist economy initiated processes of wealth stratification within these societies. However, this does not mean that communist society was egalitarian. Contrary to official ideology, it was subject to stratification, although this phenomenon was only partly based on inequalities in monetary incomes. The aim of the study is to systematise the mechanisms of social differentiation in the non-market economy and to compare the experiences of Poland and Ukraine in this field.

Why Is the Theme Important?

It is worth noting that in general awareness, especially among young people, a particular pattern is being embedded: repressiveness of the communist system and the lack of political freedoms are viewed negatively, but egalitarianism is perceived positively. However, this view does not match reality. The theoretical basis of the socialist economy was long established by the so-called political economy of socialism. This consisted of a set of scholastic formulas that fulfilled ideological requirements but did not help in understanding reality. The economic theory truly describing this type of economy emerged in 1980, initiated by János Kornai's *Economics of shortage* (Kornai, 1980). Using Kornai's categories, economists began analysing the communist economy, mainly focusing on reforming it and improving its efficiency. Few managed to examine the social consequences of shortage economics in depth, and after 1989, economists regarded this as purely historical and stopped studying it. Historians con-

centrated on the repressiveness of the communist system. The intricacies of the economic system were perceived as absurd and trivial, reminiscent of the popular Polish comedies directed by Stanisław Bareja. However, these absurdities concealed some rationality, often linked to material interests. It is increasingly difficult to comprehend them for successive generations, brought up under market economy conditions. The authors of the following study are fortunate to have at least partial memory of the previous economic system.

Why Is the Theme Difficult?

The Marxist critique of capitalism included several elements that had a significant influence on shaping the socialist economic system. The first accusation addressed the unfairness of capitalism, which is built on exploitation. The workers do not receive the full value of what they produced in the form of wages. Part of this, known as surplus value, is expropriated by the capitalists because they own the means of production. The future system was intended to overcome this negative feature through socialisation (in fact, nationalisation) of the means of production and the abolition of private property. The second allegation concerned the wastefulness caused by capitalism, which fails to use all production capacities to satisfy social needs. Oversupply crises and work stoppages are possible within capitalism even when not all social needs are met. These weaknesses, called “contradictions of capitalism,” were expected to be eliminated in the future. The envisaged system was described as one in which all production capacities would be utilised to meet social needs. The market mechanism was blamed for the “contradictions of capitalism”. The future system, free from these weaknesses, was to be guided not by the market, but by what? Initially, there was no clear answer, but the idea of a political will, unrestrained by market limitations, was becoming increasingly apparent.

The economic model, which was finally adopted in the USSR in the late 1920's and was later implemented in Eastern Europe after 1947, assumed isolation from the world economy, administrative regulation of prices, a focus on heavy industry, and capital accumulation based on the pauperization of society, which was intended to produce the effect of cheap labour. Thanks to this effect, socialism could fulfil one of its fundamental promises – the elimination of unemployment and consequently full employment. This kind of economy, shaped in the late

1920s and early 1930s, relied on cheap labour and strong ideological stimuli, often accompanied by terror. The economic model introduced aimed to create a constant surplus of demand over supply, which was meant to prevent oversupply crises, and periodically slow the development of the market economy.¹ This formed the basis of the belief in the inevitable victory of one economic system over another in the historical rivalry. It is important to remember that the First Five-Year Plan in the USSR (1929–1932) was executed during a period when the rest of the world was experiencing the Great Depression. The contrast was striking. To external observers, the USSR appeared to have found a way to avoid oversupply crises. Consequently, there were attempts to imitate Soviet experiences in market economies, including the introduction of elements of economic planning.

A multi-volume history of Soviet industrialization and the creation of centrally planned economy was prepared by R.W. Davies (1980–2014; Davies et al., 2018). A negative assessment of the founding period of multi-year plans was made by Hunter Holland and Janusz M. Szyrmer (1992). A reinterpretation of the existing critique was done by Robert C. Allen (2003). A case study of Magnitogorsk and its high importance was introduced by Stephen Kotkin (1995). One should also quote the works of Paul Gregory or edited by him (Gregory, 2001; 2004). Stalinist militarization was presented by Mark Harrison and his collaborators (Harrison, 2008). The issues of trade and consumption were described, among others, by Julie Hessler (2004). Social life under Stalinism, with special focus on the sources of support of the system, was presented by Sheila Fitzpatrick (1999).

After the conference in Szklarska Poręba in 1947, a similar economic system was adopted in the socialist countries of Eastern Europe. The Soviet economic model became the universally accepted standard. It involved striving for self-sufficiency (autarky), prioritising heavy industry, obtaining very cheap labour by artificially lowering food prices and adjusting wages accordingly, and collectivising agriculture. The pursuit of self-sufficiency proved to be an intractable feature of the system. During the interwar period, when a similar development model was adopted in the USSR, it was justified by the fact that the only socialist country had to operate in a hostile environment. Now, with several socialist countries,

¹ The attitude of Stalinist decision-makers and Stalin himself to the issue of market equilibrium is well shown in Harrison (2008).

it was seen as possible to seek self-sufficiency within the bloc. However, the new policy mandated the self-sufficiency of each country individually.² From an economic perspective, this was absurd. The USSR, building its sphere of influence, did not establish economies of its satellite states to complement its own, but rather imposed the creation of smaller copies of the Soviet economy. The benefits the USSR could extract from this arrangement were highly problematic. Ultimately, it reflected the dominance of ideology over realism, to the detriment of the economy.

The decisions made in Szklarska Poręba were based on the belief that the global market economy had entered a period of decline and that the proposed approach was a quicker, better route to development, which would help countries that had previously been on the periphery to advance in the international division of labour. The “catching up” phase was seen as a kind of “pact with the devil,” where, by disregarding normal economic principles, an extraordinary acceleration of development could be achieved. In detail, this pact can be broken down into several specific actions. So:

- At the cost of isolation from the global economy, a system resistant to crises of overproduction was built at the expense of isolation from the global economy.
- At the expense of an unprecedented impoverishment of society, the elimination of unemployment was achieved, along with the benefit of very cheap labour, that is, very low production costs.
- At the expense of the decapitalisation of agriculture, the authorities managed to supply the population with basic foodstuffs at artificially low prices, which was intended to ensure social peace despite impoverishment.

After Stalin’s death (1953) and the de-Stalinisation endorsed by Nikita Khrushchev (1956), it became possible to critique previously adopted Soviet economic model from within the system. Its internal nature meant that the fundamental principles of the system could not be questioned, but discussions on reforms to economic management became possible. The excessive centralisation of the existing model was widely criticised. Following the October 1956 breakthrough in Poland and Władysław Gomułka’s return to power, the Polish model of socialism no longer

² A popular comparatist account of the introduction of the Soviet system in Poland, East Germany and Hungary, including many economic issues: Applebaum (2012). See also: Naimark and Gibianski (1997).

needed to imitate Soviet models in every respects. The core principles, such as “social ownership of the means of production,” were not challenged, but the excessive centralisation of economic management was criticised. The proposed solution was workers’ self-government, modelled on the Yugoslav system of the time. However, Gomułka opposed this reform, fearing – probably rightly from his perspective – that there was no guarantee the party would retain the decisive vote in such a self-governing system.

Khrushchev’s reforms in the USSR also aimed at decentralisation, but they had a territorial character there. The powers of central authorities were limited in favour of regional Councils of National Economy (Sovnarkhozy). Stalin’s militarised system of governance was to be replaced by artificial, bureaucratic parameters that determined the actions of independent entities. Over time, the idea of dividing the entire administration, both state and party, into two divisions, urban and rural, also emerged.

The mechanism behind the failure of the Khrushchev era reforms was quite unexpected (see, for example, Pikhoia, 2011). The parameters, created by economists to replace the market, clearly did not succeed. They formed a strange, naive blend of pseudo-market drives appealing to vested interests and ideological platitudes urging altruism. However, what actually functioned was the real market situation, which was plagued by shortages. In this context, economic rationality mandated that maximum self-sufficiency be maintained. Autarky, once declared at the state level, gradually moved to local levels. Each region aimed for self-sufficiency, and without effective exchange mechanisms, this deepened shortages (Jachowicz, 2013). Khrushchev’s fall in 1964 was partly due to economic chaos resulting from decentralisation reforms. This period revealed that autarkic tendencies are an inherent feature of the system, driven by widespread shortages. Decentralising decision-making causes these tendencies to reach lower levels, crippling exchange mechanisms. Under these circumstances, the centre must enforce exchange and, unlike in the Stalinist era, cannot rely on terror or purely ideological motivation.

After Khrushchev’s fall, efforts to reform the communist economy shifted focus towards efficient management grounded in a technocratic approach, rather than ideology. The USSR approved the start of reforms. The eight five-year plan (1966–1970) aimed to overhaul the planning system. It was expected that plans would be developed from the bottom up, rather than imposed from the top down. The central authorities were to

oversee the entire process using carefully selected parameters and complex mathematical models. Initiated by Prime Minister Alexei Kosygin (and underpinned by the works of Evsey Lieberman from Kharkiv University), these reforms allowed economic discourse to be liberated from ideological constraints and taken over by technocrats. Although the solutions were somewhat hesitant, the eighth five-year plan is regarded as one of the most effective in the USSR's economic history. The market economy, operating according to the principles of a welfare state, and the communist economy, which was losing its revolutionary fervour and moving towards more efficient management, appeared increasingly similar. The idea of their mutual convergence was growing in popularity.

Let us focus on one criterion that sets the reformers of 1956 apart from those of the second half of the 1960s. The former criticised the omnipotence of the centre, which, fearing a loss of control, was reluctant to relinquish all authority. The latter criticised the centre's incapacity to handle the selfishness of particular interests.

However, the scale of the reforms was limited by the Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia. It strengthened conservative forces in the USSR and turned Brezhnev's slogan of stability into stagnation. During the discussions before the intervention, Kosygin strongly opposed such a decision. He believed that the intervention would empower conservative and dogmatic forces within the USSR to such an extent that further reforms would become impossible. This is exactly what happened – 1968 marked the end of economic reforms in the USSR.³ Moreover, the Soviet Union was now critically interested in preventing similar attempts in other socialist countries. As a result, the reforms carried out in Hungary and Poland at the end of the 1960s had a limited and predetermined scope.

Between 1968 and 1970, technocratic reforms were introduced in Poland, led by Bolesław Jaskżuk. However, Jaskżuk's reforms were implemented without regard for their social impact (Dwilewicz, 2008; 2011). A rebellion arose against them and overthrew Gomułka's team. Edward Gierek then became the party leader. The leadership announced a shift in economic policy. With loans and licences purchased, the Polish economy aimed to modernise rapidly and then repay its debts through exporting modern products. Simultaneously, the standard of living was expected to

³ A wider focus on legal and systemic conditioning of the Soviet system's inertia and cyclicity of reforms and withdrawals following them due to the fears of political destabilization: Ioffe and Maggs (1987).

improve. However, these ambitions were hindered by the global economic climate. Gierek's efforts at forced modernisation ultimately ended in a dramatic failure.⁴

After 1968, Brezhnev's stabilisation evolved into stagnation and Brezhnev's doctrine on limited sovereignty of socialist countries prevented reform efforts across the entire Soviet bloc. A synthetic history of post-war USSR and its breakdown, see Hanson (2003).

The 1970s marked the beginning of significant economic crises since the end of the war: the first oil shock in 1973 and the second in 1979. A notable characteristic of these crises was their coexistence with inflation. As a result of these events, Keynesian approaches proved ineffective within a market economy. A gradual shift in macroeconomic policy emerged. Monetarism, the perspective that prioritises combating inflation above all else and seeks macroeconomic stability even if it means sacrificing full employment, was gaining influence. The resurgence of liberal economic ideas signalled that henceforth, the two systems would diverge. Advocates of convergence theory either revised their views or remained silent.

Under the influence of the oil crises, the belief that socialism was unreformable prevailed. Alain Besançon and Stefan Kurowski further developed this line of thinking over time. In Besançon's work (1991), we find a vision of a lunar economy, detached from reality, incapable of development and innovation, and therefore doomed to historical failure. Kurowski's theory (Kurowski, 1983) focused mainly on Marxist value theory and its practical implications. The cornerstone of reflection on real socialism turned out to be the aforementioned 1980 work by Hungarian economist János Kornai (1980), published in Polish five years later. The author distanced himself from the artificial language of socialist political economy and began to describe real socialism using concepts suitable for a market economy. The result was highlighting the concept of scarcity as a condition shaping the socialist economic system. The analysis of the effects of this fact marked significant advance in the understanding of real socialism. Zbigniew Landau (1986, see also 1987) drew attention to the mechanism of the quasi-business cycle in the socialist economy, linked to the phases of economic policy of successive ruling teams. This led to a pro-

⁴ Among the most recent studies dedicated to the expansion and following breakdown of the Polish economy in the 1970s, one must mention Zaremba (2023) and Komornicka (2024). Still valuable are crisis-time reckonings with the 1970s policies written by economists: Kuczyński (1981) and Müller (1985).

consumption shift, initially aimed at gaining support. After some time, when the government felt more secure, consumption was restricted and investment increased.

This caused social discontent. The authorities reverted to pro-consumption policies once more, but it was too late to prevent the loss of power. The cycle model was mainly based on Polish experiences, yet it effectively highlighted the dilemmas faced by economic policy in real socialism. In the 1980s, awareness of the historical failures of the socialist economic model was already widespread. Even Marxists described socialism with grim irony as “the longest road to capitalism.” It was also sarcastically remarked that the greatest achievement of communism was improving the lives of the working masses, but not in socialist countries, only in capitalist ones. Indeed, out of fear of communism, capitalism reached a level of social sensitivity that it probably would not have achieved under other circumstances.

Statistical Point of View

The elements of isolation from the global economy included a non-convertible currency, foreign exchange controls, a multiple exchange rate system, an artificial price and wage system, etc. The result was an economy of scarcity, where access to goods and services was regulated not by monetary resources, but by a complex system of privileges. However, this system was concealed. It cannot be captured either in statistical terms or in legal regulations. It became the subject of sociological analysis rather late.

The gradual, unavoidable opening of communist economies to the outside world exposed the widening gap in living standards and the extent of poverty among Eastern Europeans. While early post-war hopes suggested that this gap might gradually close, it has become evident that it is actually growing. Non-convertible currencies, artificial pricing, and rapid inflation meant that numerical indicators related to socialist finance offered little real insight. Even today, economic historians analysing the socialist economies find these indicators largely unhelpful. Nonetheless, one indicator remained remarkably stable: the average wage converted at the black market exchange rate consistently hovered between 20 and 30 dollars. Eastern Europeans realised this every time they visited the West or interacted with so-called internal export markets. In their pursuit of foreign currency, socialist countries established shops within their

territories where better goods could be bought with convertible currencies. Although, inaccessible to most citizens, these shops were visible to all and played a crucial role in revealing the true state of economic power. Advocates of the egalitarian claims of the communist system often refer to “purchasing power parity,” asserting that despite low wages, prices were adjusted accordingly. They argue that the value of non-convertible currency can be measured not by its relation to global prices but by its real purchasing power within the domestic market. However, they overlook that in conditions of scarcity, merely possessing money does not guarantee the ability to buy goods. Access was controlled through a system of privileges. The failure to quantifiably capture this privilege system will probably disappoint economic historians who expect detailed numerical results from their studies. Nonetheless, their absence does not imply that the problem does not exist.

Legal Point of View

Privileges were not commonly disclosed in official legal acts. Instead, they were based on what is known as the mimeograph law, which refers to internal ministerial regulations that are not published in the main legal corpus, such as acts of parliament and more significant government regulations. It appears impossible to fully reconstruct the complex and evolving network of privileges and regulations. However, it is valuable to examine examples from this area, recognising that they are not peripheral, but a core element of the economic system.

Many aspects of inequality remained difficult to define legally, partly because they were not regulated by law at all. In times of scarcity, all economic entities, from provinces and large workplaces to small local communities, families and even individual farms, tended to achieve economic self-sufficiency. This involved creating stocks and excluding exchange mechanisms that would be natural in a market economy. A key feature of the socialist economy was the creation by enterprises of their own holiday resorts,⁵ supply systems, pig farms and horticultural farms. Access to these resources was governed not by legal acts, but by internal regulations, which were often unwritten variable, and discretionary. Notably,

⁵ The issues of organization of leisure and tourism in the People's Republic of Poland, accompanying shortages and their social context were the subject of two valuable monographs: Sowiński (2005) and Jarosz (2003).

the system of rationing privileges in socialism was not limited to the “top shelf” of particularly attractive goods, but covered a range of commodities, including the most basic ones. Access depended on resourcefulness, social or family contacts, and what an individual could offer in return. Such hustle and bustle typically left no traces in written sources.⁶ Recreating even examples of these situations is the goal of economic historians, economists, and sociologists, whose research methodologies complement each other perfectly. Law historians often find such challenges quite difficult to address.

Socialist Society in the Eyes of the Social Researchers

A great deal of work was accomplished by sociologists as well as historians, economists and economic historians dealing with stratification processes going inside theoretically homogenous socialist society. In the case of the latter, more eclectic group, Jerzy Kochanowski's work (Kochanowski, 2010; 2019) is an excellent, innovative study of the black economy. Marek Bednarski (1992) also addressed this topic. Paweł Wyczański (1989), among others, explored the pathologies related to currency non-convertibility. Alojzy Z. Nowak (1993) examined the impact of inflation on the development of the “black economy” in the 1980s. Józef Misala (1989) discussed the phenomenon of tourism focused on trade with citizens of the visited countries, rather than sightseeing. Similar issues were subject of the volume of studies edited a few years later by Jerzy Kochanowski and Włodzimierz Borodziej (2010). Dariusz Jarosz and Maria Pasztor examined other issues within the unofficial economy, such as housing problems and meat supplies (Jarosz, 2010; Jarosz and Pasztor, 2004). Mariusz Jastrząb (2004) analysed general supply issues during the six-year plan and their effects on politics and social life. Andrzej Zawistowski (2017) published a monograph dedicated to the phenomenon of rationing in the People's Republic of Poland, mainly emphasising the authorities' perspective. In relation to the Soviet economy, several classic studies written in English are available (Katsenelinboigen, 1977; Grossman, 1982; Simis, 1982).

⁶ The gap in the sources was later partially reduced by the attempts of collecting memoirs and relations, often in the paradigm of oral history. A very good range of attitudes of entrepreneurs and private persons confronted with the realities of the centrally planned economy is presented by a selection of recollections prepared by the team of Ośrodek “Karta”, an NGO specializing in preservation of sources for “history from below” (*Prywaciarze*, 2004).

As indicated above, a great contribution was supplied by the sociologists. Sociologists have conducted extensive work on the topic of our interest as well. The official doctrine described a classless socialist society where conflicts of interest had been eliminated. In the USSR, this was how society was perceived almost until the end of the socialist system. During the Stalinist era in the People's Republic of Poland, sociology was removed from university curricula as a "bourgeois science". After the breakthrough of 1956, it returned and gradually began to explore contemporary societal issues based on empirical research rather than ideological doctrines. Initially, this research focused on the micro-level. It took time to challenge the dogma of the fundamental equality of socialist society.

In the 1960s, Włodzimierz Wesołowski (1964, 1970) conducted research on the structure of contemporary Polish. Wesołowski's core idea could be summarised as the thesis that in socialism, the fundamental attributes of the elite – power, prestige, material prosperity, knowledge and a sense of security – are distributed among different groups, rather than concentrated in the same individuals, as in traditional class society. Wesołowski refers to this as the "decomposition" of social status characteristics.

The research carried out by Andrzej Siciński and his team was also significant. It concerned real lifestyles, inevitably touching upon economic issues (see: Straczuk, 2015). Notably, progress in understanding inequalities in socialist society was made thanks to Winicjusz Narojek (1975, 1995). He contrasted the official, egalitarian, and altruistic ideological vision with individual's selfish attitudes, which resulted in "self-preservation activities". In 1980, Narojek published a work on open-recruitment society, comparing it with societies with self-reproducing structures, and also drew attention to the ongoing, yet ever-present influence of political criteria in recruitment processes (Narojek 1980, see also: 1991). He contrasted it with societies with a self-reproducing structure, but also drew attention to the changing, yet ever-present influence of political criteria in recruitment processes.

Małgorzata Mazurek (2010a) attempted a broader analysis of the social consequences of scarcity. She primarily examined the effects of the clash between two economies of scarcity during the period when Poland's border with the German Democratic Republic was open, but the work also contains many insightful observations of a more general nature. Simultaneously, Mazurek published a more comprehensive monograph on the phenomenon of queueing, which was an inevitable consequence of scarcity (Mazurek 2010b; 2012; 2020).

Marta Cobel-Tokarska highlighted the humiliating aspects of the economy of scarcity. She wrote:

For many Poles, the 1980s were a long and monotonous period of economic deprivation (mainly due to inflation) and a profound inability to satisfy consumer needs. This was humiliating because almost nothing could simply be bought: you had to “wait in line”, “hunt”, “get hold of”, or “arrange”. Goods are not simply delivered, but “thrown” into shops, and many items require reservations, with queue committees being formed... (Cobel-Tokarska, 2014: 33).

The persistent scarcity and the resulting pursuit of self-sufficiency led to a narrowing of the circle of people with whom individuals were willing to identify. Elżbieta and Jacek Tarkowski drew attention to this phenomenon, writing:

One of the unquestionable characteristics of Polish social reality (...) is a sharp dualism: the separation of the private and public worlds, the real and the official, the “world of people” and the “world of institutions” (Tarkowska and Tarkowski, 1992: 264).

The authors go on to write:

This situation (...) highlights the role of the family and places numerous efforts to ensure the family’s current standard of living at the centre of individuals’ interests and activities. The prolonged crisis and a permanently limited pool of goods exacerbate the role of the family and one’s small immediate group in a somewhat, caricatured manner, in opposing it to the foreign, sometimes threatening external reality. Difficult living conditions, hardship, fatigue and uncertainty about tomorrow do not necessarily encourage cooperation, but also – perhaps even more so – competition: the outcome may be not only bonds, but also new areas of conflict and forms of aggression. (Tarkowska and Tarkowski, 1992: 266).

This led to a clear division between “us” – family, closest neighbours – and “them” – everyone else, perceived as rivals in the struggle for scarce resources. The consequence was a form of moral dualism. Rules applied to “us,” but there was no such scruples towards “them”. The authors also highlight the short-term thinking and lack of long-term planning that resulted from this situation:

The shortening of future perspectives, prioritisation of the temporary, short-termism, inducing lower quality, even in relation to interpersonal relations (Tarkowska and Tarkowski, 1992: 269).

Historian Tomasz Kizwalter, who studied the issue of equality from the perspective of modernisation processes, writes:

One of the manifestations of the incompleteness of modernisation in communist Poland was (...) the discrepancy between the ideological project referred to by the regime and social practice: the bureaucratic dictatorship, which considered itself the most powerful vehicle of modernity, referred in its actions to traditional models of "lordliness", trivialising them in a manner befitting upstarts (Kizwalter, 2014: 156).

The chances for true modernisation only came with the market economy after 1989.

Examples

Let us examine a few examples of such mechanisms. After 1956, a system of multiple exchange rates was implemented: from the official rate (4 zlotys per dollar) to the black market rate (around 60–70 zlotys per dollar). The authorities, who could add (or remove) anyone from the list of those authorised to purchase dollars at the official exchange rate, possessed significant opportunities to corrupt society. It should be noted that this corruption was entirely legal, based on the "mimeograph law."

The same was true of access to gradually expanding range of goods. In Poland, a ration card system was used until 1953 and then again from 1976 to 1989. This system created significant opportunities for misuse. There were different ration card categories for various groups of the population. Additionally, there were separate shops for party officials, military personnel, and members of the security services.

When assessing the Polish People's Republic, the debate about social progress and equal access to education and cultural goods frequently arises. Indeed, much has been achieved in this area. Access to culture was widespread, although some sections of society might not have fully appreciated it. The success of unpolished and crude disco-polo music after 1989 exemplifies the failure in this aspect, which was likely somewhat inevitable. The issue of access to education is more complex. During the Stalinist era, representatives of political organisations were involved in university admissions, to exclude individuals of poor social background. This mechanism was flexible, as only some fields of study were closed to those of unsuitable social origin, while others remained accessible. During the Gomułka period, this was replaced by a points system based on social background, where candidates from working-class or peasant backgrounds received an extra 5 points to their total score in the recruitment process.⁷

⁷ I will illustrate the importance of these five points based on my personal experience. When I applied to study history at the University of Warsaw in 1973, where there were

The process of distributing flats within housing cooperatives, telephones, car vouchers, etc., was a distinct epic.

A similar situation existed with the system of granting (or not refusing to grant) passports, which created ample opportunities for the development of such privileges. Before each trip abroad, it was necessary to apply for a passport, which the authorities could deny without providing a reason. Given the non-convertibility of currencies and the growing gap in living standards between Poland and Western Europe, any chance to work "in the West" represented a significant opportunity for financial advancement.

We have already noted that throughout the entire period of the Polish People's Republic, until 1989, the average wage in the economy, converted at the black market dollar exchange rate, was about 20 American dollars. Thanks to such low labour costs, the authorities could claim full employment. However, as the system became increasingly inefficient, fulfilling the needs of the population was not profitable for the state, as long as it was possible to export goods at world prices. This demonstrates the unreliability of the "purchasing power parity" criterion.

Who Distributed the Privileges?

The state was initially the sole provider of privileges, which was a fundamental element of totalitarian power. After 1956, when efficiency requirements compelled the gradual opening of the economy to the world, the state's monopoly diminished, yet it remained a significant player in this domain until the end. However, alternative distributors of privileges appeared: the church, particularly the Roman Catholic Church, parties allied with the Communist Party: such as the United People's Party, the Democratic Party, and small but wealthy Catholic groups. Something, which lacks adequate research until now, was the redistribution of foreign aid in the 1980's via different Roman Catholic Church institutions. Over time, the influence of foreign patronage, operating through a system of scholarships, increased. In the latter case, a form of compromise was achieved. Foreign funders agreed that the authorities of the Polish People's Republic would appoint "their" candidates on their scholarships, in exchange for the agreement that the funders would fill the remaining places with "their own".

many candidates for each place, I scored a total of 23 points. It was a good result, enough to get me in. If I had had the right background, I would have had 28 points (WM).

At the level of satisfying basic needs, a network of local arrangements came to prominence. It is important to note that in an economy of scarcity, tendencies towards self-sufficiency descended to the very bottom, replacing normal exchange processes. In this situation, the category of “privileged individuals” also expanded to encompass nearly the entire society, eroding the social and institutional fabric and ultimately resulting in “amoral familism”.

Privileges: Ostentatious or Discreet?

Another issue was the ostentatious flaunting of privileges. In the People’s Republic of Poland, this caused social unrest twice: in 1956 and 1980. The Stalinists prior to 1956 and Edward Gierek’s team in the 1970s tolerated blatant displays of privileges. Władysław Gomułka’s and Wojciech Jaruzelski’s teams avoided this trap by treating privileges as a discreet attribute.

The Ukrainian Experiences

In Ukraine, the Soviet system was introduced with unparalleled brutality. Soviet power was established in Ukraine through complete terror during 1917–1921, casting thousands of lives. Stalinism ushered in a new wave of terror and repression: the entire 1930s was called the “executed renaissance” because the Ukrainian nation lost its finest members, and this term was used literally, not figuratively. It is a paradox that Ukraine, which possessed 20% of the world’s black soil resources, endured three major famines in the 20th century: the famine of 1921–1923, the Great Famine of 1932–1933⁸ and the post-war famine of 1946–1947. Researchers still debate the precise number of victims, but we are talking about millions of lives. During the 1932–33 famine alone, data suggests that, between 5 and 8 million people died in the Ukrainian SSR, with some experts suggesting the toll was as high as 10 million (Verstiuk et al., 2008: 6; Suprun, 2023: 246). Through brutal methods of punishment and repression, the Soviet authorities deliberately aimed to create a society that did not think independently (or even attempt to have its own perspective) and lived in constant fear.

⁸ The most popular monograph of the Great Famine on Polish market is the work of Anne Applebaum. (Applebaum, 2017). Also two volumes of documents deserve attention: Bruski (2008) and Bednarek et al. (2009).

The control exercised by the state and its repression organs over society was almost total. In their efforts to transform Ukraine into a model Soviet republic, the Moscow leaders unfortunately succeeded: they achieved complete ideological control and exploited all of Ukraine's resources for the needs of the union state. For obvious reasons, Soviet power in Ukraine was perceived as foreign and imposed. The Communist Party purposefully appointed "people from outside the republic" to the highest administrative and economic positions in Ukraine, who were to conscientiously implement the decisions of the central government. Even when an ethnic Ukrainian was appointed to a managerial position, the effect was even worse, as such a leader sought to win the party's favour and prove that the party could fully trust him.

It is difficult to pinpoint a period in the post-war history of Soviet Ukraine characterised by pro-Ukrainian policies in both the economy and cultural life, except during Petro Shelest's tenure (First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Ukraine from 1963 to 1972). Petro Yukhimovich Shelest consistently highlighted his Ukrainian and Cossack roots and advocated for Ukrainization in all its forms (press, cinema, television, education). He ensured not only that administrative and state institutions were equipped with typewriters featuring the Ukrainian alphabet on the keys, but also that economic reforms primarily served the interests of the Ukrainian SSR. It is no surprise that such a figure was criticised and compelled to resign under the pretext of "economic localism (regionalism) and succumbing to Ukrainian bourgeois nationalism" (Shapoval, 2008). Under P. Shelest's successor, Volodymyr Shcherbytsky, the economy of the Ukrainian SSR was fully integrated into the all-Union economic system and became part of a unified Soviet economic space.

Authority was seen as an abstract synonym for punitive power, within whose reach anyone could find themselves at any moment. As a result, ordinary citizens tried to stay as far away from it as possible and avoid attracting its attention. A well-known and grim joke among those who had survived repression and hunger was the advice to "stay away from the bosses and closer to the kitchen". There was widespread awareness of the privileges enjoyed by the party leadership, including special supplies, canteens, hospitals and sanatoriums. Criticism of these privileges grew increasingly vocal and reached a critical point during the years of perestroika, when, amidst glasnost and the worsening crisis of the Soviet economy, public attitudes towards the party nomenklatura's privileges became more radicalised. An example of this is the so-

called “sausage revolution” in Chernihiv in 1990, when protests against the special supply of goods to officials during a time of severe shortages of basic commodities led to mass rallies and protests, gathering around 10,000 people at the city stadium. Activists at these demonstrations even demanded the revealing of the contents of the refrigerator of the first secretary of the regional committee, L. Palazhchenko (Krupyna, 2024: 284).

Under ongoing shortages, ordinary Soviet citizens sought to obtain everyday food products, household appliances, clothing, footwear, perfumes, and watches. The pursuit of these goods and waiting in kilometre-long queues were often the subject of popular jokes. For instance, a humorous remark that “the shortest queue in the USSR is the queue for machine guns” often puzzled foreigners without further explanation, as did the seemingly strange verbs “get” and “throw” (used in the context of acquiring scarce goods). The riddle “long, green, smelling of sausage” was also solvable only by USSR residents, as it referred to the Moscow–Ryazan train. The first two adjectives are understandable, and the phrase “smells of sausage” alludes to the common trips provincial residents took to the capital buy ordinary sausage. Ukrainian industrial centres were also regarded as priority supply cities, with an emphasis on providing the workers of major industrial enterprises with adequate food. However, this did not eliminate queues or shortages there, just as in the capital. All these aspects of the Soviet economy were known to the residents of Kyiv, Kharkiv, Donetsk and Dnipropetrovsk, but the situation was less severe compared to regions of lesser economic significance.

The deficit resulted in a specific system of rationing of goods in society: privileges for the elite and a ration card system for ordinary citizens. The Soviet authorities repeatedly used such methods. The list of achievements of the Soviet authorities, alongside the launch of industrial giants, always included the years when the ration card system was abolished – 1921, 1935 and 1947. The introduction of the first ration cards was prepared by the Soviet authorities, considering “the class affiliation of citizens and the importance of their work” (see: Shvets, 2008: 289). The Soviet authorities tried not to revert to the ration card system, but were compelled to introduce rationing of certain goods in specific areas, calling it something else – “coupons”. At the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, vouchers for consumer goods appeared in Ukrainian cities, but they were euphemistically referred to as “orders” or “invitations.”

Access to education and cultural goods was declared by Soviet propaganda to be universally accessible. Simultaneously, both education and culture were Soviet, meaning these spheres were ideologically regulated and, like everything else in the USSR, closely monitored by authorities and subject to detailed rules. A particular burden on Ukrainian culture and the education system was Russification, concealed behind slogans of internationalism (see: Dziuba 1968). A true Soviet person was expected to forget about religion altogether, as it was considered “opium for the people.” The only official church in the USSR – the Russian Orthodox Church – was not a genuine force and remained under the control of the Soviet secret services. The institutional revival of Ukrainian national churches (Greek Catholic and autocephalous Orthodox) did not occur until the late 1980s.

Contacts with the West were much rarer and more difficult for citizens of the USSR than for citizens of Poland. Ninety per cent of the population of Soviet Ukraine could not even imagine going abroad or having dollars in their pockets. As befits a totalitarian state, in 1934 the USSR passed a law under which fleeing abroad was punishable by death. Emigration was regarded as treason against the Motherland, considered illegal from the outset, and statistics on migration were classified information (Malynovska, 2013: 157, 162). Migration to other countries was considered by Soviet ideology to be unusual for socialism and involved only a few exchanges of specialists in various fields. Foreign tourist travel was restricted and strictly controlled. Separate permits were required for entry into socialist, Asian or capitalist countries (the latter type of permit was granted either to the highest representatives of the nomenklatura or after extremely rigorous reliability checks). Visiting relatives abroad was seen as a burdensome reason for travel and almost guaranteed a ban on leaving the USSR.

Economic migration of Soviet citizens abroad was almost non-existent. Naturally, Soviet engineers or skilled workers could be sent on delegations to work on the construction or launch of enterprises in other, mainly socialist countries, but this was a decision made by the authorities, not the workers themselves. The same applied to cultural, scientific and sports activists, who were constantly under strict control and could not make any decisions regarding working relationships with foreign partners without the approval of the party and state security authorities. The Soviet authorities strictly regulated their citizens’ travel abroad to prevent the “perilous influence” of the Western world or the leakage of information undesirable to the totalitarian system.

Employees of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Ukrainian SSR, sailors, passenger aircraft pilots, and workers involved in foreign trade were eligible for foreign business trips. Collecting documents and verifying the credibility of applicants for these trips was complicated and time-consuming ('Foreign business...', 2022). Working outside the USSR was considered highly prestigious and could significantly improve the financial situation of the entire family.

The unrestricted use of dollars in the USSR was forbidden. Already between 1926 and 1928, the private currency market was gradually restricted and, effectively abolished, with all foreign currency transactions being conducted solely by the State Bank of the USSR and the Foreign Trade Bank. In 1937, an article was added to the USSR Criminal Code that equated currency transactions with crimes against the state. Only high-ranking officials, diplomats, sailors, and cultural and sports figures saw dollars during temporary business trips abroad. Having currency in the pockets of the average citizen could lead to imprisonment (from 3 to 15 years with confiscation of property) or even the death penalty (Tschudnov, 2003: 129). This part of the Criminal Code remained in force throughout the entire existence of the USSR and was only abolished in 1994. Currency exchange was carried out exclusively at branches of the State Bank of the USSR; the maximum exchange amount was 30 roubles, which at the official exchange rate was equivalent to 33 dollars.

Fees, salaries, donations, or inheritances received in foreign currency, as well as any remaining funds from foreign business trips, had to be deposited in the bank, where they were exchanged for Soviet "cheques" (or "certificates"). These could be spent in the all-Union chain of shops called "Berezka" through a very complicated process (Ivanova, 2011: 90). The Ukrainian equivalent of "Berezka" shops was "Kashtan" shops. Depending on the type of your foreign currency income, and even your country of origin, a different exchange rate for Soviet "cheques" was set. Only foreigners could make purchases directly with dollars, while Soviet citizens received 'cheques' at an often predatory exchange rate set by the state.

The actual exchange rate of the dollar in the USSR was carefully concealed; it was the most secret economic indicator of the Soviet era, as it differed markedly from its official value. Nikita Khrushchev's anecdotal advice for strengthening the rouble is widely known: "let's print it larger than the dollar and in gold, because we have gold!". During the monetary reform of 1961, the dollar exchange rate was set at 90 kopecks; later,

it was adjusted to 60 kopecks per dollar, which was a result of the dollar's depreciation in 1971 and subsequent years, while maintaining the fiction of the foreign exchange parity of the rouble. This rouble exchange rate was significantly overvalued compared to the black market rate. In the 1960s and 1980s, the dollar cost between 8 and 10 roubles on the black market, meaning that an average Soviet salary of 100–120 roubles was equivalent to a maximum of 15 US dollars.

Everyone sought to get involved in the complex Soviet system of privileges and opportunities in any way they could. Some aimed to find friends and obtain scarce goods from a warehouse or through a staff entrance to a shop, others tried to secure a job where privileges were granted or distributed, and some chose their university specifically for the prestigious jobs and opportunities to travel abroad it offered. Unfortunately, historical sources cannot illustrate all these processes with quantitative data, but they convincingly demonstrate the development of a complex system of access to and use of material goods in the USSR and the Ukrainian SSR, where money alone was insufficient: one also had to add particular privileges or use personal connections. Compared to the relative variety of channels for accessing scarce goods in Poland, the Soviet authorities maintained control over both formal and informal privileges almost until the end, which naturally meant that individual citizens were much more dependent on them.

SUMMARY

The review of different forms of conditioning of access to consumer goods in centrally planned economies via privilege and networking indirectly suggests significantly decreased living standards in comparison to the assessments achieved by deflating nominal incomes by price levels, which are usually a fair measure of real incomes in the market economy. The scope of the decrease is, however, still difficult to quantify. Another negative effect were the supply-side inefficiencies resulting from the focus of labour on the informal deals instead of normal work duties. Those burdens on the centrally planned economy were, in some extent, advantageous to the maintenance of the political power of the communist party. The need of privileges ensuring satisfactory consumption levels was a significant factor behind greater social conformity and increased power of

the authorities semi-officially distributing those access privileges. Those informal social mechanisms generated additional dose of inequality in the society to the one resulting from pure income differences. So the initial level of inequality at the beginning of transition to market economy was also significantly higher. A brief comparison of Polish and Ukrainian experiences shows much greater dependency of population from the authorities in that dimension in the Soviet Ukraine, which reflects the greater scope of authoritarianism in the political system of Soviet Union. Higher level of pluralism of public life in the Polish version of communism meant also wider range of possibilities of access to undersupplied goods and services. That was meaning also the worse starting point for systemic transformation for the economy of newly independent Ukraine than it used to be in the case of Poland.

This sketched outline of the issue of inequalities induced by the centrally planned economy leaves open the question of general archival research confronting the theses from reviewed literature with the previously unavailable primary sources.

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