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Polarization-diffusion versus sustainable development and economic concepts promoted by the Civic Platform and Law and Justice

Abstract: The article analyzes key issues related to the polarization-diffusion model of social and economic development. It compares this model with the concept of sustainable development and examines their impact on the economic development of the country. The authors aimed to determine whether, in such a highly polarized political environment, it is possible to create a common cross-party, long-term economic development strategy. The goal of that strategy is to remain stable despite changes in political leadership. However, this seems challenging due to the fact that supporters of the polarization-diffusion system dominate in larger centers of western Poland and large cities, much like the voters of Civic Platform (PO RP). In contrast, opponents of the system dominate smaller towns and rural areas, aligning with supporters of Law and Justice. Given that these two major political parties advocate for opposing models of economic development, it appears unlikely that Civic Platform and Law and Justice will agree on a unified plan for state economic development across party lines.

Key words: polarization-diffusion model, sustainable development, regional policy, Civic Platform, Law and Justice

Introduction

The analysis focuses on Poland's two largest and most influential political parties: the Civic Platform of the Republic of Poland (PO RP)



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and the Law and Justice Party (PiS). These parties hold opposing views on the state economic model. The Civic Platform, headed by Donald Tusk, leans toward the polarization-diffusion system, while PiS, led by Jarosław Kaczyński, advocates for a sustainable development model. As a result, the ongoing political conflict between these two parties, which has persisted since 2005, extends into the area of economic policy as well.

The purpose of the article is to analyze the key issues related to the polarization-diffusion model of social and economic development, contrasted with the concept of sustainable development system. The article uses formal-dogmatic and comparative methods. The authors seek to determine whether, in such a highly polarized political environment, it is possible to develop a common, cross-party, long-term economic development strategy for the country, a strategy which remains consistent despite changes in political leadership.

Polarization-diffusion model – concept outline

Historically, the polarization-diffusion system can be seen as a consequence of neoliberalism and its inherent anti-interventionist stance. As Andrew Heywood explains: “Neoliberalism, sometimes called neo-classical liberalism, refers to the revival of economic liberalism that has been going on since the 1970s. Neoliberalism is counter-revolutionary: its goal is to halt, and if possible reverse, the trend toward ‘powerful’ government and state intervention that has characterized much of the 20th century. Neoliberalism initially had its greatest impact in two countries where free market economic principles were most firmly entrenched in the 19th century: Britain and the United States” (Heywood, 2008, pp. 67–68). According to Mises, the general increase in the wealth among the strongest actors in the society leads to improvements in the living standards for the weaker members, a process referred to as diffusion. This diffusion occurs both on an individual level (e.g., through charity) and on a global scale. Mises argues that state interference hinders the development of the strongest actors, which in turn exacerbates poverty. The result is an increase in state power, as the government assumes control over social processes, such as through social welfare programs. According to Mises, state intervention in the economy is often justified on ideological and propaganda grounds (Mises, 2011, pp. 607–608, 707, 716, 720, and 729–730).

The polarization-diffusion system supports structures that are most likely to succeed, with the expectation that their success will naturally “spill over” to weaker areas. This leads to a transfer (diffusion) of profits from more developed entities to less developed ones. Essential categories of the system are as follows: 1) the core, which generates profit, and 2) the periphery, which is in the hinterland and benefits from the diffusion of growth generated by the core (Jańczuk, 2013, p. 124; Zarówna, 2014, p. 90; Churski, 2014, p. 16). In some cases, intermediary centers are also distinguished. These are not strictly part of the periphery but still function as hinterlands, playing an intermediate role in the diffusion process (Wójtowicz-Wróbel, 2011, pp. 108–109).

The polarization-diffusion system anticipates the existence of inequalities and does not centralize compensatory measures. The equalization aspect contrasts with the system’s focus on economic efficiency. It is assumed that these inequalities will be short-term and will diminish as the economy becomes more innovative and competitive. Development is expected to occur naturally, without central intervention, with a preference for decentralization and strengthening local authorities. The assumption is that cores will compete with each other rather than with their peripheries (Bukowski et al., 2019, p. 6; Zielinski, 2011, p. 78; Malkowski, 2015, p. 215; Kuźnk, 2015, p. 15). The system promotes harmony between the cores and periphery, aiming for complementarity between competitiveness and cohesion. However, “cohesion” is not meant to be compensatory but functional. Functionality refers to the support of the periphery by the cores within the framework of local connections, rather than through compensatory measures (Smętkowski, 2015, p. 325; Dahlke, 2017, pp. 76–77; Chmieliński et al., 2017, p. 22).

Sustainable development – concept outline

The opposite of the polarization-diffusion model is the concept of sustainable development. This concept often extends beyond national borders and applies to international law, particularly in the context of the European Union. Key legal frameworks, such as Article 11 and Article 191 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU), emphasize sustainable development as a guiding principle for EU policy (Iwańska, 2017, p. 10; Robel, 2023, p. 17).

Sustainable development is one of the constitutional values in Poland, as outlined in Article 5 of the Constitution, which identifies it as

a key goal of the state's programmatic policy (Pliszka, 2023, p. 55). This value is also enshrined as a programmatic norm within the European Union, appearing alongside principles such as the protection of human rights, environmental preservation, and gender equality (Bazylińska-Nagler, 2022, p. 11; Kaczmarek, 2021, pp. 30, 44). As a result, both the Polish Constitution and international law obligate public authorities to implement the principle of sustainable development. In contrast, the polarization-diffusion system lacks such legal backing. This is largely because it adheres to a highly free-market doctrine that resists state interventionism and the creation of elaborate mechanisms to support weaker entities.

In socio-economic terms, sustainable development is mentioned alongside values like internal cohesion and the security of the state's population. It is also linked to constitutional principles such as solidarity and the common good (Pułło, 2015, p. 339). The polarization-diffusion system aligns more closely with the concept of economic freedom and the "survival of the fittest." In this model, the strongest actors have the freedom to support weaker ones, but only if it proves profitable for them.

The principle of sustainable development is generally based on five key points: 1) the protection of nature, 2) the formation of spatial order, 3) proper attention to social and civilizational development, 4) the need to build infrastructure that meets the civilizational needs of individuals and their communities, and 5) the necessity to balance various constitutional values (Czerwińska-Koral, 2020, p. 66). This balance must encompass three fundamental spheres: economic (industrial), social, and environmental. A crucial aspect of sustainable development is ensuring equal opportunities among current communities. Additionally, in negative terms, the value of non-wastefulness is often associated with sustainable development, highlighting the importance of minimizing waste and conserving resources (Dobrowolski, 2023, p. 194; Łyszkowski, 2022, pp. 90–91).

In this context, the principle of sustainable development can be seen as a local equivalent to the principles of justice described by John Rawls. Rawls formulated the basic principles of justice: "The first: each person is to have an equal right to the broadest possible system of equal basic freedoms as long as this system is compatible with similar freedoms for others. The second: social and economic inequalities should be arranged in such a way that: a) They reasonably expected to benefit everyone, and

b) They are associated with positions and offices open to all” (Rawls, 2013, p. 107).

In the context of local communities, the principles align with Rawlsian justice by affirming that all individuals have the right to adequate support through the redistribution of wealth from the state. This support should be tailored to their specific circumstances, with actions proportionate to the law and the factual situation of the local government units involved. The guiding factor is not economic profit but rather the multidimensional distribution of economic and non-economic interests of stakeholders (Kornberger-Sokołowska, 2020, p. 11; Szmyt, 2015, p. 12). In contrast, under the polarization-diffusion system, economic calculation takes precedence.

The principle of sustainable development in ecological terms complements sustainable development in social terms. It focuses on ensuring environmental security. Closely related to this principle is the concept of intergenerational solidarity, which emphasizes environmental stability. This means that the environment should not be overexploited to prevent consequences, such as climate change, that would negatively impact future generations. One method of achieving a balance between ecological and social spheres is through effective spatial policy (Krystek, 2023, p. 33). Another key goal of sustainable development is to maintain the environment’s capacity for regeneration and renewal despite ongoing exploitation. This ensures that natural resources remain available and ecosystems remain resilient, even as they are utilized for economic and societal needs (Szymańska, 2016, p. 129).

One of the essential features of sustainable development in economic terms is the fair and efficient redistribution of financial resources to those entitled to them. The importance of realizing the concept of sustainable development is so significant that, in order to protect this constitutional value, it is permissible to limit individual rights under **Article 31(3)** of the Constitution (Dorosz-Kruczyński, Gerwatowska, 2023, p. 81; Strzała, 2023, p. 55).

The ecological dimension of the principle of sustainable development applies not only to local governments and states but also to EU bodies, as evidenced by various international legal acts. For instance, it is noted that the Council of Ministers was guided by the principle of sustainable development when providing support to local government units. Similarly, the European Commission established conditions for funding based on this principle. Additionally, regional legislative bodies, such as

the provincial parliament, have the authority to establish landscape parks (Dorosz-Kruczyński, 2022, p. 45; Poździk, 2014, p. 7; Mroczkowski, 2023, pp. 160–161). Another example is Austria, where animal welfare legislation mandates that requirements align with the principle of sustainability (Chmielarz-Grochal, Sułkowski, 2021, pp. 14–15).

The goal of sustainable development is to ensure the general welfare of both local and supralocal communities. A key feature of this principle is the cooperation among local governments across various aspects of their activities. Equally important is state support, which can provide budgetary funding to restructure regional administration, enabling the full realization of sustainable development among local governments (Kulesza, 2023, p. 49). Sustainable development is a fundamental part of the normative framework for community development, and local governments must integrate this principle into their policies. The implementation of sustainable development promotes greater material justice, reduces violence, enhances citizen participation in both state and social life, and addresses non-economic exclusion, affecting both individuals and entire communities (Rynio, Zakrzewska-Półtorak, 2023, p. 30; Pyć, 2011, p. 354).

A compelling approach to realizing the principle of sustainable development is J. Krawczyk's concept of public administration deglomeration. This proposal involves distributing public administration offices and authorities, such as ministries, across the national territory rather than concentrating them in a few or a single central location (Krawczyk, 2019, pp. 50, 59, 60). The mechanism encourages a more balanced distribution of governmental support, reducing the creation of dominant central hubs and less developed hinterlands. Deglomeration is expected to boost socio-economic activity in various regions, helping to mitigate regional disparities and address institutional issues such as "transportation exclusion." This contrasts sharply with the polarization-diffusion system.

In other words – sustainable development consists in such support or limitation of the activities of institutionally or economically conflicting entities or values, so as to proportionally and adequately take into account and maximally realize the preservation of the status of both and the realization of their interests, without simultaneously leading to a radical weakening or marginalization of one of these entities or values (Rakoczy, 2021, p. 23) Metaphorically speaking, what is important is the common "way forward" of the various entities, not their "race" (Sołtys, 2022, p. 29).

Polish political discourse

As Paweł Churski points out, the primary objective of regional policy, viewed as a form of intervention in the development process financed through public funds, should be to reduce disparities in the socio-economic development levels across various regions of the country (Churski, 2014, p. 14). In examining the economic policies of different governments in the Third Republic, it is evident that the polarization-diffusion model was also attempted in Poland. Waldemar Budner and Marian Gorynia note, "In Polish regional policy, from the transformation period until 2015, a regional development policy was pursued that focused on maintaining a high and steady growth rate, even if it temporarily increased interregional differences. The polarization-diffusion model was implemented, supporting metropolitan areas and fostering the spread of development from these areas to their surroundings. Metropolises were expected to act as intensive centers of regional growth. This approach benefited the country overall, as metropolitan functions were concentrated in a few large cities distributed fairly evenly, although with a deficit in the eastern regions. In 2013, the 'Long-term National Development Strategy – Poland 2030' adjusted the polarization-diffusion model, replacing it with the concept of reducing interregional disparities through a model of balanced regional development. This shift aimed to address inequalities in socio-economic development levels and counter the accumulation of socio-economic issues, particularly in peripheral areas, which were often distant from large urban centers and situated at the borders of provinces. The government placed particular emphasis on supporting the least developed areas and smaller and medium-sized cities. Nevertheless, large urban agglomerations continue to play a vital role in the spatial and functional structure of the country. They act as poles of growth for their regions, and provinces with large metropolitan centers tend to experience better development. This is supported by statistical data. Manuel Castells, a prominent scholar of urban studies, remarked, 'The future of countries is tied to metropolises.' Thus, the position of Poland on the economic map of Europe and the world may largely depend on the role of Warsaw and other major Polish agglomerations" (Budner, Gorynia, 8.06.2021).

The polarization-diffusion model became prominent in Polish politics primarily through the 2009 development program of the Civic Platform (PO RP) (<https://wiadomosci.onet.pl/tylko-w-otecie/zapomniane-bledy-donald-tuska-newsletter/x9qm7tf>, 4.09.2023). The model was introduced

by Michał Boni, then advisor to Prime Minister Donald Tusk, as part of Poland's broader development strategy. The program recognized regional inequalities and sought to address them by focusing investments on the most developed areas – referred to as “development locomotives”. There were five to seven key regions whose success was expected to create a positive spillover effect on weaker, less developed areas of the country (<https://www.kartografia-ekstremalna.pl/p/tryumf-modelu-polaryzacyjno-dyfuzyjnego>, 28.03.2024; Bochniarz et al., 2009, pp. 15–17, 119–120, 160, 266, 339, 367 and 374; Adamowicz, 2009, p. 46; Maj, 2014, p. 42).

In Law and Justice circles, this concept has most often been linked with neoliberal economic transformation, both past and proposed (<https://www.newsweek.pl/polska/czy-akcja-polska-jest-jedna-pis-roz poczyna-kampanie-wyborcza/zvczc5m>, 4.09.2023; <https://www.newsweek.pl/polska/j-kaczynski-odgrzewa-podzial-polski-na-solidarna-i-liberalna/bvg0ghc>, 4.09.2023). Jarosław Kaczyński, for example, has been a vocal critic of the system. In 2010, he criticized the model in the context of Podkarpacie, and again in 2012, in the context of Western Pomerania. In 2016, Mateusz Morawiecki referred to the polarization-diffusion system as “crumbs from the master’s table.” There have been concerns regarding the system’s compliance with Article 5 of the Polish Constitution. Moreover, criticism of the system’s potential contradiction with the Constitution has come from more than just Law and Justice politicians (<https://www.newsweek.pl/polska/kaczynski-o-polaryzacyjno-dyfuzyjnej-koncepcji-co-prezes-pis-mial-namysli/5e8b7z3>, 4.09.2023; <https://www.newsweek.pl/polska/kaczynski-chce-utworzyc-województwo-srodkowopomorskie/h5yqw19>, 4.09.2023; *Sprawozdanie...*, 2016, p. 31; *Interpelacja...*; Piontek, 2020, p. 207–209).

After the 2015 parliamentary elections, the Law and Justice party fulfilled one of its key election promises by moving away from the polarization-diffusion model of national development. PiS politicians argued that his model concentrated investment funds in the largest cities, resulting in the economic marginalization of peripheral regions. In response, PiS directed significant development funds to these underserved peripheral areas, especially in the eastern part of the country (<https://www.kartografia-ekstremalna.pl/p/tryumf-modelu-polaryzacyjno-dyfuzyjnego>, 28.03.2024). As a counterpoint to the polarization-diffusion system implemented by the PO RP, PiS introduced a model of balanced regional development, which was incorporated into programs such as the “Polish Deal” (Budner, Gorynia, 8.06.2021). The then-Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki was highly critical of the polarization-diffusion model: “This

very scholarly-sounding polarization-diffusion model of economic development, in practice, boiled down to the fact that money and investment only went to already prosperous areas. This model simply failed. Not only that, it led to one of the worst things that could happen to any society – it divided our country.” According to the Prime Minister, “everyone makes up one society and one economy, and it is essential that all individuals have equal opportunities to develop and benefit from that development” (<https://wpolityce.pl/polityka/643697-premier-polaryzacyjno-dyfuzyjny-model-podzielil-nasz-kraj>, 28.03.2024).

According to some researchers critical of the polarization-diffusion system, there is no logical connection between supporting stronger entities and improving the conditions of weaker ones. Instead, they argue that the result is often a deepening of disparities between core regions and peripheries (Janikowska-Kiśluk, 2019, p. 3). The very existence of a stronger center inherently creates disparity with weaker areas, and diffusion will never completely eliminate this differentiation. This is because the stronger entity is unlikely to foster competition that could pose a realistic threat to its dominance. In practice, polarization tends to overshadow diffusion. The decentralization and “natural” progression of diffusion makes it developmentally unstable, leaving the growth of peripheral regions highly dependent on the progress of core areas (Kudłacz, 2013, pp. 84–85; Wieczerek, 2021, p. 138; Piętak, 2016, p. 52).

In the polarization-diffusion system, the flow of capital is paradoxically tacitly controlled by “decentralization.” It is anticipated that the strongest centers will naturally attract the most development potential due to their greater economic attractiveness. As a result, a strong concentration of capital forms around these core regions, leading to regional centralization despite the system’s formal decentralization framework. The system does not account for the peripheries that lack functional connections to the core regions. These peripheral areas, like the villages in eastern Poland, are often left without meaningful development support and face a risk of extinction. Instead of capital flowing from core to peripheral areas, the reverse happens: larger, more developed regions tend to drain resources and populations from smaller, less developed areas, contributing to the depopulation of the periphery (Malisiewicz, 2011, pp. 271–272; Radło et al., 2020, p. 107; Rakowska, 2011, p. 27).

There are viewpoints that support the polarization-diffusion system as appropriate, arguing that other approaches are ineffective. However, the system is criticized for its inefficiencies, particularly for disregarding the

unique characteristics of each region. It has failed in terms of long-term policy, weakening many peripheries instead of strengthening them. This is evident from the fact that, in 2020, local authorities informed the central government that their worsening situation was due to the effects of this very system (Szafranek, 2017, p. 127; Cudo, 2019, p. 60).

Waldemar Budner and Marian Gorynia highlight a long-standing debate regarding the most effective model for national development: whether a balanced regional development model or a polarization-diffusion model is better for the country as a whole. The balanced development model focuses on reducing disparities between regions through substantial government intervention and economic policies aimed at equalizing development levels. In contrast, the polarization-diffusion model acknowledges regional differentiation, allowing stronger regions to drive national growth, with the expectation that their success will eventually benefit weaker areas (Budner, Gorynia, 8.06.2021). In this debate, Poland's two largest political parties take opposing views. Civic Platform (PO RP) supports the polarization-diffusion model, believing it to be the key to national economic growth. On the other hand, Law and Justice (PiS) advocates for a balanced regional development approach.

The researchers emphasize that in the sustainable development model, economic policy measures are used to accelerate the growth of lagging regions, aiming for relative convergence between regions. This approach helps less developed areas catch up but can potentially slow down growth in the more developed regions due to resource reallocation. In contrast, the polarization-diffusion model advocates for minimal state intervention, focusing on investing in already prosperous and well-functioning centers. The assumption is that these centers will eventually stimulate growth in neighboring, less developed areas over time. Looking for a middle ground, Budner and Gorynia suggest that instead of solely relying on convergence, territorial (spatial) cohesion could be a solution. This involves improving the connections and accessibility of weaker, peripheral areas to stronger regions, thereby facilitating flows of resources and opportunities (Budner, Gorynia, 8.06.2021).

Conclusions

Since the parliamentary and presidential elections of 2005, there has been an increasingly intense political dispute between Poland's two larg-

est and most important parties: Civic Platform (PO RP) and Law and Justice (PiS). Analyzing election results, we can observe that PO RP enjoys the greatest support in large and medium-sized cities, while PiS has the strongest backing in small towns and rural areas. It is also worth noting that supporters of the polarization-diffusion model are more prevalent in larger centers in western Poland and major cities, which coincide with areas where PO RP voters are most concentrated. In contrast, opponents of the system prevail in smaller towns and rural areas, much like the supporters of the Law and Justice. As a result, there is a clear correlation: PO dominates in the cores, while PiS has a strong presence in the periphery (www.pkw.gov.pl, 4.09.2023; <https://www.tvp.info/44783958/wies-i-male-miasta-glosowaly-na-pis-najwieksze-miasta-wybraly-ko>, 4.09.2023). This division of political preferences aligns with the two contrasting development models. The polarization-diffusion model primarily benefits the largest and wealthiest urban centers, whereas the balanced regional development model benefits smaller and less affluent towns and rural areas.

In this situation, it appears that since the electorates of the two largest parties support different and opposing models for the country's economic development, it will be difficult to expect Civic Platform and Law and Justice to collaborate on a unified economic development plan across party lines. Moreover, tying the choice of an economic model to whichever party happens to be in power (or is the strongest faction in the ruling coalition, holding key positions such as the prime minister's office and significantly influencing the government's main agenda) and prioritizing the needs of its electorate – in an effort to secure victory in the next election and retain power – would be the worst possible approach.

It seems necessary to focus on developing less developed areas and striving to raise their standard of living to match that of the most developed regions. However, this should not be done by weakening the more developed areas, which, as the main economic drivers of the country, play a crucial role in the national economy. A balanced approach, or the so-called “golden mean,” is essential here. From an economic standpoint, the challenge is to prevent the polarization-diffusion model from leading to the impoverishment of peripheral regions, which are meant to benefit from the success of core areas through diffusion. At the same time, from a social perspective, attention must be paid to preventing depopulation in peripheral regions while avoiding excessive population growth in the core areas.

It seems that politics has overshadowed economics, and the choice between the two models of development is determined more by political motives. The focus has shifted toward pleasing the electorate of each respective party, with electoral considerations playing a larger role than purely economic ones.

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Polaryzacyjno-dyfuzyjny system funkcjonowania państwa kontra zrównoważony rozwój a koncepcje gospodarcze Platformy Obywatelskiej oraz Prawa i Sprawiedliwości

Streszczenie

W artykule przeanalizowano najważniejsze kwestie związane z funkcjonowaniem systemu polaryzacyjno-dyfuzyjnego rozwoju społecznego i ekonomicznego w zestawieniu z koncepcją systemu zrównoważonego rozwoju oraz ich wpływ na rozwój gospodarczy państwa. Autorzy starali się znaleźć odpowiedź, czy na tak silnie spolaryzowanej scenie politycznej, można wypracować wspólną ponadpartyjną wieloletnią koncepcję rozwoju gospodarczego państwa, tak aby jej nie zmieniać wraz ze zmieniającymi się partiami sprawującymi władzę. Jednak ze względu na fakt, że zwolennicy systemu polaryzacyjno-dyfuzyjnego dominują w większych ośrodkach zachodniej Polski i wielkich miastach, podobnie jak wyborcy PO RP, a przeciwnicy wspomnianego systemu dominują w mniejszych miejscowościach i wsiach, czyli tak jak zwolennicy PiS, to w tej sytuacji wydaje się, że skoro elektoraty dwóch największych partii opowiadają się za różnymi oraz przeciwstawnymi modelami rozwoju gospodarczego państwa, trudno będzie oczekiwać, że zarówno Platforma, jak i PiS wypracują wspólny plan rozwoju gospodarczego państwa ponad partyjnymi podziałami.

Słowa kluczowe: model polaryzacyjno-dyfuzyjny, zrównoważony rozwój, polityka regionalna, Platforma Obywatelska, Prawo i Sprawiedliwość