

A Breach in the System: The 'Polonia Firms' 1976-1994.

Abstract

Wider research context/theoretical framework

Investigating the so-called “polonia firms”, a unique case of transnational, non-state economic activity in the Soviet bloc, our project links current debates on late socialism to the nascent historiography of post-socialism. The focus on Warsaw’s decision to deploy the diaspora’s financial and business-related resources and to allow foreign-owned firms to operate as quasi-independent entities in the national economy adds to the debate on the “long transformation”, exploring the late-socialist roots of mass recruitment into private entrepreneurship, socioeconomic mobility and the emergence of a market society.

Hypotheses/research questions/objectives

The five subprojects make use of social, economic and cultural history approaches to discuss the social and economic impact of the “polonia firms” in the light of the three entangled processes of socialist globalization, economic transformation and social stratification. Interrelating a broad array of issues ranging from human capital formation and managerial innovation to the consumerist turn and changing social norms, we aim to challenge the traditional top-down approach to socialist economic reform and to shed new light on actors operating in the gray zone between the first and the second economy.

Approach/methods

Our joint endeavor takes inspiration from economic history approaches that prefer the *longue durée* of social and economic change over narratives of political ruptures, but is primarily framed as a social history project, based on both traditional archival and oral history sources. Transcending the boundaries of the East-West division and the state-society dichotomy, our agency-oriented approach follows a qualitative design to offer a historical take on the underexplored topic of private entrepreneurs in socialism.

Level of originality/innovation

The investigation of the “polonia firms” focuses on transnational capital circulation and early globalization processes in late-socialist Poland, thus offering a counterpoint to the narrative of Warsaw’s international isolation and the political diaspora-homeland antagonism. Debating the pro-active role of entrepreneurs in Poland’s long transformation from the 1970s onwards, we aim to highlight the impact of Western actors and reform dynamics from below on early marketization processes, thus bridging the abyss between historiography and transitology.

Primary researchers involved

The historians Lars Fredrik Stöcker (Vienna), Jerzy Kochanowski and Mariusz Jastrząb (Warsaw), who form the core of the research group, have all demonstrated considerable expertise in the fields of Cold War research, socialist economics and the history of post-war Poland. They will be joined by a postdoc and a PhD candidate in their mission to develop a multi-perspective approach to the complex realities of the late-socialist Polish economy and an innovative take on processes of globalization, marketization and social stratification.