The wave of strikes in the summer of 1980 and its consequence, the birth of NSZZ Solidarity started the deepest phase of the crisis of the communist state in Poland. The economic crisis, growing since 1976, had led to a destabilisation of the political system based on hegemonic position of the Polish United Workers’ Party (PZPR) in 1980. The creation of NSZZ Solidarity and its over year long period of legal functioning significantly altered the social awareness, a change which could no longer be reversed by the so-called politics of normalisation, which began after the introducing of martial law in Poland in December 1981. The banning of Solidarity and the pacification of civil protests, which peaked on the 31st of August 1982 when demonstrations of supporters of the union took place in 66 cities, had not stopped the economic, social and political changes which put the People's Republic of Poland (PRL) in a state of chronic crisis and, after a change of the international situation, led to its downfall. Below I will try to enumerate the most important factors which, in my opinion, made the crisis grow and, in consequence, led to the breakdown of the system in 1989.

1. Changes in the USSR. This factor appeared last, only after the proclamation of the politics of perestroika by Mikhail Gorbachev in 1986 but has to be mentioned first as it played a crucial role in inclining the team of general Wojciech Jaruzelski to begin changes in the political system, which, eventually, led to its complete breakdown. In July 1986, during a meeting of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Gorbachev said, that the countries of Middle and Eastern Europe “can no longer be carried on our back. The main reason – the economy”. This meant that in the Kremlin opinion was prevalent, that the model of cooperation within the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance, which was based on the transferable ruble, needed to be changed. The supply of petroleum and natural gas – the main export articles of the USSR – to the Comecon countries at set prices had no longer been profitable for the Soviet economy. It also was not a coincidence that one of Moscow's most important postulates after the government of Tadeusz Mazowiecki had been formed was the transition to USD as currency in mutual trade.

Although the knowledge remains limited regarding the plans of the Soviet leadership in the second half of the 1980s, Andrzej Paczkowski was probably right to say that “Gorbachev did something like an amputation on the Brezhnev >Doctrine<, which lost its ideological sense and became more of a geopolitical rule. The former pressure Moscow put on Warsaw subsided no later than 1987-1988 and was replaced by extensive conformity of intentions and actions”. General Wojciech Jaruzelski's team's hands were bound at that
time as far as system reforms go, but that did not prevent it from using the Soviet deterrent in contacts with the West, the opposition and the Church until the end of its regime. French researcher Jacques Levesque even claims, that Jaruzelski for a long time was not using the freedom which Gorbachev had given him.

2. The state of the economy. Although in 1983 economic growth was recorded for the first time in five years, it had not been the result of real changes in the economic system, but of the return of the economy to the old ruts, from which it had been removed first by Gierek's team's mistakes, later by the strikes of 1980-81 and finally by the militarisation of many companies and the economic sanctions undertaken by the Western countries against Poland. Already in 1985 economic growth slowed down because, according to one of the party's analyses, “the material-resource barrier, […] resulting from insufficient national reserves and low import possibilities, became very apparent”.

Repeated by Jaruzelski's team after the introduction of martial law, declarations that the continuation of economic reforms, which officially began in 1981, is needed, quickly proved to be propaganda fiction. As general Jaruzelski correctly observed in 1982: “A paradoxical phenomenon accompanies the reform: on the one hand the liberalisation of the rules governing the economy and on the other the rigor of martial law”. The rigor of martial law had not been the main reason why the introduction of a real reform of the inefficient economic system of PRL was a failure, however. In fact the system could not be reformed, what was made clear by the unrelenting resistance of the people governing the economy. The situation is well illustrated by the example of closing down 106 unions of state-owned companies in 1982 in a reform which brought in their place 103 unions, different only in name. “Essentially there is no institutionalised force, which would comprehensibly introduce the reform into economic practice, there is no approach to the reform as a political-economic complex” - it was said in a lengthy analysis of the socio-political situation made in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and ordered by general Czesław Kiszczak in May 1984.

According to Władysław Baka, the government's representative for the reform, during the meetings of the Council of Ministers in July 1983 and June 1984 plans aiming to openly “thwart the reform” were forced. One of their main supporters was supposedly Deputy Prime Minister Zbigniew Messner, who argued that “brought to completion, the model of socio-economic reform outlined by minister Władysław Baka means in essence the change of socio-political system” i.e. the fall of socialism. The continuation of the reform was defended, according to Baka, by Jaruzelski, but he changed his mind a year later on a National Council in Poznań and supported Messner's limited option instead. After a couple of months, in November 1985, the latter became Prime Minister and the office of government's representative for the reform was removed. Real reforms had not begun until 1988-89 when Mieczysław Rakowski's cabinet introduced regulations guaranteeing freedom of economic activity and liberalising the rules of sales with foreign countries. If the political system had not followed, Rakowski's reforms could have lead to the realisation of the so-called Chinese model of transformation, that is the introduction of market economy with the maintaining of authoritarian political system.

3. Instances of state privatisation. Compared to the general economic decay of the 1980s, the rise of the private sector in the economy was a curious occurrence. In the years 1981-1985 it had increased its production level by nearly 14% while the production of the national sector decreased by 0.2%. Private enterprise was still highly limited, however, and many key members of the PZPR criticised the instances of “certain groups getting richer without grounds”. However, gradually, especially in mid-level state apparatus, belief was getting stronger that without development of the private sector the deficit on the market of consumer goods could not be satisfied.

The so-called Polonia (Polish diaspora) companies had a special position within the private sector. Foreigners of Polish descent were
taking part in their establishment on the basis of
the law from July 1982. “Polonia companies
steal highly qualified cadre from the national
sector. Some of the employees leave from
foreign trade offices, they possess information
which is a business and national secret. […]
Cases of informal contacts with the employees
of departments in charge of the Polonia
companies are also frequent” - was the alert in
the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in May 1984.

The Polonia companies became a sort of a
testing ground for the authorities and especially
for the secret service (both the SB and military).
The behaviour of entities functioning within
market mechanisms was tested and used in
operational activities. What followed was a
gradual acquaintance of part of the government
elite with the thought of a need for radical
breaking off with the economic system based on
national property, originating in the 1940s. In
such a way a climate appropriate for the reforms
of the Rakowski government was beginning to
appear, with the side-effect of the process of so-
called nomenclature enfranchisement.

4. Deregulation of the political system. Its
main symptom became the weakening of the
position of the PZPR, hitherto playing a
hegemonic role in the political system of PRL.
The crisis of the years 1980-1981 and the
martial law left the PZPR with about 1 million
members less. Only in the middle of the decade
had the party stopped shrinking and the number
of members stabilised at 2.1 million. The
process of aging of the party had not been
stopped however, and the proportion of people
under 29 years of age decreased from the level
of 15% in 1981 to only 6.9% in 1986, while the
average age of a PZPR member raised to 46
years of age. A similar process began to threaten
also the ranks of the party apparatus, over 12
thousand functionaries strong. Personnel review
of the members of Central Committee of the
Polish United Workers' Party from 1984 showed
that in the years 1985-1986 as many as 23% of
its employees would reach retirement age. At
the same time only 6% of over six hundred
political employees of the Central Committee
were younger than 35 years of age.

The communist party was becoming old and
was losing its influence, becoming less of a core
of the political system and more of a tool of
various pressure groups operating within the
government apparatus. The most important of
these groups was a part of the officers’ corps of
the Armed Forces. In the first year of martial
law 32 officers were delegated to high positions
in the party apparatus, and 88 more to national
administration. Among them were 11 Ministers
and Deputy Ministers, 13 voivodes and vice-
voivodes and 9 secretaries of the Executive
Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party.
Furthermore 108 “lawyers in uniforms” were
degulated to work in the prosecution service and
civil judiciary.

Besides the military men the role of higher
functionaries of the Security Service (SB) and
other people working in the economy apparatus
also increased in the 1980s. All of them were
obviously members of the PZPR but in reality
often opposed many decisions and solutions
forced by the functionaries of the PZPR
apparatus. The leaders of the All-Poland
Alliance of Trade Unions (OPZZ) were also
members of the communist party. The Alliance
was supposed to replace Solidarity in public
consciousness. For this to happen, the leaders of
the PZPR had decided, that leaders of the OPZZ
had to receive a much wider autonomy than all
the other socio-political organisations were
given before, including the allied parties United
People's Party and the Democratic Party. “We
must include different opposing elements from
the party itself […] controlling us from our
system positions, constantly stinging us in our
bottoms” - said general Jaruzelski about OPZZ
in December 1986. Still, OPZZ with nearly 7
million members, in time became a force,
which, especially in the late 1980s, contributed
significantly to the limiting of the level of
control of the PZPR over state apparatus and
especially over the part, which governed the
economy.

5. Evolution of social moods. After the
introducing of martial law, the social moods
became relatively stable. In 1983 nearly 40% of
pollees believed that the economic situation
would become better, 8% that it would become
worse and the rest, over 50%, thought that it
would remain the same or did not have an opinion. This state of a kind of waiting began to change in the middle of the decade in a direction very unfavourable for the authorities. While in December 1985 46% of the pollees described the economic situation as bad, in the following months the figure grew quite consistently: 55% in April, 58.5% in December 1986 and as much as 69.1% in April 1987. In the following months it was becoming even worse and that significantly affected the consciousness of the elite of the authorities. A team of three general Jaruzelski’s advisors, the Secretary of the Central Committee of the PZPR Stanisław Ciosek, Deputy Minister of Internal Affairs Władysław Pożoga and the government spokesperson Jerzy Urban wrote in a memorial in January 1988 this about the matter: “The moods are below the red line, which means the critical point of explosion has been passed. There is no explosion because the tendencies are suppressed in the society by various stabilisers (historic experience, mainly of the 13th of December 1981, the role of the Church, lower influence of the opposition, apathy)”. The assessment was that such a state affected the authorities in a bad way and part of the apparatus “as usual in decadent times, begins to question the leadership, plot intrigues, plan future personal configurations. In time it will begin to plot”. It was therefore proposed to “make a drastic turn, in which there would be few words, many actions”. Ultimately such a turn of action, in the form of the Round Table Talks, happened a year later.

According to Mirosława Marod “three types of experiences of the broadest social reach” were making the mood worse. The first was increasing inflation devaluing “life's work of individuals and their families”. The second was the “feeling of disproportion between the effort put into achieving and keeping a decent standard of living and its effects”. Its main source were the persistent problems with supplies (especially manufactured goods) and that created a stark contrast with not only the situation in the Western countries but also with often visited Soviet Bloc countries. The third experience generating social frustration according to Marod was “the belief that methods of action offered to the individuals by the system lead to nowhere”. This affected mainly the young and the broadly understood intelligentsia, most severely affected by the apathy increasing during the 1980s.

6. Church and political opposition activity. In the 1980s, in front of the eyes of the PRL’s authorities, the Catholic Church turned from their main opponent into an important factor stabilising social mood. That is why, not abandoning various behind-the-stage actions aimed against the clergy, of which the kidnapping and killing of the priest Jerzy Popiełuszko by SB functionaries became a symbol, the leadership of the PZPR in practice accepted the unprecedented rise of the Church’s potential which took place in the 1980s. It was apparent both in record-breaking number of new priests and temples built (according to government data in 1986 over three thousand churches were being built) as well as in quick development of Catholic press and publishing houses. In the middle of the decade there were 89 Catholic periodicals, with circulation of 1.5 million. Politics of the authorities regarding the founding of new churches and Clubs of Catholic Intellectuals had also been liberalised. Additionally, Church structures played a dominant role in the distribution of charity aid from the West, while its substantial amount constantly worried the authorities.

The authorities expected that the liberal course would bring gradual increased acceptance of the system by the clergy. But the double dealing of the Church hierarchy, calculated for parallel dialogue with the authorities and discreet support of the moderate part of the opposition, disoriented Jaruzelski’s team. They knew that the support of the Church would be necessary to introduce the system reform plans maturing since the middle of the decade but they could not determine to what extent the bishops would be willing to endorse them, nor how far they identified themselves with the aims of the opposition.

Meanwhile, the opposition, despite its weakness apparent in the middle of the decade, became a constant factor generating resistance against the system. In late 1985 the Ministry of the Interior assessed that there were over 350 different
opposition structures in Poland, over half of them active in the area of just 5 of the 49 then existing voivodeships: Warsaw, Wrocław, Gdańsk, Kraków and Łódź. According to the SB its hard core was 1.5 thousand people while over 10 thousand worked as distributors of newspapers, messengers and printers. The number of “active sympathisers” was estimated to be 22 thousand people, what would give in total “about 34 thousand people directly involved, to a larger or lesser extent, in illegal activity”. This opposition was divided into different groups opposing each other, but generally fitted into one of two categories, differing in their attitude to the PRL authorities. While the radical category, in which Fighting Solidarity created in 1982 by Kornel Morawiecki had the most potential, wanted to organise a general strike and overthrow the regime in a revolution, the moderate category, gathered around Lech Wałęsa and Temporary Coordinating Commission of Independent Self-governing Trade Union Solidarity assumed that the deteriorating economic situation and pressure from the West would finally force Jaruzelski’s team to begin talks with the opposition. From the point of view of the authorities it was important for the moderate group to be stronger than the radical one and when, in 1988, the leadership of the PZPR finally decided to talk with Wałęsa and his collaborators, the opposition radicals turned out to be too weak to stop the Round Table Talks and later to boycott the contractual parliamentary elections in June 1989.

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