

# The countdown has begun

## Is Poland heading towards totalitarianism?

Over a year ago, Poland was visited by one of the world's most prominent psychologists, professor Philip Zimbardo. He was invited to Wrocław by the Institute of National Remembrance (IPN). He was asked to give a lecture on totalitarianism and so he did - at a time when the country by the Vistula river was in political heat. He presented the stages of the government's progression to dictatorship. Which stage are we on today?

Zimbardo became recognisable in this field of studies in the beginning of the 1970s thanks to the Stanford experiment, in which students had taken on the roles of prisoners and gu-



*Prof. Philip Zimbardo*

ards. This experiment, among other things, attracted him to studying the psychology of good and evil by exploring the causes of pathological behaviour in the world. Conclusions from the prison experiment as well as other research (on torturing people by American soldiers in Iraq's Abu Ghraib) were put in an extremely interesting book he wrote - "The Lucifer Effect".

The psychologist knows Poland not only from the media. A few years ago, he founded a youth center in Katowice, aimed at young people encouraging them to spend their time in a creative way and to interact with one another. Not only are social inequalities eliminated through such interaction but also the local cultures are developed further. Zimbardo visits our country rather often therefore he keeps his ear to the ground.

He surprised IPN when he was in

Wrocław. He spoke not only of totalitarianism, but also about... Lech Wałęsa. He stated that the former president was a hero whose standing was undermined by some and that the reason for Wałęsa's persecution, he suggested, was the envy that came from the fact that his accusers lacked the same courage in those difficult times. This added to the dismay already caused by the lecture on the government heading towards authoritarianism.

Zimbardo said that the road to dictatorships is taken in small steps. First, the restriction on the freedom of speech, later the control of the media, then the control of the judiciary, next the politicians replace electable representatives, then the critics of the regime are imprisoned, the next step is to call off elections, after which the military or religious rule takes over and finally, a total political domination takes place, he explained. It is hard not to place some of these points in the context of the current situation in Poland. At that time, however, we were still somewhere near the second stage. Today we are one step further. In fact, a milestone further.

Why totalitarianism, not authoritarianism - as some people suggest? The former differs from the latter by the scale by which the ruling group attempts to control various aspects of life. Authoritarianism is milder because it can interfere in the division of powers and censor the media, for example, whilst fully respecting the rules of the free market. Thus, it is possible for dictatorship to stay on the level of authoritarianism, but one never knows if it does not veer towards totalitarianism.

After the Second World War, countries created regulations that were designed to prevent such situations. The European Union should be such a barrier as well. How it all works is being tested in surgery on an open heart. Hungary has stopped at the stage of authoritarianism because Viktor Orbán unexpectedly started to honour the judgments of the Constitutio-

nal Tribunal (which does not mean that the situation in his country is a cause for joy). Polish government has not backed off before the Constitutional Tribunal and instead, it has taken over the Tribunal and now it is trying out various forms of attack on the Supreme Court and common courts. This means that after one year from the psychologist's visit to the capital of Lower Silesia, we have progressed farther than Hungary.

One point remains unchanged, as Zimbardo mentioned. Based on the example of Nazi Germany, he argued that totalitarianism always had its starting point with the nation turning against some common enemy. Evil always began with the use of propaganda, inducing human minds to be for or against something. And so it is today, he said and gave the example of Hungarian billboards prepared by authorities on which it was suggested that immigrants will come to Hungary to take the local population's jobs. Sounds familiar? Jaroslaw Kaczynski was doing the same, when speaking of "the diseases brought by refugees", but he is also turning the Law and Justice (PiS) supporters against Poles who disagree with the current government.

Is there any hope that this government will back down? Given its recent, increasingly bolder actions, the chances are slim. Former presidents - Aleksander Kwasniewski and Bronislaw Komorowski, less than a year ago at the "Polish Constitution of 1997 - Political and Legal Practice" conference, argued that our primary legislation was one of the best in the world, but if the government has bad intentions, there is no law that can stand in its way. Let's not deceive ourselves, the EU will not achieve anything more effective, even by imposing sanctions on Poland as this would only infuriate the current rulers. Having said that, it does not mean that one should not react this way. So then, who is going to stop PiS? Who?

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