

# [Opinion] South Korea, Poland and the pitfalls of neoliberalism

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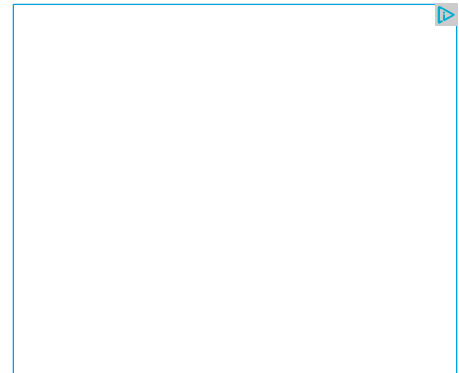
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The striking similarities in recent political developments in the two young democracies vividly illustrate the pitfalls of neoliberal policies.

It has been almost three decades since South Korea and Poland introduced first democratic institutions in place of their formerly authoritarian regimes. The rise of discontented workers, students, and other social groups by the late 1980s led in both countries to the first democratic elections and subsequent dismantling of the military rule in the former, and the state-socialist government in the latter. Simultaneously, transformations in the economic sphere commenced and the two emerging democracies introduced far-reaching, at least when compared with Western Europe, neoliberal policies.

Although gradual liberalisation of the economy began already in the mid-80s, de facto still under the communist system, it was the crisis generated by the collapse of that regime and the disintegration of the Soviet bloc more generally which opened the way to the full-fledged neoliberal policies in Poland. Under the auspices of the IMF, the former communist party dignitaries as well as the elites of the democratic movement served the Polish society an (in)famous 'shock therapy' that included rapid privatisation of state-owned enterprises, liberalisation of trade, deregulation of the labour market, and a pursuit of a tight monetary policy. Although certain welfare programmes were initially introduced or expanded, they were part and parcel of the strategy described by Prof. Pieter Vanhuyse as 'divide and pacify' that was aimed at generating social consent to the painful neoliberal restructuring. In addition to this, playing such an instrumental role in expanding the marketization project rather than being grounded in the principles of social justice, these programmes soon fell victims of the market logics and were scaled down even by the formally liberal-left government elected in 1993 that enthusiastically embraced the new economic dogma. Once put in motion, further consolidation of neoliberalism was driven by the European Union which set-up specific reforms to be implemented prior to the accession of Poland in 2004 and these were designed in a neoliberal fashion.



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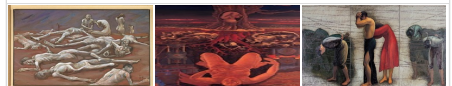
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Soon the developments in South Korea followed the suit. Although the military government of Chun Doo-Hwan arguably pathed the way to liberalisation of the state-led economy, it was an IMF loan taken in the face of the Asian financial crisis that proved to be the decisive event in the dismantling of it through South Korea's own version of a shock therapy. Like in Poland, some noteworthy welfare policies were introduced or expanded but, as the study titled 'The Korean welfare state: a paradox of expansion in an era of globalisation and economic crisis' by Kwon and Holliday suggests, they should be seen as driven by the same logics as in Poland: namely, pacifying workers and expanding neoliberal reforms. Moreover, while the EU acted as a factor consolidating neoliberalism in Poland, a series of free-trade agreements did the same job in South Korea by integrating it closer with the global economy.

Fast-forward to current times and we can see the two countries as some of the most extreme cases of neoliberal restructuring in East Asia and Europe, at least when labour market indicators are considered. For example, data suggests that South Korea has the highest incident of atypical employment among OECD countries whereas Poland is the European leader in this respect. Although the latter country retained a relatively expanded welfare system when compared to South Korea, spending twice as much of its GDP on social policies (roughly 20% and 10%, respectively), it is not a particularly generous figure in European terms and is only marginally higher than that of the US.

While appreciating many significant differences between the two countries, they are also strikingly similar in terms of recent political developments. Above all, there has been a growing concern about their relatively young democratic institutions. In South Korea, the controversies surrounding the presidential elections that brought Park Geun-hye to power, the disbandment of the UPP and imprisonment of its lawmakers accused of North Korean espionage, the Tatsuya Kato's defamation lawsuit, the deportation of Shin Eun-mi for supposedly praising North Korea, the overall growth in National Security Law cases and lawsuits against journalists, and the new surveillance policies have made people wonder about the future of liberal freedoms. On top of this, despite hopes associated with the coming to power of the first female president, there has been no noticeable improvement in women's freedoms. Instead, we are in the situation where we should hope that the situation does not get worse indeed.

In Poland, the turning point was a success of the conservative party Law and Justice in the parliamentary elections in October 2015. The pace of changes carried out by the new government had been so fast that by January 2016 the European Commission, concerned with the reforms in media and constitutional court laws, opened an unprecedented in the EU's history inquiry into the rule of law in Poland. On top of this, new controversial surveillance laws, which gave the government more oversight over the digital data about citizens, were implemented too. Women's freedoms have also been under threat as more restrictive changes to abortion law are on the table. Even though mass anti-government protests have been regularly organised across Polish cities, the polls indicate that the support for the ruling party has not wavered.

However, perhaps the most damaging in the long-term perspective have been developments in the discursive space in the two countries. In South Korea, critics of the government have commonly been labelled as communists, anti-Korean, and pro-North Korean. Trade union activists, immigrants, and other, even the most vulnerable groups in the society, have been subject to intensifying symbolic violence and hate speech. Even the parents of victims of the Sewol ferry disaster were not spared from being insulted by right-wing groups parading in front of them with fried chicken during the anti-government hunger strike. We have also witnessed growth in misogynist language, especially online. All of this is best visible on platforms such as Ilbe where predominantly young university students, not uncommonly from Korea's top educational institutions, are the most active. This is perhaps the most worrisome trend.

In a similar fashion, those critical of the conservative government in Poland can easily be framed as 'post-communists'. While the criticism of the continuing political influence of the former communist elites conveyed in this term is understandable, particularly when their role in implementing the devastating for the working class neoliberal policies is taken into account, the word itself became a pejorative catch-all code that discredits any critique of the government from the politically progressive position by indicating the assumed connections with or support for the former communist regime, regardless of the soundness of arguments and criticism that are voiced. Moreover, in the run-up to the implementation of the new surveillance law, those criticising the government were rebranded from post-communists to 'defenders of terrorists'. In line with this political discourse, online and offline hate speech directed at people with progressive, left-wing political views seems to be on the rise. The same holds true about negative attitudes towards certain migrant groups and refugees. Another noteworthy parallel with South Korea is that there is also a major national tragedy at the centre of the political divisions running through the

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society, although this unfolded differently in the two countries. While the issue of Sewol became an important point of criticism of the current government, in Poland the tragic death of major political figures in the 2010 plane crash in Russia has been continuously used by conservative politicians to mobilize its electorate. Nevertheless, perhaps the most worrisome similarity with South Korea is the chord that the discourses described above strike with young, formally well-educated people.

This is where the relationship between the 'crisis' of democracy in the two countries and neoliberal policies becomes visible. Specifically, in the context where more and more people feel that they are losing ground in the deregulated labour market that makes stable lives ever-harder to reach, anger and discontent are prone to emerge. Furthermore, surrounded by discourses that manifest individuals as self-authoring monads who are the sole craftsmen or craftswomen of their biographies, these negative feelings can easily be shifted towards the vulnerable groups or, in fact, any groups that put demands on the government. Consequently, trade unions demanding fair working conditions, progressively oriented people supporting them, women fighting for the state to intervene to challenge the patriarchy and discrimination, activists alarmed with encroaching state surveillance pursued in the name of fighting terrorism, and vulnerable immigrants, refugees or Sewol victims' family members who ask for the liberal democratic state to fulfil its duty to protect citizens as well as other human beings who are not citizens, can all come to be seen as making unjustified claims that damage the country. From here, there is only one step to making them culprits responsible for the difficulties that the society faces. In this way, the social pillars of a healthy democracy become perceived not as a solution to but, rather, as a source of problems.

Moreover, the success in capturing of the imagination of the young in both countries by a populist discourse that promises a strong nation-state also points at the relationship between the current situation and neoliberalism, paradoxically indicating an underlying dissatisfaction with the latter. For example, in South Korea the narrative of making the economy great again as it was under the authoritarian state-led industrialisation period of Park Chung-hee resonates not just with older people who remember those times but also with some youth. Similarly, a rhetoric of renationalising the economy and standing up to foreign influence has earned the Polish government much of its popularity. However, the rhetoric apart, it is hard to see actual shifts towards a more regulated economy in any of these two countries. Regardless of the promises of curbing the irregular employment made both in South Korea and in Poland, or even some laudable welfare programmes introduced recently by the government in the latter country, the overall direction of economic policy continues.

Despite this, however, there have been no signs of a significantly diminishing support for the conservative, aka populist parties neither in South Korea nor in Poland. What does it mean for the futures of these two democracies that will soon celebrate their thirtieth birthday? While it is hard to speculate, it seems that despite the geographical distance and significant historical, political, economic, and cultural differences, there is much that progressively oriented politicians, activists, researchers, and journalists in both countries can learn from each other.

By Radoslaw Polkowski, Marie Skłodowska-Curie 'Changing Employment' Research Fellow, University of Strathclyde (UK) and Paek Soo Gyoung, Visiting Fellow at the Korean Studies Department, University of Wroclaw (Poland)

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