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Citation style: Kubin Tomasz, Lorencka Małgorzata, Myśliwiec Małgorzata. (2017). Verification of research assumptions. W: T. Kubin, M. Lorencka, M. Myśliwiec, "Impact of economic crisis on the functioning of political systems : a case study of Greece, Spain, and Italy" (S. 229-236). Katowice : Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego



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Verification of research assumptions

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It was emphasised in the introduction to this publication that Greece, Spain, and Italy were not accidentally selected as subjects of a detailed research study. The analysis makes it clear that in the examined cases, the effects of the global economic crisis have had a significant impact on the functioning of the key elements of the political systems of the analysed states, including the functioning of their respective subsystems.

Having conducted the research process, we are able to finally validate the detailed hypotheses and the main hypothesis.

1. The first detailed hypothesis assumed that the political actions of the decision-making centres of Greece, Spain, and Italy concerning economic matters, both on the central and regional levels, led to serious interference in the functioning of their political systems. The analysis proved this assumption true and made us draw several conclusions in this respect. The first one concerns the fact that corruption has become a serious problem in all the studied countries. In all these countries, a number of crimes of this nature was revealed, not only in the central institutions of power, but at a sub-state level as well, which seriously undermined the citizens' confidence in public authority. In this situation, it was difficult to expect an effective resolution of the crisis. Secondly, it is important to note that the central governments, in particular, found it very difficult to make socially unpopular political decisions. Counteracting the effects of the economic crisis and fulfilling the conditions for external assistance (as seen especially in Spain, and even more so in Greece) led to the escalation of social tensions and left many groups of citizens feeling indignant. The disparity between what is politically and economically necessary and what is socially expected has led to the demolition of a so far relatively stable structure that links the various social groups with

their political representation. According to the research conducted, the need to seek external financial assistance by the central elites in a situation of deep economic crisis seriously affected the functioning of the entire political system of each of the states. It creates a strong interdependency between the authorities that seek such assistance, and the institutions or countries providing it. This relationship becomes even more significant than the relationship between the ruling elites and the voters, whose interests they should represent. Thirdly, we can finally observe, that in crisis conditions, political structures operating at the regional level, which is significantly closer to citizens than central governments, played a significant role. The unemployment levels in Spain and in the Basque Country are a good example. The opportunities created by the law allowed the government of this region to pursue an effective policy to prevent unemployment. Thanks to its competences in shaping certain elements of regional economic policy, this autonomous community, outperformed the rest of the state, at least in terms of unemployment rates. The analysis also allows us to conclude that a decentralised form of state allows for a smoother transition from a crisis than if power is focused in the political center. This is confirmed by making a comparison of the economic situation of Spain and Italy with that of Greece. Although we need to bear in mind that these two states are much more prosperous than Greece, we cannot ignore the fact that Spain and Italy constitute so-called regional states,¹ while Greece is a country with a centralised structure. It should be borne in mind that in a strongly centralised state, the political center is fully responsible for coping with the crisis. When their actors are unable to find effective solutions or are forced to make difficult decisions that are not in line with social expectations, the relationships between the various social groups and their political representation are bound to deteriorate rapidly or disintegrate altogether. The situation is somewhat different in decentralised states. In the case of regional states, the main provisions of their economic policies are defined, in fact, by their political center. However, a considerable amount of

¹ More on the concept of a regional state, see J. IWANEK: "Prawnokonstytucyjne położenie regionów autonomicznych w Hiszpanii." In: *Oblicza decentralizmu*. Ed. J. IWANEK. Katowice 1996, pp. 27—41; IDEM: "Wspólnota autonomiczna w ustroju polityczno-prawnym Hiszpanii." In: *Państwo i prawo wobec współczesnych wyzwań. Współczesne ustroje państwowe i rozwój demokracji w Polsce*. Eds. R.M. CZARNY, K. SPRYSZAK. Toruń 2012, pp. 231—247; J. IWANEK: "Współczesne rozumienie autonomii terytorialnej." In: *Spoleczeństwo wobec problemów transformacji i integracji*. Ed. J. LISZKA. Ustroń 2000, pp. 171—178; M. MYŚLIWIEC: "Zmierzch „państwa regionalnego” w Europie? Analiza przypadku Królestwa Hiszpanii." In: *Państwo w procesach przemian. Teoria i praktyka*. Eds. A. LISOWSKA, A.W. JABŁOŃSKI. Toruń 2009, pp. 244—259; M. MYŚLIWIEC: "Hiszpańska autonomia w progu XXI wieku." In: *Athenaeum. Polskie Studia Politologiczne*, no. 32/2011, pp. 28—46; T. SKRZYPCZAK: "Państwo regionalne — problemy autonomii terytorialnej we Włoszech i Hiszpanii." *Zeszyty Naukowe Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego*, no. 221. Kraków 1984, pp. 71—84; A. SROKA: *Hiszpańska droga do federalizmu*. Wrocław 2008.

- competence in the area of specific solutions rests with the regions. This in turn means that in an economic crisis, responsibility for overcoming it does not solely rest in the political centre. In such countries, some of the responsibility lies with the regional governments, which helps mitigate the results of a crisis. The bonds that connect voters with their political representation clearly weaken, but in a decentralised state, they are broken down between the political center and the regions. In practice this means the capability to differentiate the level of trust (“I trust the political center more than the regional authorities,” or vice versa), which prevents a total distrust of public authorities from occurring.
2. The second hypothesis assumed that the economic crisis in Greece, Spain, and Italy seriously interfered with the rhythm of the electoral cycle. The analysis carried out showed that the normal electoral cycle, which is typical for democracies, was severely disrupted in two cases: in Spain and Greece. In Spain, early elections were held as early as in 2011. The difficult economic situation of the state led the then Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero to request the monarch to organise the election four months before the date prescribed by law. However, the biggest political changes were brought about by the elections held on 20 December 2015. As a result, Podemos and Ciudadanos, two new players on the political scene, won parliamentary representation. The appearance of their representatives in the lower house of the General Cortes prevented (for the first time in the history of Spain after 1975) the creation of a central government and ended in the need for organising another early elections on 26 June 2016. The situation in Greece was much more complicated. The first elections after the economic crisis erupted were held in 2009 and they were early elections. The next elections were also inspired by political turmoil brought about by a bad economic situation. The year 2012 saw parliamentary elections organised twice. In 2015, the situation repeated itself. These events therefore not only validate the second research hypothesis, but also confirm the conclusions drawn from the verification of the first hypothesis, namely that Greece was much more in need of external economic assistance in the context of the economic crisis than Spain (despite both countries being beneficiaries). The terms under which the loans were granted made the central elites of the two states dependent on the borrowing entities and forced them to take political actions that were contrary to the expectations of many groups of citizens. It should be noted that these decisions were much more in line with the social expectations in Greece than in Spain. Therefore, it can be assumed that this phenomenon is to a certain degree reflected in how much the election cycle was disturbed in both countries (much more in Greece than in Spain).
 3. The third hypothesis stated that the economic crisis in Greece, Spain, and Italy influenced the functioning of their party systems. The analysis validated

the assumptions of the hypothesis. There have been significant changes in the functioning of party systems in these states after 2008. The changes were associated with the emergence of completely new political actors such as Syriza in Greece, Podemos and Ciudadanos in Spain, and the Five Star Movement in Italy. These parties managed to garner considerable amounts of support thanks to the dissatisfaction of numerous social groups, who were discontented with the political parties' dependence on the financial assistance of external facilities. Their leaders were successful in winning the support of different social groups (especially those that suffered the most because of the crisis) and gained a powerful position in the political systems of the studied states. Reality however, quickly verified their unfounded promises that were made in situations that were extraordinary for each of the states. The example of Syriza in Greece can serve as a good example. Its leaders quickly realised that it is impossible to completely ignore the conditions of international assistance programmes and return to fulfilling public expectations in a situation where the state is on the verge of bankruptcy. The 2015 referendum turned out only to be a manifestation of Greek national pride and a symbol of the elites' will to renew their bond with the citizens. However, it failed to bring a solution to the country's internal economic woes nor did it give the state a green light to disregard the assistance provided by external parties. Spaniards also learned that it is impossible to ignore the state's obligations towards external creditors and to avoid making difficult political decisions in times of economic crisis. After a boisterous success of new political parties (Podemos and Ciudadanos) in the parliamentary elections carried out on 20 December 2015, it turned out that a lack of a will to cooperate in establishing a central government, which would be able to counteract the effects of the crisis, did not appeal to all the voters. The repeated election in June 2016 strengthened the position of the People's Party that had been ruling Spain at that time. When this publication was being submitted for printing, the state still lacked a central government, and it is difficult to assess how this process will evolve. It seems probable however, that following the first shock caused by the economic crisis and the people's aversion to the political elites who were forced to make difficult decisions, the citizens will finally realize the necessity of their actions.

4. The concept presented above, which assumes that citizens' confidence is spread between the central and regional authorities, can be very helpful in understanding the intensification of decentralising tendencies in times of economic crises. The fourth detailed hypothesis of this publication's authors was that the economic crisis in Spain and in Italy helped intensify the decentralisation tendencies in these states. The analysis proved the hypothesis to be true. It is proven that the far-reaching decentralisation of a democratic state in conditions of the unhampered functioning of its political system, may

be an effective tool for managing public matters successfully. The situation looks slightly different in a crisis. A significant weakening of the position of the political centre, which occurs during a serious economic crisis, may cause citizens to place more confidence in the regional authorities. If regional elites take advantage of increased confidence to further deepen the socio-political divide between the political centre and the peripheries, this will lead to strong decentralising tendencies, and in extreme cases, to separatism. It is noted, however, that the studies were carried out in Europe. This means that three levels of political decision-making need to be taken into account, namely the European, state, and regional levels. Examples of decentralising tendencies are not only characteristic for countries in southern Europe. An equally spectacular example of such a tendency is observed in the relations between London and Edinburgh. The building of an increasingly stronger position of European power centres was accompanied by an increase of political ambitions on the regional level as well. It is noted that attempts at building a stronger regional position based on a powerful political partner is not a new phenomenon in Europe. Such developments were observed in different periods of the continent's history. They became very clearly visible in the period following 2008. As far as the studied states are concerned, the significant weakening of the political centres in Spain and Italy contributed to a strengthening of decentralising tendencies in Catalonia and in the Veneto region.

5. The fifth detailed hypothesis assumed that the economic crisis in Greece, Spain, and Italy helped intensify the formulation of anti-system postulates by selected political groups. The results confirm the hypothesis. In each of the analysed states, proposals to change the constitutional provisions were submitted. A change of the constitution would in turn change the functioning of the political system. The most advanced prospective changes concerned the Italian Constitution and were accepted by the parliament on 12 April 2016 (the amendments pertained to 47 of 139 articles), but were subsequently rejected in the constitutional referendum of 4 December 2016. Therefore, the opinions by sceptical observers of the Italian political scene, who have claimed that proposals for constitutional change have been systematically appearing in this country for the last several dozen years, but always remain in the sphere of theory due to the lack of political compromise, proved to be right. The researcher of the subject will surely notice the powerful dynamics and intensity of political activity in this area after 2008. This same remark applies to other countries, such as Spain or Greece. In the first of the two states, the urge to amend the constitution has appeared several times in recent years. At first, the discussion revolved around the decentralisation of the state. After 2008, it began to touch upon other aspects, such as civic rights, methods for determining the composition of the parliament or the republican

form of state. As far as Greece is concerned, the Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras announced that matters relating to constitutional change would be introduced into the public debate.

Verification of the detailed hypothesis finally leads us to the positive validation of the main research hypothesis. According to the assumptions of the authors, the hypothesis was formulated as follows: in conditions of a representative democracy, the economic situation of a state is one of the most crucial factors determining the stability and sustainability of a political system. The political stability and sustainability of a state is determined by its economic situation. In an economic crisis, the stability and sustainability of a political system is put in serious jeopardy. The sources of such a dependency should mainly be sought in the citizen-state relationship that has been shaped in the last decades. Over the course of the 20th century, the economic expectations of citizens of European states (e.g. in terms of medical coverage, childcare, the education or social security systems) have developed on an unprecedented scale. What for many hundreds of years was restricted to the private sphere has become the responsibility of the state thanks to political actions and decisions. This means that the centre of public authority has taken on an economic responsibility of enormous proportions. When a representative democracy is in a good economic situation, different interest groups, which have been defined by the voters, tend to pressure the state with increasingly greater demands. However, when an economic crisis ensues, it becomes very difficult for the state to see through the execution of many expensive and complex, albeit publically expected tasks. In addition, the situation is further complicated by the fact that in a world of globalised economic processes, it becomes almost impossible to effectively counteract and overcome crises by a state acting alone. Both the emergence of a crisis and the subsequent battle to overcome it usually involves a number of states, which is particularly visible in the case of states belonging to the EU. This, in turn, means that these processes do not occur from within, but around the political systems of individual states. However, in a situation where a system of strong interdependencies is formed between the political centre of a state (as the debtor) and another state, a group of states or an international entity (the creditor), there is a significant deterioration of the bond and in the confidence between the political centre and the citizens, who have selected its representatives to serve in the centre's institutions. This lack of confidence mainly results in a change in electoral preferences and in the alternation of power. However, when a crisis is impossible to overcome quickly nor smoothly without making difficult political decisions, the disintegration and transformation of a political system is unavoidable. A crisis is conducive to the decomposition of the party system of a state. Usually, this leads to the emergence of new groups, which build their political capital on an illusion that they possess the skills required to cope with the crisis and fulfil public

expectations. However, their survival on the political scene is possible only if they are actually able to find a way to overcome the economic crisis, which, in reality, tends to be a very difficult task. Only because another entity has taken over control of the centre of power does not mean that a state's obligations towards third parties will disappear. This was a lesson learned by the leaders of Syriza in Greece, Podemos and Ciudadanos in Spain, and by the representatives of the Five Star Movement in Italy. For this reason, it is difficult to state whether these parties will become a permanent feature of the political landscape in these countries. What is certain, however, is that public confidence in these entities, as well as the effectiveness of their actions, is often verified in elections that tend to be carried out quite frequently, as the regular election cycle is normally altered during a crisis.

An economic crisis also sparks a desire to introduce changes in the functioning of public administration institutions. Such actions were taken by the central authorities of Greece and Italy. Whenever it is necessary to carry out tasks in order to fulfil public expectations but resources are limited, the state begins to seek ways to financially optimise the execution of these tasks. Dissolution of the intermediate levels of public administration or decreasing the number of local government entities are examples of actions that significantly change the functioning of the entire party system.

Another phenomenon, which may occur in a crisis and is closely related to decentralisation, is the strengthening of decentralising tendencies in regions that possess their own distinctive features. Taking advantage of regional political elites to deepen the socio-political divide between the centre and the peripheries may lead to serious changes in the functioning of the entire political system: from changes in the territorial organisation of the state, to attempts to disintegrate it altogether.

A serious economic crisis may also lead to a public debate on the necessity to change the constitution. In turn, any amendment of the constitution leads to a radical change in the functioning of a state's political system.

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