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The Polish Countryside in Statistics

Wilkin J., Nurzyńska, I. (eds.) 2012. *The Polish Countryside 2012. A report on the state of the countryside*, Warsaw: Scholar Publishers, pp. 244.

2012 saw the publication of the seventh report¹ on the state of the Polish countryside. Much like its six predecessors (the first of which was published in 2000) it contains complex data concerning the Polish countryside and changes taking place, which accelerated particularly after Poland's accession to the European Union in 2004. According to editors Jerzy Wilkin and Iwona Nurzyńska *it would be difficult to find as complex a source of knowledge of the Polish countryside in Polish literature as that which our reports contain [...] we have filled a considerable gap both in the system of analyses and in the dissemination of knowledge about such an important part of our country*².

According to accepted premises which have been consistently fulfilled for 12 years all the hitherto published reports are interdisciplinary: *the countryside (this term is used interchangeably with the concept of rural areas – MK-Z) is here perceived as a very intricate system involving social, economic, cultural and natural aspects. In order to portray and understand the changes taking place in the Polish countryside it is essential to include*

¹ Reports are financed by the Foundation for the Development of Polish Agriculture, FDPA. The FDPA is the oldest Polish "rural" foundation which came into being after 1945. In 1988 it became an independent NGO. A full list of the reports to date appears in the bibliography.

² The Polish countryside 2012, p. 7.

*all these aspects as a whole*³ – and complex, i.e. all the significant areas of rural development are the subject of the analysis. The report must also be synthetic – graphs, tables and short, understandable comments to the data – cyclical (it comes out every other year) and published in both Polish and English; which broadens the readership of these publications⁴; reaching various circles: academics and students, journalists, politicians, local government representatives and agricultural consultants.

In addition to documentation regarding demographic change, agriculture and other areas of the rural economy, the socio-professional structure of rural inhabitants, environmental issues, typical for this type of work, each volume contains special themes, referring to other significant development problems or connected with an important event (e.g. EU accession was highlighted in the 2006 and 2010 reports). The last one discussed the situation of young people⁵ and their opportunities as well as the spatial diversification of the Polish countryside. Earlier reports included special topics such as: in 2010 – the evaluation of the consequences of EU integration after 5 years and that of transformation 20 years from its beginning as well as cultural changes in the countryside; in 2008 – the issue of rural potential, i.e. rural inhabitants' possibilities of getting organised and their presence in the public sphere; in 2006 – the first evaluation of results of EU integration as well as self government, economic diversification, land cultivation, a vision of the countryside and agriculture from a wider perspective of change in Poland; in 2004 – an evaluation of the effects of introducing pre-accession programmes (mainly SAPARD) and the problem of regional and traditional products; the 2002 report revealed the internal differences in the countryside and the contrasts between it and the city in the economic, social, demographic and natural profiles. In addition to a complex and synthetic view of the countryside, the first report in 2000 discussed rural poverty and hardship.

³ The Polish countryside 2000, p. 8.

⁴ The reports (with the exception of the 2002 one) are available in electronic form on www.fdpa.org.pl. in both languages. The Polish version also exists in print.

⁵ The problems of young rural people are also the subject of an article by Krystyna Szafraniec (the author of this fragment in the discussed report) published in the current issue of EEC.

Turning to a more detailed analysis of the most recent report (The report about the state of the countryside, Poland 2012), it consists of 8 chapters and a summary of the tendencies, phenomena and problems of rural areas under the authorship of Jerzy Wilkin. There is information about demographic changes (the author is Izaak Frenkel), agriculture and its structural changes (Walenty Poczta), social capital (Barbara Fedyszak Radziejowska), the influence of rural economic development on the state of the natural environment (Artur Bołtromiuk), socio-economic differentiation of rural areas (Monika Stanny) political views and affinities (Krzysztof Pankowski). Special topics included in the report concern the opportunities of rural youth (Krystyna Szafraniec), Polish and EU policy as regards rural areas (Iwona Nurzyńska). The authors are mainly researchers who have worked for the series for many years while also being connected with the Institute of Rural Development and Agriculture of the Polish Academy of Sciences. A researcher from Poznan University of Natural Science (structural changes in agriculture) and the Research Centre of Social Opinion (political affiliations of rural inhabitants) was also invited to the team.

The authors refer to data from various sources: public statistics (data from the Central Statistical Office, the Agricultural Register, Eurostat, data from government agencies – The Agency for Restructuring and Modernisation of Agriculture – ARMA, the Electoral Commission), data from interdisciplinary research of representative Poles (Social Diagnosis, CBOS research) as well as own research (generally smaller scale).

The Polish countryside in 2012 has become less and less agricultural – only a third of rural inhabitants are permanently connected with agriculture although the size of farms is growing. Not only are there fewer farms but most of them are less and less economically active. Farms which are above average in size (10 ha. in 2012) have a chance of survival. A significant portion of farmers' incomes are supplementary benefits (about half of farming incomes). These had an influence on the significant increase of farmers' incomes – although they are still far lower than in other professional groups (80% of the national average). The authors draw attention to the low productivity of Polish agriculture (approximately 30%), which means that despite the relatively low portion of agriculture in GDP (approx. 3%), this sector shows a relatively high rate of employment (approx. 13% of all those employed in the economy).

Due to the departure of the countryside from agriculture, analyses of the rural labour market are growing in importance. Employment figures are dropping while unemployment ones are on the rise. These tendencies affect the youth in particular (the 18–24-year-olds), women and the elderly. The employment level in all age groups is particularly low in non-agricultural rural households – lower than on farms where there is an excess of employed people. The percentage of those working in agriculture is still the highest in all the EU countries, with the exception of Romania. Izasław Frenkel (chapter 1) sees this as being connected with the fragmentation of farms (the percentage of farms which are smaller than 2 ha. is 24.1%, and in the 2–5 ha. category – 31.1%) (p. 82).

That conclusion is somewhat contradictory with Walenty Poczta's views (chapter 2). He observes progress in the changes in the spatial and productive structure of agriculture. 'There has been a considerable drop in number of small and medium sized farms as well as land utilised by them. (...) A cautious conclusion may be reached that there are fewer farms in those groups where there are difficulties in reaching parity in income levels and development possibilities and there are more where a suitable income allows for an adequate level of consumption and production' (pp. 98–99).

Walenty Poczta assumes that the observed changes in agriculture (a moderate growth in production and income growth in the sector is the effect of taking over Polish agriculture through the mechanisms of the Common Agricultural Policy (further CAP). This thesis is also confirmed in research carried out by Iwona Nurzyńska (chapter 6). She notices that thanks to CAP support, over 17 million Polish zloty (i.e. approx. 4 billion euro) reached the rural areas, almost half of which directly reinforced the farmers' incomes. Like Frenkel Nurzyńska underlines that the defective structure of Polish agriculture derives from unexploited and unnecessary labour resources in agriculture (p. 201). From that perspective she outlines two challenges for Polish rural area policy: setting up activities which would serve to create extra-agricultural jobs and counteract the spatial polarisation between rich and poor areas, while pointing out that the currently applied instruments which were supposed to be conducive to the convergence of regions cannot stop that polarisation.

The differentiation between areas noticed by Nurzyńska was also researched by Monika Stanny (chapter 5) in broad socio-economic development analyses. In her research she mentioned such socio-economic

development factors as: the characteristic of demographic structure, the characteristic of the local community (including an evaluation of the education structure as part of human capital, an evaluation of social capital, civic activity, the inhabitants' capacity to cooperate in the common interest; the participation of social workers) the characteristic of the labour market, the characteristic of the agricultural and extra-agricultural sector. As a result of statistical data the author distinguished 5 groups of communes, differing in their level of development. She notices a concurrence between the current level of development of those communes and their position within the framework of the former partitions: in the former Russian partition the level of development is either very low or low, it is moderate in the former Austrian partition; in the former Prussian partition it is high or very high. The destiny of the country's individual areas had an influence on the development potential. According to the author *it is difficult to counteract these tendencies which are permanent.* (p. 173), having an influence on the structure of agriculture. Communes with a very low or low standard of development are monofunctional, based on family farming or large-scale hired labour farming; communes of a moderate standard of development are also monofunctional but based on fragmented farming and various sources of income, not distinctly specialised. Whereas communes the development of which is well-advanced are those the multifunctionality of which results from economic urbanisation or modern agriculture. According to the researcher's expectations that means that achieving the same goal of development of rural areas takes place according to various scenarios in the Polish countryside (p. 174). Perhaps that is an explanation for the hitherto inadequacy of tools of convergency (Nurzyńska).

One of the aspects of analyses led by Monika Stanny was social and human capital. Barbara Fedyszak Radziejowska (chapter 3) and Krystyna Szafraniec (chapter 7) take a closer look at select elements making up that capital.

Barbara Fedyszak-Radziejowska attributes "the role of shock absorbers of the crisis in the national economy" to the countryside and agriculture (p. 102) which can be linked to the fact that "changes appearing in the countryside are evolutionary and free of violent shocks and crises. The functional features, – i.e. the multifunctionality of agriculture – of the rural communities are undergoing stabilisation (p. 102). Rural inhabitants rarely experience material wealth but social well-being (having social support) is

experienced more frequently by them than by their urban counterparts. The author puts forward a theory supporting it with data from representative research that the social capital of the Polish countryside is its strength, particularly “the strong acceptance of standards of cooperation connected with religion and appearing in the activity for the benefit of the parish” (p. 123).

While differences in standards between town and country are diminishing there is a growing desire to live in the countryside. This is not a sufficiently desirable prospect for some young people. Krystyna Szafraniec points to this (chapter 7). According to her “the choice of living in the countryside is still secondary, creating a guarantee of safe survival for those who are not quite ready to compete for a social position in the city” (p. 218)⁶.

According to the data the level of optimism is growing from year to year. Areas of inequality and marginalisation affecting rural areas continue to appear but, on the other hand, the authors also point out favourable changes. According to their diagnosis, a turning point for the condition of the Polish countryside was meant to be 2004 and EU integration. The countryside before that (presented in reports from 2000, 2002 and 2004) was an area the characteristic features of which were profound regional differences and a clearly unfavourable situation when compared with the city. Unfavourable features of the countryside were noticeable in the economic sphere (the fragmentation of farms, low incomes, a low number of non-market farms, a very poor development of extra-agricultural functions, a high dependence on benefits – old age and disability pensions) but they also had an institutional deficit (a poorly developed social services system – pre-school and health care; a non-developing rural labour market). The countryside had an unfavourable demographic and social structure (the educational structure was particularly unfavourable, there was a high level of poverty and a very low level of financial integration between farmers).

The most recent report (2012) portrays Polish rural areas as seen by Jerzy Wilkin as being rather positive and optimistic, particularly if we

⁶ A solution and justification of this thesis can be found in the article by this author in the current issue of EEC.

situate it in a comparative historical and international perspective (p. 13). Indeed there are still gaps in development but the editor of the series draws attention to the drop in overall backwardness. That seems to dominate in the general evaluation of changes in rural areas undertaken by the team of authors.

In the report synthesis Jerzy Wilkin asserts among others that despite the unfavourable trends concerning agriculture (persistent fragmentation, low productivity, low participation in GDP, low income levels) it has an important role in the system of food security and “strengthening the country’s energy security” (p. 9) and small farms “fulfil many useful economic, social and environmental functions. As in the past, they continue to play the role of shock absorber of economic disquiet and external shocks”. It seems that, apart from its informative role, the report – which continues to be one of the few synthetic, complex and interdisciplinary sources of information about the condition of Polish rural areas – also plays a persuasive role, entering the political debate on the shape of agriculture and tools of acting on the development of rural areas.

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