

Rural Poland after EU accession

# Home at Last



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**The stereotype of a Polish peasant riding a pitiful horse-drawn wagon still lingers in the minds of many Poles. Is that what rural Poland really looks like today? How has EU accession changed farmers' attitudes and awareness?**

Rural Poland and its inhabitants represent a research area and topic of public debate that is particularly susceptible to stereotypes and simplifications. Many of these manifested themselves as Poland was negotiating the terms of its EU accession. Rural Poland was usually described in two ways: some employing the notions used to describe marginalized communities, others using descriptions of "backwardness."

We can assume that the reason why rural inhabitants were sidelined in the process of Poland's transformation lies in the low level of human, social, cultural (symbolic), and economic capital committed to defending rural interests. In the light of sociological research findings and economic analyses, we can nowadays advance the thesis that Poland's villages have been "returning to the fold" of the Polish Republic since 2004. A symbolic bridging of gaps, including between the urban and the rural, was initiated by the agricultural and regional policy that has reached the Polish peripheries via Brussels.

"Capital" means resources that can be harnessed to yield additional value, or profits. Simply possessing material resources (land, farms, savings), human resources (education, knowledge, skills), or social resources (trust-based bonds) is not enough to guarantee development or benefits. Such benefits can be derived only when enterprising individuals or groups harnesses such resources to generate added value.

Working the land and animal husbandry are nowadays very difficult ways of life, requiring one to stay abreast of economic, political, and ecological changes and to make shrewd investments. That is why in the wake of EU accession, farmers have become one of the most active groups in Poland



Bartłomiej Kowalski



The EU has a standard of measure for gauging the economic size of a farm, called the European Size Unit (ESU), equal to €1,200. In the EU, farms that do not exceed 4 ESU are considered ineffective and unprofitable. In Poland, 66% of the country's 1.5 million farms were not larger than 2 ESU in 2004, while 280,000 fell between 2-4 ESU, 148,000 fell between 4-6 ESU, and some 220,000 farms exceeded 6 ESU. Only in the latter were agricultural incomes comparable to the incomes earned in non-agricultural sectors of the economy.

### Poverty's Rural Face

The low level of economic capital in Polish villages means poverty for many of their residents, hidden unemployment at agricultural farms, and a lack of non-farming jobs. The chances for absorbing the excess manpower inherent in agriculture remain low. The Polish countryside retains "hidden unemployment" (agrarian unemployment) estimated at 700,000-900,000 "redundant" individuals at farms. As a result of all these circumstances, poverty in Poland mainly has a rural face: after nearly two years of EU membership, rural poverty remained twice as high as urban poverty.

Human capital, gauged in terms of both level of education and the skills demanded by modern civilization (computer and Internet literacy, knowledge of English, continuing education), is lower in rural Poland than in cities and towns. In 1988, only 1.8% of village residents had higher education (against 9.4% in cities), with more than 60% having graduated from at most primary school. In 2002, 4.3% of village residents had graduated from a higher education institution, while the percentage of individuals in the least educated category dropped to 43.3%. Differences between the city and countryside were narrower within the 25-29 year old age group, with 10% of young village residents having higher education (against 26.6% in cities), and 32.6 percent having high-school or post-high-school education (against 31.2% in cities).

The level of social capital - measuring the degree of trust, the standard of cooperation and collaboration, and the capacity to establish organizations and associations - is very low in Poland and even lower among village



Merian Zubrzycki/Fotorenga

residents and farmers. Rebuilding social capital is not an easy task, as R. Putnam writes, because unharnessed social capital dies out and we do not have effective methods to revitalize it. The land reforms enacted by the Polish Committee of National Liberation at the end of WWII, the period of the Communist-era authorities' "repressive tolerance" policy towards agriculture, and also, unfortunately, the way in which farmers were written about and talked about during the pivotal period of EU membership negotiations all did little to encourage rural residents to have confidence in the Polish state, political authorities, or opinion-forming elites.

In 2006, only 19% of Poles, 15% of rural residents, and only 5% (!) of farmers reported that they could trust most people. Fortunately, the countryside does have a certain advantage over cities: rural residents' level of trust in local government authorities, towards their own neighbors, and towards strangers is higher than among city residents. Village residents also evidenced a readiness to collaborate with and actively contribute to their own community. This means that following Poland's EU accession, local relations and close bonds with neighbors are serving as a basis for rural Poland to build a modern, modernization-oriented social capital, drawing together people from various communities.

### From periphery to center

On interesting signal is to be found in the changes taking place in the symbolic (cultural) capital in rural areas. The tradition

**Although poverty and unemployment still affect rural areas, modern private farms are changing the face of the Polish countryside. Here Piotr Kubiak stands next to a milk tank capable of holding 6,000 liters - his parents own a 120-hectare farm where they raise 120 cows and 125 heifers**



## Rural Poland after EU accession

Polish political leaders visiting and symbolically opening an investment project implemented under the SAPARD pre-accession program, which proved to be an unexpected success. Applications were filed for 130% of the funding available, and by the end of 2004 some 1.5 billion zlotys had been invested in rural Poland



Sergiusz Pecezek/Agencja Gazeta

of rural-focused or “peasant” political parties as a vehicle for defending the interests of rural residents stretches back more than 100 years in Poland. Farmers and rural residents still seem to mainly trust politicians who are “one of them.”

In the 2001 elections, the Polish Peasants Party (PSL) and Self-Defense were backed by a total of 2.4 million voters (1.1 million for the PSL), marking a record mobilization of the agricultural and rural electorate. Support for rural-focused parties ebbed somewhat in 2005, and in 2007 only the PSL won seats in parliament, winning the support of 8.9% of voters (1.4 million). However, among village residents, both the Civic Platform (28.4%) and Law and Justice (38.5%) won greater support than the PSL (17.4%). That could mean that Poland’s EU entry and the resultant shifting of the decision-making center to Brussels initiated a process reconstructing the symbolic capital of farmers.

De-marginalization entails returning from the periphery back to the center of social, economic, and political life. Over the past 20 years the number of potential voters for “peasant” parties has not reduced, and is even on the rise. Perhaps, therefore, farmers and village residents “finally feel at home” in the Third Polish Republic, and rather than backing “their own” political parties they are instead choosing among the political groups that were previously backed by “urban” society.

### Declaration of support

Despite the skepticism shown by farmers, the EU accession negotiation period already marked the start of important changes. The preparations for European integration saw funding allocated for educating and informing people about the EU itself, European agriculture, and the standards and requirements of the common market. In addition to such training, Polish villages also received money: in 1991–1996, the Cooperation Fund Foundation dedicated €26 million to establish a credit line for the agricultural sector, the PHARE program supported agriculture-related institutions, and the “Stimulation of Rural Areas” Programme allocated a World Bank loan to be spent on rural infrastructure, education, microloans, and workforce retraining in five selected provinces. All of these financial initiatives were accompanied by training, central and local institution-building, and the stimulation of rural areas.

The pre-accession SAPARD program proved to be a first, unexpected success. Skeptics anticipated a fiasco but rural communities turned out to harness the entire pool of funding, with applications filed for 130% of the amount available. By the end of 2004, the program had invested some 1.5 billion zlotys in rural Poland. Thanks to the launch of Agricultural Consultation Centers, the training activity of the Agency for the Restructuring and Modernization



of Agriculture, many NGO initiatives, and media involvement, some 100,000 farms availed themselves of some form of EU-related information, training, or advice.

### Positive emotions in the EU

The Polish countryside had not experienced any initiative on such a scale since WWII. That helped build human and social capital, while every zloty and euro spent also boosted the economic capital of farmers, rural entrepreneurs, the agricultural processing industry, and rural local governments. The measures adopted by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development for 2004–2006, set forth in the Development Plan for Rural Regions (PROW) and the Sectoral Operational Program (SPO), provided for a wide range of support of all three types of capital. Securing funding for low-output farms adapting to meet EU standards or for environmental-agricultural projects required farmers to expand their knowledge and skills in advance. The establishment of producers' groups (under the PROW) and efforts aimed at village renewal and preserving cultural heritage (under the SPO) forced the local elite to work together. The LEADER+ program (under the SPO) encouraged partnership and cooperation between NGOs, local governments, and private capital, thus boosting social capital in rural areas.

Two years of being in the EU altered farmers' attitudes and EU membership is now a source of increasingly positive emotions. Just after the referendum, a June 2003 opinion poll carried out by PBS for *Rzeczpospolita* showed that 61% rural residents and only 34% of farmers backed integration. In April 2007, three years after accession, Poland's membership in the EU was supported by 86% of all Poles, 82% of rural residents, and by 80% of farmers!

On non-agricultural issues, farmers are becoming more similar to other social groups. Their opinions are similar to those of everyone else as concerns enhancing Poland's security and boosting Poles' sense of self-worth. The gap between cities and villages is closing, and rural values are becoming more accepted by the Polish public at large. That may be evidenced by research indicating that not just rural inhabitants are pleased with their place of residence, but that Poles in general appreciate the countryside more than they did 8 years ago (an increase of 12

percentage points). Twice as many residents of the largest cities would like to move to rural areas than previously did.

That does not mean that poverty, low incomes, overcoming educational barriers, and rural Poland's other problems have already been solved. Yet EU integration has ended disputes over the extent to which the Polish state should follow a policy of cohesion, showing solidarity with the country's poorer regions, since Brussels has now become the driving-force of such policy. The Polish countryside stands a real chance of becoming a normal place to live and work for its residents, on par with other places – provided, of course, that we can tackle all the challenges and difficulties involved in modernizing agriculture and ensuring sustainable development in rural areas. ■

#### Further reading:

Fedyszak-Radziejowska B. (Ed.). (2005). *Proces demarginalizacji polskiej wsi. Programy pomocowe, liderzy, elity i organizacje pozarządowe* [The Process of Demarginalizing Rural Poland: Aid Programs, Leaders, Elites, and NGOs]. Warsaw: ISP.



Dorota Awiorho-Klimek/Fotoczepa

Vast changes have been underway in the Polish countryside and among its residents since EU accession. Pictures such as this one are now mostly the stuff of folklore albums