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Chapter 13. Poland's rural areas 20 years after EU accession – synopsis of the Report

Introduction

Just as several previous editions of the *Report*, the present one opens with its synopsis. Previously, the situation of rural areas in Poland was summarised in the introduction by the unforgettable, late Professor Jerzy Wilkin; now, we have to manage without him. Here, we continue his work and maintain this practice, but the content now rests with the author of the chapter. It is a tough challenge and responsibility, in terms of doing justice to the professor and the readers. A synopsis ought to fulfil no fewer than two demanding goals: to accurately and succinctly outline the gist of the work and to encourage the public to read the whole. Therefore, readers are encouraged to explore individual chapters as they provide a much fuller description of the developments taking place in rural areas and agriculture and discuss many interesting topics that are not addressed in this introductory part of the *Report*.

The interest manifested by the general public in agriculture, farmers, and broad rural areas has not diminished despite the progressing (even if not promptly enough) deagrarianisation and a falling share of agriculture in Poland's GDP, as a result of which fewer and fewer people in the rural areas are linked to farming, and agriculture itself is contributing relatively less to the national economy. Such interest is additionally fuelled by the current developments, tensions and crises that result in farming issues hitting the headlines and front pages of newspapers and news websites. The growing food prices raise serious concerns among consumers, while the increasing costs of production, combined with low prices of agricultural produce, are sources of constant worries for food producers. Additionally, recent years have witnessed other phenomena such as some acutely felt, tangible consequences of climate change that call for adaptive measures, the sharp rise in energy prices following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and disruptions in many markets caused by sharp rises and then falls in prices.

The period after the publication of the previous report, *Rural Poland 2022*, also saw increased interest in rural history, mostly as a result of several publications that aroused curiosity and sparked discussion about the many

dimensions of peasantry. Here, we mention three, although many more works also sought to tackle this issue. The public debate was reopened by Adam Leszczyński's *Ludowa historia Polski* [A popular history of Poland], which brought to light issues that were either falsified or suppressed from the Polish memory and appears to be an experience shared by over 90% of Poles. Similarly, Joanna Kuciel-Frydryszak's work titled *Chłopki. Opowieść o naszych babkach* [Peasant women. The story of our grandmothers] also captured the attention of the general public. The author's portrayal of rural Poland based on diaries demystifies its romantic, idyllic vision and shows the hardships of everyday life experienced by our grandmothers and great-grandmothers. The third publication, *Chamstwo* [The pleb] by Kacper Pobłocki, demonstrates how serf peasants perceived the nobility and their Poland. The serfs' past needs to be thoroughly worked through and their tragic plight revealed, while the nobility and magnates of the time ought to be held morally accountable for keeping peasants in bondage and exploiting them boundlessly. Such debate has not been possible until now when the generation not ashamed of their peasant past can make their voice heard and can write and talk about it without the restraints that hamstrung the intelligentsia with peasant roots not so long ago¹. The narrative about our past has been distorted by its nobility-focused interpretations, which obliterated the guilt of serfdom and reduced peasant heritage to folk rituals. We hope that the debate will not abate any time soon and will fill the significant gaps in the thinking about the rural past while restoring, or rather according the right perspective of the collective memory of Poles.

Since 2000, the Foundation for the Development of Polish Agriculture (FDPA) has published biennial reports, which discuss the developments and processes taking place in Poland's rural areas. It is already the 20th anniversary of Poland's accession to the European Union and therefore a pertinent time to discuss rural areas and agriculture in *Rural Poland 2024* to assess the impact of Poland's EU membership on the processes taking place in rural areas. Professor Jerzy Wilkin was an ardent advocate and promoter of Poland's EU membership and would have had a lot to say on this matter. He would also have welcomed the result of the 2023 parliamentary election as it averted the threat of Polexit.

The changes in rural areas are visible. As we travel across Poland, we see many towns, large and small, that have manifestly improved their condition and appearance. The same can be said about villages with new, good roads,

¹ Marian Pilot, who died on 2 February 2024, accurately expressed the shame felt by his generation: "There was no way I could hide my origin, I was ashamed of my roots, although there were thousands of youths just like me who had suddenly arrived in the city. We all felt ashamed, and later, felt shame for feeling this shame." (<https://wyborcza.pl/7,75410,30662456,nie-zyje-marian-pilot-odszedl-wybitny-pisarz-straznik-slow.html>, accessed on 3.02.2024).

newly built houses and well-kept older ones. Polish villages are both more affluent and prettier after 20 years of EU membership. These are positive changes. However, if we drive through villages after dark, we will notice how many homes have no lights on, and how many streets in small towns are unoccupied. These are all symptoms of rural depopulation, quite considerable in some regions. The Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and regional policy measures were unable to halt that trend. Nevertheless, we could only imagine the scale and extent of depopulation in the absence of such measures and funds. However, there is also now a converse trend of people moving from cities to villages, resulting in a rapid increase of the population in villages situated in the vicinity of large cities. In many such locations, the urbanisation pressure is heavy, with agricultural production being eased out, and traffic jams forming in access roads during rush hours. The negative consequences of the process are further exacerbated by the lack of zoning policies and insufficient attention given to ensuring comfortable living spaces for the residents' communities. Our *Reports* pointed out that the cultural and spatial identity of the landscape was being lost and its unique traits obliterated. The poor awareness of landscape assets and the lack of effective spatial planning are leading to the depletion of landscape values. Decisive and systemic actions are needed to raise such awareness and help improve responsible spatial management.

Identifying the economic and social processes taking place in rural areas and agriculture poses a serious challenge as many phenomena evade statistical measurement. One such example is the structure of agricultural farms or real employment in agriculture. These are the challenges not only for statistics but, first and foremost, for agricultural and social policies. Nonetheless, such policies can hardly be formulated in the absence of reliable information. Finding an effective solution, and a good model for the farmland market is a pressing issue not only for formal and legal reasons. The current situation, whereby non-formalised land leases are quite common, poses a systemic barrier to the development of agriculture in Poland. An unstable lease, in which there is the risk that the land cultivated by one active farmer in a given year will be passed on by the owner to another farmer in the next year, hinders, if not precludes, taking long-term investment decisions. Farming production will not grow if there is no investment. Concerning employment policy, smallholders still need support in acquiring new competencies and formalising their employment status. An informal labour market in the "grey economy" not only means lower budgetary revenues, but above all, means that those employed in this way have no social security insurance. This is yet another development barrier arising from an incomplete use of the labour pool available in rural communities.

There is also a pressing need to secure the tools needed to collect statistical information about agriculture that shows its true picture because their absence makes it difficult to formulate a desirable agricultural policy and effectively implement the existing policies. Given the statistical distortions in the portrayal of rural areas and agriculture, we need to make an informed use of qualitative analysis tools. This is what the authors of the *Report's* chapters do. As a result, and despite the occasionally subjective opinions or selection of individual topics, the readers are offered a comprehensive view of the rural areas and their transformation over the last two decades. Because of a careful selection of the authors, who are eminent experts in their respective fields and scholars of diverse interests, the sum of all such subjectivities is objectivised.

13.1. Rural residents

Poland's EU accession accelerated demographic changes in rural areas. By happy coincidence, a national census was conducted in the year when the accession negotiations were finalised (December 2002), as it captured the society's portrayal on the eve of Poland joining the EU. Almost two decades later, in 2021, another national census was taken. In their analysis of these two censuses, Monika Stanny and Łukasz Komorowski offer a very interesting picture of rural demographic changes. The authors have primarily focused on phenomena such as ageing and changes in the economic activity of rural residents. National censuses are the most comprehensive source of information on the country's population and also include many aspects viewed spatially at the local level, while the collaboration of statisticians and the thematic scopes, definitions and classifications being agreed at the supranational level, make comparisons with other EU countries considerably easier.

By allowing the free movement of people², the European Union both facilitated and accelerated various forms of migration; notably, it added to the significance of the category of "resident population"³ that helps determine the number of rural residents and migrants. The category of resident population so defined enables estimating the number of people who have been living abroad for a long time. National censuses indicate that from 2002 to 2021, the number of resident rural population increased by over 366,000 people, i.e., over 2.5%. This was a continuation of the trend initiated at the turn of the century, pointing to the changing balance of population flows between urban and rural areas.

² Particularly within the Schengen Area, which Poland accessed in December 2007.

³ The term denotes the total number of people living/residing in a given area for at least 12 months.

The calculation method for determining the “actual”⁴ or “resident” has various significant consequences. Many people who are officially registered as permanent residents have long lived abroad, and yet they are regarded as residents in the statistics. This is yet another example of how statistics fails to cope with complex realities. Such results are due to overstated employment figures in agriculture, in which many “farmers” have left Poland and work abroad, but unofficially lease out their land to active farmers, pay their social security contributions (KRUS) and are formally counted as employed in agriculture.

Poland ought to follow the UN recommendation and accurately count the resident population. According to the 2021 national census, the number of resident rural population was nearly 446,000 lower than that of the actual population. Such an overestimation of the population size leads to distortions in the distribution of seats in the parliamentary elections, inappropriately allocated subsidies, etc.

The differences between regions and subregions need also to be taken into account when writing about demographic changes. The general picture can be quite misleading and, therefore, we need to look at the local (municipal) level to get a good grasp of the demographic situation in Poland’s rural areas. One-third of municipalities are increasing their population, while in two-thirds, the number of residents is falling. In the former group, it is mainly due to the influx of new residents, and in the latter – to their outflow. It is likely that in the municipalities with reducing populations, the number of people is overestimated and in reality, fewer residents live there than it appears from the statistical data.

Another serious challenge is the changing age structure. Ageing has resulted in an increase in the proportion of the post-working age population in the total rural population from 15.5% in 2004 to 19.8% in 2022. At the other end of the age pyramid, there has been a 2.5 percentage point (pp) fall in the pre-working age population (aged 0–17). These changes also have specific regional characteristics.

In this context, the authors of Chapter 3 show the changes in the economic activity of rural residents. Since Poland joined the EU, the economic activity ratio has gone up by a mere 3.3 pp to 59.4 % and is still much lower than that of urban residents. These values also increased in Eastern Poland, although admittedly, the observable increase in rural areas is relatively small, given the simultaneous growth in the number of economically passive persons (old-age pensioners) and the emigration of many working-age individuals. Pockets of low employment can be found in various locations of the country, at the

⁴ In practice, it denotes the number of people officially registered as residents.

boundary of Mazowieckie and Świętokrzyskie provinces, in Central Pomera-
nia and the Warmia-Mazury region.

The changes being observed in the proportions of landless and farming
populations and the level of their economic activity are captivatingly described.
This is yet another area where statistical data do not suffice to explain a complex
reality. The changes in economic activity translate into changes in the sources
and income levels of rural residents.

The recent decades have been the finest period in the history of Poland's rural
areas; never before have so many rural residents enjoyed such relatively good
standards of living. Naturally, even today, there will be individuals or whole
families suffering privation, but their number is getting smaller. The question
of poverty is discussed in more detail in one of the chapters of the *Report*.
It should be emphasised that the situation of the rural population, including
farmers, and the factors determining the quality of life of rural residents were
significantly affected by EU membership; it was largely the reason behind
increased farmer incomes and decreased disparities in the incomes and living
conditions between the rural and urban populations. As Józef Zegar and
Barbara Chmielewska explain, rural areas are becoming desirable places in
which to live. This was made possible by extending the EU's CAP instruments
to Poland's agriculture and villages, access to the single market, increased
demand for agricultural produce and expansion of the labour markets. The
living conditions in rural areas and small towns were improved thanks to
investment funds from the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF)
and funds for vocational activation and counteracting social exclusion from
the European Social Fund (ESF).

Since 2004, the nominal per capita income of rural residents increased 3.5-
fold and, importantly, the structure of income sources has improved and the
share of income from work grew from 37% in 2004 to 51% in 2022, whereas
the share of social benefits decreased from 39% to 29%. The latter was a
consequence of the fall in the number of retired farmers under the individual
social security system from 1.709 million in 2004 to 1.037 million in 2021. In
2020, the non-farming rural population represented 72% of the total urban
population as compared to 55% in 2002. In the analysed period, the share of
farmer households fell from 13.4% in 2002 to 8.5% in 2021, and the share of
dual-career households increased from 27% in 2002 to 36% in 2021⁵.

The farmers' revenues noted a significant positive change. From 2004 to
2022, incomes from agriculture in 2010 fixed prices increased from PLN 23.6
billion to PLN 36 billion. In farms reporting to the Farm Accountancy Data

⁵ This measure is probably also affected by a statistical flaw due to the non-disclosure of leases. It is
very likely that the majority of dual-career households are in fact employee households.

Network (FADN), nominal income by farm per full-time employee increased by 259%, from PLN 13,000 to PLN 46,000, which is a real increase of 81%.

The improving standards and quality of life of rural residents are well illustrated by changes in the level and structure of household expenditure. In 2004–2022, monthly per capita expenditure grew by 136%, whereas the ratio of expenditure to income fell from 96% to 64%, which denotes increased savings and investments of households to upgrade the living standards of families. Similarly favourable changes could be observed in the expenditure structure. Although the pre-existing disparities were not obliterated, they were considerably reduced, and the differences between urban and rural areas regarding total expenditure and expenditure on essential needs were significantly improved. Many changes in the indicators suggest that the lifestyles and living standards of urban and rural residents are increasingly being aligned.

According to the authors of the chapter on farmers' incomes: "The accession to the European Union considerably increased farmers' incomes [...] during the 20 years of Poland's EU membership, the living standards have seen a greater increase in rural areas than in cities".

These findings are corroborated by the relative poverty rate, which fell from 18.1% in 2005 to 11.8% in 2022. Notwithstanding the above, rural areas still suffer more from poverty and more individuals are at risk of deprivation than is the case in cities. Although the falling poverty values in the last two decades are a significant improvement, the increase in poverty rates over the last three years is a source of serious concern. The popular perception of deprivation has also increased. Despite all these improvements, rural residents remain at much greater risk of poverty than urban dwellers, for several underlying reasons, discussed by Sławomir Kalinowski in the chapter on successes and social challenges. Poverty is associated with social exclusion in many spheres, first and foremost transport exclusion, which leads to subsequent exclusions from access to goods and services. Despite the professed pro-social stance of the ruling party, Law and Justice (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* – PiS, in power from 2015 to 2023) and their Family 500+ scheme, rural poverty has increased over the past three years. The Covid-19 pandemic, Russia's invasion of Ukraine and growing energy prices all contributed to this. The popular perception of poverty increased, and the worsening situation was corroborated by the Gini coefficient, which in 2022 was 0.318 in rural areas and 0.304 in cities and indicated growing social stratification in rural areas. Since there are many very wealthy people living in rural areas, the value of the coefficient is higher than that in cities. This is further exacerbated by more difficult access to public services, which is still far from satisfactory despite considerable EU support for many investment projects. Recent years have seen a rapid increase in the

range of services, both commercial and public, offered online. However, while online access improves accessibility for many, it marginalises and excludes those who limited Internet access, and lack the necessary equipment or digital competencies to be able to make use of such services.

When analysing rural poverty, we should take into account spatial differences, both at the country level and between regions. At regional level for example, Eastern Poland (the so-called “Eastern Wall”), has a fragmented agrarian structure in which not all smallholders have been able to cope, while the persisting challenges in the north and west of Poland are labour market inclusion and life prospects improvement for the residents of former state farms (PGRs). The most taxing situation in terms of poverty and social exclusion can be found in the provinces of Warmińsko-Mazurskie, Podlaskie and Lubelskie. Within regions, poverty is associated with peripheral places of residence.

There is much to be done and improved, especially since Poland is among the countries with the highest disparities regarding poverty and social exclusion between urban and rural areas (11.6 pp), even though the average values for Poland's rural areas are similar to those of the EU at large.

In the words of Sławomir Kalinowski, “... although the socioeconomic situation of rural residents was much improved upon the EU accession, it remains worse than that of urban residents, and the indicators presented are far from the expectations laid down in Agenda 2030. Therefore, structural measures are needed at international, national and local levels to address the existing disparities between rural and urban areas. These measures should foster the activity of the rural population and create conditions for the smart development of rural areas while respecting their unique cultural, landscape and environmental values. Crucially, they ought to be customised and addressed to specific areas and take into account their functional differences, socioeconomic situation, opportunities and resources. Only then can the living conditions of the rural population be realistically improved”.

13.2. Changes in attitudes and political choices

Changes in the rural areas not only encompass the external ones referred to in the introduction above but also those associated with the evolution of people's attitudes. Until relatively recently, the particular nature of rural areas was taken for granted and was viewed as a consequence of the unique features of their communities, the type of work and how it was done. It was also seen as a consequence of being immersed in the local community, which to a large extent shaped such attitudes and forged the opinions of its members on various

topics. According to Barbara Fedyszak-Radziejowska, from the 1980s onwards, also thanks to EU membership, the distinctive characteristics of rural residents became less acute, and the lifestyles, attitudes and financial situation of rural and urban residents became more similar. In Barbara Fedyszak-Radziejowska's words, such factors as the impact of EU membership, participation in its programmes, including the use of CAP instruments, and the resultant increased activity of rural residents, "helped the rural areas «return to Poland via Brussels»". People's attitudes are changing, and so is the perception of rural areas, one proof of which is perceiving the act of moving to rural areas as social advancement. Plus, the farming profession has significantly risen on the scale of professional prestige.

Directly before Poland's European Union accession, many farmers were aware that changes were needed. Nonetheless, many of them saw the Common Agricultural Policy as a threat rather than an opportunity to make desirable improvements. This was probably fear of the unknown, since even in 2002 about 25% of farmers had heard of the CAP, and another 42% knew such a measure existed but little more. The concerns of rural residents concerning the consequences of EU accession were reflected in the results of the 2003 accession referendum. In the referendum, both rural and urban residents expressed their support for the accession. However, the turnout in rural areas was 12 pp lower, and there were 17 pp fewer votes in favour than in cities⁶. Similarly, the degree of support for EU membership varied from region to region. After accession and progressive familiarisation with EU policy instruments, these initial fears subsided, and support for Poland's membership increased, particularly strongly in rural areas. Jan Bartkowski, in his chapter on the political behaviours of rural residents⁷, cites the interesting case of the Godziszów municipality (in Lubelskie province), where 88% of residents opposed Poland's accession to the EU in the referendum. However, the local authorities and residents soon recognised the new opportunities created by the accession and were able to embrace them. In effect, as early as 2010, Godziszów boasted a distinction in the ranking of the absorption of EU assistance, which boosted the development of the municipal infrastructure.

The evolving opinions of rural residents and farmers on Poland's integration with the European Union are well illustrated in Table 1.1. One should bear in mind that these opinions were influenced by many factors. On the one hand, these included tangible and visible benefits of membership, and on the other, the strongly anti-EU stances of the coalition in power from 2015

⁶ More information can be found in the chapter: *Polityka i wieś w XX-lecie akcesji do UE* [Politics and rural areas 20 years after EU accession].

⁷ It is recommended to read the chapter authored by Jerzy Bartkowski after the chapter by Barbara Fedyszak-Radziejowska.

to 2023. The findings from CBOS (*Centrum Badań Opinii Społecznej - Public Opinion Research Centre*) suggest that the effectiveness of the communication made by the Law and Justice party, with support from the Catholic Church, was limited, at least regarding EU membership. The consequences of accession are apparent when we compare the 2019 data with the data for 2023. Looking at 2023 values, it is important to recognise the new situation in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the resultant spike in the prices of means of production, energy in particular. Such a change of heart should not be found surprising if we add disruptions in the market for grains and other agricultural produce caused by sharp rises and then falls in prices

Table 13.1. Opinions on Poland's EU integration (in %)

Socioeconomic groups	Are you personally in favour of or against Poland's membership of the European Union?							
	I am in favour				I am against			
	2003	2016	2019	2023	2003	2016	2019	2023
Total	63.0	81.0	91.0	85.0	30.0	10.0	5.0	10.0
Residents of the largest cities	77.0	90.0	96.0	90.0	19.0	6.0	4.0	8.0
Residents of rural areas	51.0	78.0	90.0	81.0	39.0	11.0	4.0	13.0
Farmers	38.0	89.0	88.0	75.0	57.0	7.0	5.0	14.0

Source: CBOS Komunikat BS/182/2003, 31/2016, 59/2019, 55/2023.

During the 20 years of EU membership, rural residents and farmers had a growing sense of agency as regards their influence on public affairs, both at the national and local (municipal) level. A sense of empowerment was particularly strengthened among farmers. Rural residents are willing to engage in work for their community, and this readiness was on the increase until the Covid-19 pandemic when it stabilised at a relatively high level.

In the words of Barbara Fedyszak-Radziejowska: the stances and opinions “clearly show the consequences of Poland's presence in the European Union and substantiate the opinion on the favourable impact of such presence on the self-esteem of farmers and rural residents alike. ... Both these groups, farmers and rural residents, have the right to see Poland's EU presence as a major, positive development factor, one that they have made a superb use of”.

Professor Jerzy Wilkin often said that whoever wins the elections in rural areas will win them in the whole country. There can be little wonder, therefore, that our *Reports* devote considerable attention to political preferences and electoral decisions of rural residents, including farmers. In the present edition of the *Report*, we discuss this matter at length due to the importance of the

parliamentary election held on 15 October 2023 and offer a view of how these preferences and decisions fluctuated from the pre-accession period until October 2023. In the chapter titled *Politics and rural areas 20 years after EU accession*, Jerzy Bartkowski analyses 17 elections, focusing on the decisions made by rural voters. The author reaffirms that “irrespective of where they live, Poles are ardent supporters of EU membership. The war in Ukraine provided new, strong and convincing arguments in favour. Eurosceptic attitudes in Poland are few and far between”.

Among the 20th- and 21st-century events that were regarded as having crucial significance for Poland, accession to the EU was ranked fourth⁸. In this context, all Polish elections have a European dimension that needs to be considered if the voters’ decisions and behaviours are to be better understood. Analyses suggest that support for EU membership is stable among the Polish public and has increased over time⁹. Poles appreciate the benefits and advantages of being an EU member, and by and large are in favour of more integration. Rural residents and farmers do not differ significantly from the public at large. Having said that, low voter turnout in European elections may be found somewhat surprising, and rural residents are less interested in them than urban voters. Elections to the European Parliament have the lowest turnout of all elections in Poland, making Poland no different than other Member States in this respect. Many more citizens cast their vote in the 2019 European elections, mostly as a result of the mass mobilisation of supporters of both the ruling coalition and the then opposition. This is yet another example corroborating the claim posited by Jerzy Bartkowski that the national elections are intertwined with the European ones. The high turnout did not stem from sudden interest in the policies of the EU but was a reflection of the domestic activity of political parties. The chapter offers an interesting analysis of the distribution of votes in consecutive European elections among political parties and election blocs. It is a succinct portrayal of political developments in Poland over the last 20-plus years and demonstrates how the preferences of rural residents have changed over that period.

Different rules apply to local elections, which are more important for rural voters than European elections. In such elections, particularly at the municipal level, electors vote for specific individuals rather than parties or groupings and, importantly, have a sense of agency. Voters either already have an opinion or follow the choices of those around them; they tend to opt for stability and the familiar rather than the unfamiliar. Such a stance often means the re-election of village or town mayors. Overall, rural residents are satisfied with their

⁸ CBOS, October 2014.

⁹ It slightly fell in the final years of the previous, Law and Justice government, following strident anti-EU propaganda.

voting decisions because they have a positive opinion of the local authorities, according to CBOS polls.

An analysis of the presidential elections in 2000–2020 indicates that on several occasions their outcome was determined by rural voters and that since the 2005 election, the distinct character of the rural electorate has come to the fore with the popularity of the Law and Justice party consistently on the increase. The general public was surprised by the results of the 2015 election and the defeat of the incumbent president, Bronisław Komorowski. The Law and Justice candidate received unexpectedly massive support; this, coupled with the “protest” votes cast for Paweł Kukiz in the first round and the weakness of the left-wing candidate secured victory for the Law and Justice candidate, in the second round.

In the 2020 election, the incumbent president, Andrzej Duda, received robust support in the first round, which in the second increased enough to secure him a comfortable victory over Rafał Trzaskowski, who failed to win a sufficient number of votes from urban residents. It was the urban electorate that ensured the second round, but the victory was determined by the rural electorate, which was mobilised to vote with the considerable efforts of the Law and Justice party machine and support from state institutions and funds.

Jerzy Bartkowski analysed the progress and results of seven parliamentary elections in 2001–2019, and separately in the 2023 election. Special attention accorded to the latter in this insightful analysis stems from their role in upholding and rebuilding democracy in Poland. The author looks at the reasons underpinning the defeat of Law and Justice in the last election. Yet again, rural voters decided their outcome: the support for Law and Justice in 2019 was 60%, compared to a mere 39% in 2023. “Law and Justice lost its support in all groups, which mostly took place in 2020–2023, that is the period of the pandemic and the war in Ukraine. This was the worst possible loss, being significant in size and affecting many groups. It took place among the strongest Law and Justice advocates such as rural residents, among the less educated and among typical, perfunctory Catholics. One distinctive feature can be observed: if we look at these results in terms of mutual relations of support and rejection, we will see the tipping point: the group that no longer votes mostly for Law and Justice, characteristically shifts in the subsequent election: towards older age, to smaller towns, fewer educated groups and more religious ones. This means that the popular support for Law and Justice is dwindling, and opposition to it is expanding. More and more often, it encompasses less educated and elderly people, and is starting to reach religious ones too; it is not restricted to the largest cities, but permeates to smaller towns and rural communities”.

13.3. Polish agriculture under the Common Agricultural Policy – the challenges of the single market and the European Green Deal

Many of us can still recall pre-accession fears concerning Polish agriculture. They were voiced in Poland, by the European Commission and in Member States and epitomised by the picture of a horse-drawn cart, which symbolised Poland's backwardness. The well-prepared and constructive negotiations to bring Poland into the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) mechanisms, the enthusiasm and commitment of farmers, as well as institutional support, were all factors that enabled Polish farmers to make effective use of CAP instruments to develop agricultural production. In parallel, obtaining access to the single market provided a boost for the growth of production and exports. Many indicators confirm the root-and-branch transformation of Polish agriculture: its share of GDP, which in 2004, oscillated around 4.5%, fell to 2.2% in 2021. This was a result of the robust development of the whole economy, whereby the role of agriculture decreased to some extent despite its dynamic growth. Thanks to the CAP transfers, investment in agriculture nearly doubled during the 20 years of EU membership in which as many as 45% of such investments were co-financed by EU funds.

According to the chapter's authors, Agnieszka Baer-Nawrocka and Walenty Poczta, Poland still has high rates of employment in agriculture, i.e., 9.8% in 2021, which was nonetheless a considerable decrease compared to 2004, when 15.4% of all people in work were employed in agriculture. In most Member States, these values range from 1% to 3%. Although these wide differences between Poland and other countries can partly be explained by the statistical difficulties, there can be little doubt that agriculture still suffers from overemployment. Its negative consequences include low labour productivity and lost potential benefits of more efficient use of the surplus labour pool in other sectors of the economy. As mentioned above, more effective ways of vocational activation of those whose work cannot find full use in agriculture need to be found.

Although in 2002–2020 the number of farms shrank by 640,000, the average farm area in 2020 was only 11.3 ha. This is six times smaller than in countries such as Germany and France. However, these values are partly distorted because unofficially leased land is not reflected in the statistics, meaning that the average size of a market-oriented farm is much larger, but there is no way of knowing exactly what it is. Despite the relatively unfavourable agrarian structure, agricultural production has consistently increased since Poland's EU accession, recording an average annual growth of 2.34%, 35% higher than in 2004.

Agriculture has proved a huge export success. In 2022, the share of agri-foods in Poland's exports was 14% (compared to a 2.2% share in GDP). Also, the structure of exports is steadily improving, incorporating more and more processed, higher value-added products.

Agriculture is a beneficiary of the CAP and has made good use of the opportunities it offers, but simple reserves have now been depleted, the competitive advantage in the form of lower prices has diminished and new methods of maintaining competitiveness need to be found, and the available reserves prudently tapped into. In 2020, the share of Polish agriculture in the EU-27 production was 6.6%, with 17.6% labour input and 9.5% land resources, which shows the extent of the existing reserves. These reserves mainly include labour resources and their low productivity, in addition to land productivity, which remains approximately 30% lower than the EU's average.

In the pre-accession period, Poland was a beneficiary of the Phare¹⁰ and SAPARD¹¹ programmes, which helped the central administration and local governments at various levels to acquire hands-on experience in project implementation. The Regional Development Project (RDP)¹² also played a significant role. Funded from loans and with technical support from the World Bank, the RDP largely helped establish and develop the provincial branches of the Agency for the Restructuring and Modernisation of Agriculture, or ARMA (*Agencja Restrukturyzacji i Modernizacji Rolnictwa*). ARMA's institutional capacity was strengthened with the support from SAPARD – Special Accession Programme for Agriculture and Rural Development. The Programme was designed as an instrument to assist countries applying for EU membership and back the structural transition of rural areas in the candidate countries. As a programme promoting the transformation of agriculture, SAPARD aimed to prepare institutions and beneficiaries in the candidate countries to make use of the CAP instruments after they accede to the European Union. Without a well-prepared system of institutions or support to beneficiaries such a masterly utilisation of the funds and their absorption would not have been possible. Additionally, one of the difficulties in the preparations for the CAP was that the policy changed over time, and it was not quite clear during the preparatory period¹³ what needed to be prepared for, as the policy's goals shifted.

¹⁰ <http://www.fapa.org.pl/fapa-1992-2017/dzialalnosc-wdrozeniowa/9-programy-phare> (accessed on 15.01.2024).

¹¹ <https://www.gov.pl/web/arimr/sapard> (accessed on 15.01.2024).

¹² <http://fapa.org.pl/fapa-1992-2017/dzialalnosc-wdrozeniowa/10-program-aktywizacji-obszarow-wiejskich> (dostęp 15.01.2024).

¹³ The 1999 Berlin Summit adopted Agenda 2000, and the Luxembourg Summit approved another package of changes to the CAP in 2003.

In 2002–2022, ARMA paid out PLN 395 billion (including SAPARD)¹⁴, of which PLN 234 billion constituted direct payments, and PLN 128 billion was expended on modernisation projects in agriculture and the processing industry. These aggregate amounts are quite impressive and, importantly, were well-spent. According to Iwona Nurzyńska, “the scale of financial assistance received by Poland after the accession and earmarked for the modernisation of agriculture and improvement of the living conditions facilitated a fundamental civilisational transformation in the standards of life in Poland’s rural areas. As a result, there are few pronounced differences in many aspects of the living conditions between urban and rural areas”. This chapter of the *Report* confirms yet again that the living conditions of the rural population have improved, and that agriculture is undergoing change, although not at a sufficient pace. Agriculture is visibly becoming professionalised and there is a growing number of market-oriented farms.

During CAP implementation, some mistakes were made in defining the criteria for the application of particular instruments, mostly as a result of decisions subordinated to ad-hoc political gains or due to insufficient analyses of the anticipated impact of specific regulations. With better use of structural pensions and support for young farmers, the changes in the agrarian structure would most likely have been more advanced. In some cases, it was a lack of imagination, as was the case with manure storage pads paid from public funds, which were soon abandoned due to animal husbandry being discontinued in many farms.

Despite the two decades of Poland’s EU membership, not all of its benefits have been identified, nor have they in agriculture. Therefore, in this edition of the *Report* Karolina Pawlak outlines another, no less important context of EU’s agricultural policy and practice. While being a beneficiary of the CAP involves substantial financial transfers that are easy to calculate and express in monetary terms, the benefits of participation in the single European market are not so easy to assess. The participation in the single market and the EU’s common trade policy in relations with other countries have created very favourable conditions for the development of the food sector in Poland, dynamic growth of exports and a positive trade balance. Some of the benefits can easily be measured and quantified, while others are less tangible. These include, for example, a much wider choice for the consumer and access to a diverse diet regardless of the time of year.

¹⁴ Including the pre-accession assistance (SAPARD), in 2002–2022 ARMA paid out nearly PLN 285 billion. This amount comprised the required national co-financing from the Rural Development Programmes, incl. the financing of complementary area payments agreed in the Accession Treaty until 2013.

Skilful adaptation to the requirements of the single market has enabled the development of the food sector: in 2010–2020 alone, the value of production rose by 56%. Notably, the growth rate of the sector was higher than the average in other Member States, indicating a relatively strong resilience to disruptions in the supply chains caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, which led to the value of agri-food exports being maintained at a high level in 2019–2021.

It was already clear in the pre-accession period that if the potential of Polish agriculture was to be brought to fruition, a well-functioning processing industry and viable market channels for the sale of produced and processed foods would be needed. That was why the SAPARD¹⁵ allocation to improve the processing and marketing of agricultural and fishery products accounted for approximately 38% of its total budget¹⁶. A well-functioning processing industry and receptive sales markets stimulate the demand for agricultural production and promote the development of agriculture. The processing sector accelerated its growth after the EU accession. The years 2004–2022 saw a steady growth of foreign investments and domestic companies in the food industry. The presence of transnational corporations boosted competition and encouraged domestic enterprises to undertake modernisation efforts and improve productivity. In effect, post-2007, the development rate of the food industry in Poland was much higher than in other Member States in terms of turnover and added value.

The access to the single market also brought benefits for consumers, enabled exports to expand in range and helped improve the quality of products. Above all, however, thanks to the extensive imports of many products, including exotic ones, consumer choices were broadened, and the quality and variety of foods were improved.

Today, few question the fact that climate change has accelerated, directly threatening the livelihoods of many communities around the world. Migrations and the migratory pressure on the European Union are effects of armed conflicts but also climate change as wars lead to a struggle for resources, including water. Agriculture has contributed to, and continues to accelerate, climate change and greenhouse gas emissions. The environmental aspects of agriculture are discussed in the *Report* by Mariusz Matyka, Jerzy Kozyra and Grzegorz Siebielec.

One response to climate change is the European Green Deal (EGD) programme¹⁷, which in agriculture is to be implemented via the Farm to Fork (F2F) strategy¹⁸. In July 2023 the European Commission “adopted a package of

¹⁵ <https://www.gov.pl/web/arimr/sapard> (accessed on 2.02.2024).

¹⁶ The author of the chapter in question coordinated the preparation of the SAPARD programme for Poland in 1999–2000.

¹⁷ https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal_pl (accessed on 1.02.2024).

¹⁸ https://food.ec.europa.eu/horizontal-topics/farm-fork-strategy_en?prefLang=pl (accessed on 1.02.2024).

measures for a sustainable use of natural resources”¹⁹. This legislation, when implemented, is expected to increase the resilience of European food systems and agriculture. The package proposes a new soil law, a Community regulation on plants grown using new genomic techniques, as well as measures intended to reduce food and textile waste. The adopted regulations can be viewed as a natural next step in putting to life the commitments arising from the EGD.

In Poland, the implementation of the agricultural portion of the EGD was postponed, or rather partly factored into, the Strategy for Sustainable Rural, Agricultural and Fisheries Development 2030, which was operationalised in the CAP Strategic Plan of Poland for 2023–2027. The environmental and climate-related goals of the Plan are to be fulfilled using measures such as eco-schemes and allocation of no less than 40% of the funding to environmental and climate-related activities. The authors of the chapter are right in stating that “the main challenge for scientists, policymakers, social activists and farmers is to adopt a development path that will help continue or strengthen the already high environmental protection standards while maintaining the production potential and competitiveness of both Polish and EU’s agriculture”.

In the face of farmer protests across the EU, the execution of the EGD is to be softened. If that happens, it will bring harm to the environment and the generations to come. As Margaret Atwood forewarns “It’s not the Earth that will cease to exist – it’s us if we do not come to our senses. And we are at a critical juncture”²⁰.

13.4. Rural enterprise

Professor Jerzy Wilkin stated that “rural businesses have their unique characteristics: typically, they are family-owned microenterprises operating locally that have strong links with the food sector and a low level of technical facilities. These factors limit their competitiveness. For this reason, they require specific development policies, encompassing streamlined regulations, simplified audit measures and easier access to financial services and the business environment. Specific solutions dedicated to rural micro-entrepreneurs need to be created, to set up a system that is entrepreneur-friendly: clear, stable and as easy to implement as possible”²¹.

¹⁹ https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal/agriculture-and-green-deal_en (accessed on 1.02.2024).

²⁰ <https://wyborcza.pl/7,75517,30660363,margaret-atwood-feminizm-rozumiany-jest-dzis-na-przynajmniej.html> (accessed on 9.02.2024).

²¹ *Przedsiębiorczość na wsi – współczesne wyzwania i koncepcje rozwoju*, collective work, FDPA, Warsaw 2014, p. 42. For the FDPA, rural enterprise represents a major aspect of its activity, and receives support mainly in the form of loans. Long before the EU accession, soon after the dismantlement of state farms

Mirosław Drygas summarised the programmes that promoted the development of enterprises during the pre-accession period and afterwards: Phare²², Rural Development Project (RDP)²³ and SAPARD²⁴. The RDP aimed to contribute funds, investments, know-how and skills to broadly understood economic development of rural areas and support the implementation of the *Structural Cohesion Policy for Rural Development and Agriculture*.

The RDP had three main objectives:

- increase the level of off-farm employment in rural areas,
- contribute to the ongoing decentralisation of self-government and regional development,
- assist Poland in building institutional capacity to absorb EU pre-accession and structural funds.

It was agreed with the World Bank that the loan would be used for the development of the private sector and human resources, including a retraining programme, improvement of education in rural areas, strengthening of local and regional administration institutions and the development of infrastructure in rural areas to create conditions for growth and promote enterprise. The RDP was co-financed from a World Bank loan of USD 120 million, and its budget totalled USD 301 million (including local government, central budget and other funds). It was the second largest programme (with SAPARD) designed to support the restructuring of rural areas in Poland before the EU accession and during the first years of membership. Although SAPARD had a much greater budget (over EUR 1 billion) its allocation to off-farm enterprise totalled 7.66%, i.e. slightly over EUR 80 million.

Both in the case of SAPARD and in the later operational programmes, off-farm activity and rural development received less allocation than agriculture. The relevant funding was invariably limited, and even if there was a larger allocation at the programming stage, e.g., for the diversification of economic activity in rural areas, these amounts were curbed during programme implementation, and transferred to other agricultural schemes. Most importantly, however, as the *Report* points out, on very many occasions, the funds were transferred from Pillar II to Pillar I of the CAP.

(so-called PGRs), the Foundation expanded its scope of activity and focused on promoting enterprise and creating off-farm jobs in rural areas and small towns. Rural residents needed the know-how, skills and funds to put their ideas to life while seeking a new role for themselves in the changing realities of the time. These needs were addressed by the provision of training programmes, advisory services, grants and loans for off-farm startups. Another example of such involvement was the 2014 project implemented jointly with the Institute of Geography and Spatial Organisation of the Polish Academy of Sciences (IGSO PAS), which sought to answer the question: How to support the development of rural enterprise to foster the creation of new businesses and help the existing ones to improve their competitive advantages and create new jobs?

²² <http://www.fapa.org.pl/fapa-1992-2017/dzialalnosc-wdrozeniowa/9-programy-phare> (accessed on 15.01.2024).

²³ <http://fapa.org.pl/fapa-1992-2017/dzialalnosc-wdrozeniowa/10-program-aktywizacji-obszarow-wiejskich> (accessed on 15.01.2024).

²⁴ <https://www.gov.pl/web/arimr/sapard> (accessed on 15.01.2024).

From the very onset of Poland's EU membership, the LEADER approach and its Local Action Groups (LAGs) played a major part in promoting rural enterprise. In 2014, LEADER was extended under the community-led local development, financed by several EU funds²⁵.

According to Eurostat, the decade between 2008 and 2018 in Poland saw an over 20% increase in the number of enterprises in rural areas, which suggests a rekindling of entrepreneurial spirit and economic activity²⁶. In discussing enterprise promotion programmes, Mirosław Drygas demonstrates how much has been done to encourage entrepreneurialism and evaluates the results based on the monitoring of rural areas. He poses a difficult question, whether Poland has done enough to fully tap into the potential of off-farm enterprise. The answer to this and several other questions can be found in the *Report*.

13.5. Poland's rural areas and agriculture from the perspective of the European Union

Before accession, many politicians in Poland perceived rural areas and agriculture as a “problem” hindering accession to the European Union. In the EU, in turn, different circles were concerned about the competitiveness of Polish agriculture, but its perception in the context of EU enlargement varied, depending on the country, knowledge and types of interests involved. There was never, and is yet to be, a universal EU perception of Polish rural areas and agriculture, and this pre-accession image was most often built on myths and stereotypes. From the pre-accession period through various phases and periods of Poland's membership of the European Union, the perception of Polish rural areas and agriculture has fluctuated and changed.

Jerzy Plewa, the author²⁷ of the chapter devoted to these issues, analyses this topic from the start of the accession negotiations until 2023 from different angles. As he writes: “These changes are particularly evident when it comes to the perception of Poland's participation in shaping the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) within the successive reforms of Community policies, the multiannual financial framework, increasingly pressing environmental and climate issues, and the prospect of Ukraine's accession to the EU. In Poland, after 20 years of EU membership, it is still very often forgotten that the European

²⁵ https://ec.europa.eu/enrd/leader-clld/leader-toolkit/leaderclld-explained_pl.html (accessed on 12.02.2024).

²⁶ KSOW+ <https://www.ksowplus.pl/rozwoj-obszarow-wiejskich/przedsiębiorczosc-na-wsi> (accessed on 12.02.2024).

²⁷ In 1997–2004 Jerzy Plewa served as Secretary of State at the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development. A member of the team negotiating Poland's EU accession in the field of agriculture. In 2006–2013, he was Deputy Director General, and in 2013–2020 Director General, in the Directorate General for Agriculture and Rural Development of the European Commission.

Union is all the Member States and not just Poland and Poles. How Polish rural areas and agriculture are perceived in the EU depends to a large extent on what narrative about the EU, rural areas and agriculture prevails in Poland at the time”.

Nonetheless, the fact that rural support for accession was so high in the referendum is also a result of social dialogue with rural communities in Poland and an honest, fact-based and knowledgeable presentation of the European Union and its policies, especially the CAP. The Catholic Church played a positive role in opening the rural areas to the EU in the period before accession.

The accession negotiations were a great success and it is worth emphasising that the Polish negotiating team in the area of agriculture and rural development was very well-prepared for the negotiations in terms of content and organisation. An important role in the negotiations, apart from the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, was played by FAPA – the Foundation of Assistance Programmes for Agriculture. FAPA was the analytical background of the thematic negotiating teams, which provided the teams with relevant data and prompt analysis. One of the more difficult issues was direct payments to farmers at the beginning of EU membership. Difficulties were overcome thanks to skilful negotiations and the support of the majority of the Member States for accession. Poland's efforts and achievements in harmonisation with EU agricultural policy and regulations were highly praised, as was the drive towards modernisation and structural changes.

Polish agriculture and the food sector have been very successful in the single market, as evidenced by the 11-fold increase in the value of food exports and their high positive trade balance. This is the result of the effective use of CAP support tools but, above all, the effect of the possibility of free trade in goods within the single market. This has been fostered by the competitiveness of Polish agriculture, based also on lower production costs. Its competitive advantages have already been exhausted and once again, Polish agriculture is facing a major challenge. A fragmented agrarian structure, a low degree of innovation and inadequate preparation to face the demands of environmental and climate policy are barriers that need to be wisely overcome, to compensate for the delays and negligence of the 2015–2023 governments. Polish food is still associated with high quality and in this respect, there remains a competitive advantage.

Jerzy Plewa rightly, and importantly, states that the European Union also means Poland and Poles. Poland played a major part in the reform of the CAP even before its accession in 2003, and was among the countries that promoted the market-based development of the CAP and improving the global competitiveness of EU agriculture. Later, Poland made a significant contribution to the Community's abolition of caps on milk and sugar production. Post 2015,

the government of the day was not able to benefit from the achievements of their predecessors, as a result of which Poland's influence on EU policies diminished. This also had a bearing on the negotiations of the financial framework for 2021–2027: direct payments were reduced by 2%, the largest such nominal reduction among the Member States. Compared to the 2014–2020 perspective, the EU's budget for the development of rural areas was 6% smaller, while the allocation for Poland was cut by 12%. These are just two examples of the losses inflicted by the anti-EU policies of the Law and Justice government.

In the wake of the October 2023 election and coming to power of a new government, the attitude to the EU has changed and Poland's impact on its policies has begun to increase. Although the financial losses will be irrecoverable, the perception of Poland's EU standing has already started to improve.

Translated by Dorota Szmajda

The opinions presented here are those of the author, and the selected topics and emphasis his subjective decision. Hopefully, this summary of the Rural Poland 2024 report will encourage readers to read it in whole or as selected chapters.