

# Chapter VII

Polish society 15 years after  
the Round Table:  
its condition, social structure,  
attitudes, values and social capital.

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After 15 years of systemic transformation, Polish society and the Poles' living conditions have changed very significantly. Anyone who visits Poland following a long absence (and many emigrants have indeed returned home), can no longer find the old Poland. Even in rural areas, where the pace of change has been the slowest, modernization is plainly visible – with both its positive and negative consequences.

This chapter, which constitutes something of a conclusion to our *Report*, presents our readers with a snapshot of Polish society today, of Poland as a new member of the European Union. We herein endeavour to capture that image with a knowledge of the trends in Poland's demographic changes, the social policies which have been implemented (as presented in previous chapters) and through an analysis of the results of a wealth of respected social studies carried out by various centres both in Poland<sup>1</sup> and abroad. Our aim is to present a picture that, although simplified, is justly comprehensive. Thereafter, on the basis of this picture, we attempt to assess the present social situation.

The fundamental question that we put forth in this part of the *Report* is: do the structure and features of Polish society provide a good basis for a high pace of development and for achieving a higher level of social cohesion? In asking this question we do not intend to formulate ready answers. Rather, this question is to help us evaluate changes, suggest necessary (or possible) future adjustments, and postulate efforts to counteract the undesirable and dangerous phenomena before us.

<sup>1</sup> *Social monitoring studies have also been carried out for many years by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation (EU Monitoring). These studies were led, in turn, by professors Marody and Hausner.*

## 1. Social condition

Until 1994, Poland belonged to a group of countries with high demographic growth. Between 1946 and 1994, the population increased by 14.7 million people. Since 1994 the population has no longer been growing. The country has entered a phase of demographic stability (Okólski 2002). The fertility rate is declining, average life expectancy is clearly increasing and the share of senior citizens in the population is growing, although not yet at the pace observed in Western European countries. This tendency is accompanied by an increase in the share of the disabled population.

The years of transformation have brought about a clear improvement in the health of the population. The sharp decline in infant mortality rates and in mortality due to circulatory diseases is a sign that the health crisis, which periodically re-emerged during successive stages of industrialization and during the crisis of the 1980s, has been arrested. In recent years the functioning of the health care system has deteriorated due to low financing by the public sector and problems associated with its management, both at the macroeconomic level as well as at the level of health care institutions. This could translate into a deterioration in the quality of life of the sick and those in need of rehabilitation.

The structure of the population has changed in terms of educational attainment. The share of those with higher and completed high school education (matriculation exams) has increased considerably. The level of those entering higher education increased from slightly over 10% at the end of the 1980s to around 50% at present. The return on investing in one's university education has increased and educational aspirations have shot up. The system of education is now facing the need to improve the quality of teaching and become more oriented toward the requirements of the labour market.

The mobility of the population is characterized by two contradictory tendencies. The period of transformation has caused a notable deceleration of the processes of internal migration and urbanization. In some regions of the country, a reverse tendency can be observed, with return to or settlement in rural areas (usually close to big cities). However, as regards foreign migration, we can observe the persistence of a negative balance of migration, although with a different structure than before as migrations to Poland are steadily on the rise.

Average disposable incomes have increased over the 15-year transformation period. However, this general tendency obscures periods of sizeable fluctuations. Over the first four years incomes plunged, and only afterwards did they begin to grow dynamically. At the close of the century they were seen to stabilize, with growth of approximately 1% in real terms. The structure of income growth has been completely different than during the PRL, as high growth has been observed particularly among persons with the highest skills and living in large agglomerations.

Income disparities further widened. With the emergence of official unemployment and its increase (particularly that of long-term unemployment), poverty and social exclusion have become more acute.

The overall affluence of the population has increased. People are living in better apartments, and ones that are better equipped. Nearly all households boast basic appliances: refrigerators, washing machines, freezers and vacuum cleaners. Ownership of a TV, radio and modern stereo equipment has also become commonplace. As many as 75% of families are equipped with fixed-line telephones. However, ownership of computers is much less common, with only 1 of households possessing one, although among urban households some 30% do. It is estimated that 10% of households have an Internet connection (4% in rural areas).<sup>2</sup> Despite the continued progress, Poland is still lagging behind other European countries in this regard.

<sup>2</sup> Data on household equipment come from the GUS survey study on household living conditions in 2003 - GUS 2003.

Ownership of cars and modern recreation equipment has also become more commonplace. The majority of households (more than 50%) owns low-value cars, ones purchased second-hand or used for a very long period of time. Only fewer than 20% have more expensive and new cars. The widespread use of autos has exposed the bad condition of road infrastructure, which is one of the Achilles' heels of Poland's material development. While Poles have two and a half times as many cars as in 1990, the amount of paved roads has increased only by 57%.

The accessibility of public transport has decreased due to the closing down of many less profitable railway and bus connections.

Despite the improvement in the quality of housing, Poland has one of the largest indicators of housing shortage in Europe. Poland is the only country of the enlarged EU not to achieve the "1 room per 1 person" ratio (only 0.9). A number of unfavourable developments of the past half-century of the country's history contribute to this. Firstly, the massive wartime destruction; secondly – the housing construction of the PRL era, which totally failed to keep up with industrialization and high demographic growth; and thirdly, the lack of support for mass-scale housing construction during the transformation period. The 1990s were the period that saw the construction of the lowest number of apartments in all of the country's post-war history.

Table 1. Changes in basic indicators of social condition

| Areas of change  | 1989/1990                           | 2002/2003/2004           | Change  |
|--|-------------------------------------|--------------------------|---|
| Population (million)*  | 37.879                              | 38.230                   | + 0.9%  |
| Share of population in retirement age %  | 12.5                                | 15.0                     | + 2.5 percentage points                                   |
| Senior citizens – over 65 – share in %   | 10                                  | 13                       | + 3 percentage points                                     |
| Number of old-age pensioners and disability benefit recipients (million)                               | 6.8                                 | 9.2                      | + 35%   |
| Marriages contracted – thousands.  | 255                                 | 192                      | (–) 25%   |
| Fertility rate – number of children per 1 woman in reproductive age                                    | 2.04                                | 1.25                     | - 0.79 fall below simple replacement of generations       |
| Average life expectancy – years  |                                     |                          |   |
| men  | 66.5                                | 70.4                     | +4  |
| women  | 75.5                                | 78.8                     | +3  |
| Infant mortality – per 1000 live births  | 10.6                                | 2.7                      | -7.9 percentage points or fourfold decline                |
| Mortality due to circulatory system diseases – ratio per 100,000 inhabitants                           | 564 (734 for men and 446 for women) | 443                      | Decline by 25% among women and by 28% among men           |
| Children in pre-school facilities per 100 children aged 3-5  | 32                                  | 32 (11 in rural areas)   | After perturbations, recovery to the 1989 level           |
| Share of population with higher education attainment   | 13%                                 | 46%                      | + 4.5 percentage points or 75% increase                   |
| Those entering higher education (relation of the number of students to the number of youth aged 19-24) |                                     |                          | + 33 percentage points                                    |
| Employment (million)   | 17.5                                | 13.2                     | – 4.3 mln (–)25%  |
| Unemployment rate %  | –                                   | 20-19%                   | Open unemployment, significant share of structural causes |
| Increase in no. of apartments  | 14.9% (1979-1988)                   | 8.5 % (1989-2002)        | – 6.4 percentage points                                   |
| Population in substandard housing  | 34.2%                               | 17.1%                    | – 17.1%   |
| Public hardened roads in km thousands  | 159                                 | 249                      | 57% increase  |
| Autos – million  | 4.5                                 | 11.2                     | 2.5-fold increase   |
| Fixed-line telephones  | –                                   | 74% (61% in rural areas) |   |
| – Share of households with telephone %   | –                                   |                          |   |
| – Private subscribers - million  | 2.3                                 | 9.2                      | 4-fold increase   |
| Computers - % of households  | –                                   | 25% (14% in rural areas) | New phenomenon  |
| Internet connection – % of households  | –                                   | 12% (5% in rural areas)  | New phenomenon  |

\* note: demographic data comes from the National Censuses of 1998 and 2002. The sources for other data are reports or data from representative surveys conducted by GUS in the relevant years, included in statistical yearbooks and GUS specialist publications.

## 2. The social structure after 15 years of transformation

The changes in social structure which have occurred since the beginning of the transformation were affected not only by the working of market structures, but also by the social policies pursued and by individual life-strategies. Mirosława Marody (1999) and other sociologists beforehand (Ziółkowski, 1994, Rychard, 1998) pointed to the formation of dualistic life-strategies in Polish society. The first of these strategies anticipates a market-based logic. People are focused on goals that entail effort and risk. The second choice is that of a safe road in life, although a modest one in terms of income potential. This means work in public administration, seeking to obtain a disability benefit, early retirement, or other social benefits. "Between the market and a safe job", is how Marody described what is currently happening in the social structure. Perhaps a third choice should be added for full clarity, namely social transfers.

Let us look at the social structure from the perspective of the sources of income on which Polish households support themselves. Analyses prepared on the basis of GUS studies of household budgets (Wiśniewski 2002, Łysoń 2004), point to the following tendencies:

- the share of income from work in total household disposable income is declining. While at the end of the 1980s income from work accounted for 60% of all income, 10 years later, its share fell below 55%.
- the share of incomes from agriculture declined dramatically: from 20% to around 6%
- the share of income from social benefits increased substantially: from around 20% to around 33%
- other sources of income (including income from capital) emerged, with a slow increasing tendency from 1% to around 6% .

A significant change in the structure of household incomes is that a higher share of income from work is currently obtained in the private sector. At the end of the 1990s, the share of income from work in the private sector reached a level of 55%.

One can also look at the social structure from the perspective of the three basic sectors of the economy, and which are the main sources of employment and of generating national income: industry, agriculture and services. The changes of structure in this regard are perhaps slower than in Western countries due to the persistently high share of agriculture, yet there are unequivocal trends towards an increase in the share of services.

An important method of analysing the social structure is that of the subjective assessment of social position. Here analysts see a distinct incommensurability between subjective assessments of material position and the objective indicators included in official statistics published by GUS. The subjective picture, as reconstructed through representative surveys of the public, is slightly more optimistic. Without going into too much detail, one can say that one source of the difference is that of the individual resourcefulness of many Poles, for example the participation of a large group of registered unemployed in the shadow economy, trips abroad to work, etc.

When using subjective measures of social position, society can be divided into three or four major factions. Aside from the relative few with a feeling of improvement in their mate-

rial situation, there is a relatively numerous group of those who have adjusted to the new conditions and are not complaining. The number of persons whose declarations indicate social disadvantage does not exceed 1/4 of the Polish population (Sikorska 1998, Marody 2000).

Below we shall describe the changes underway and how they affect the main social groups in Poland today. This outline does not include a description of the group that could conventionally be called "the excluded", for we do not have sufficiently complete information about this group. However, broad studies have been conducted fairly recently on selected categories of people in this group - for example, on the homeless and/or addicted who come into conflict with their environment. Moreover, they are partly to be found among recipients of social assistance. We are aware that this is not a small group. A few well-known non-governmental organizations have devoted all of their activities to the socially excluded. However, as we have but fragmentary information, we cannot yet responsibly present general numbers and conclusions regarding social exclusion in Poland.

## Workers

The results of the National Census conducted by GUS in 2002 show that the share of the industrial working class in the social structure remains significant: 25.3% (of which 8.7% are operators of machinery and equipment) of all those employed. However, at the same time the share of workers employed in the services sector, especially trade, is also increasing (11.1%). Over the past 15 years there was no radical shift in the structure of Polish society towards a post-industrial society, although the increase in the share of services is evident. A significant feature of the worker structure is the still sizeable share of workers performing simple manual tasks. According to the Census they account for 6.4% of total employment. Domański's study, which uses the General Social Survey to analyze the social structure (Domański 2004), estimates the share of this group to be slightly higher.

The structure of the working class has undergone changes in the opposite direction of those that took place during the decades of industrialization. First of all, the size of the large-industry working class has decreased notably, its place being assumed by workers in small and medium-sized enterprises. Secondly, this disparity became associated first and foremost with the ownership sector: specifically, there is a correlation between these two groups: public enterprises are usually large, while private ones are small and mid-sized.

After more than a dozen years of systemic transformation, the differences in the characteristics of public- and private-sector workers have become very noticeable. Those employed in the public sector are on average better educated<sup>3</sup>, earn more and their salaries show smaller disparities. In the majority of enterprises where they have worked, there were trade unions or an employee council. Conversely, for those employed in private enterprises, salaries have been more divergent, and there have usually been no trade unions. These differences have had implications for workers' attitudes and views: rational management (e.g., the dismissal of excess employees, bankruptcy of insolvent enterprises) is more often accepted in private enterprises. But at the same time, workers employed there have demanded much greater social equality. Research has also pointed to a declining level of solidarity among the working class, something largely caused by the high level of unemployment, lack of trade union organizations, as well as the lack of confidence that strike action can bring about the results employees expect. Hence, dissatisfaction has rarely led to active protests. Since the second half of the 1990s the level of strikes in Poland has been among the lowest in Europe.

<sup>3</sup> This is quite striking as the older population is on average less educated. This would indicate that a significant selection process has taken place among workers (the majority of those with poor skills are probably unemployed).

## Entrepreneurs and the self-employed

Entrepreneurs and the self-employed constitute around 25% of overall employment. This figure is lower than in the mid-1990s when it reached 33%. The economic slowdown at the turn of the decade reduced this group notably, despite the clear tendency in many companies to switch from regular employment contracts to individual or group contracts for the completion of specific tasks, or to rely on the services of outsourcing companies.

The statistical group of employers and the self-employed also includes individual farmers, who account for 60% of this group. As a result, those who undertook the risk of running their own business outside the agricultural sector account for only 11% of the self-employed. "Full-blown" entrepreneurs, meaning those who run companies employing a larger number of people, are an even smaller group – barely a few percentage points. Although the position of this group in the overall social structure is higher today than it was in the last decade of state socialism (its share has increased from around 3% to around 6%), its share has not increased since the initial jump that took place during the late 1980s and early 1990s.

The group of private entrepreneurs is comprised of distinct lower and higher levels. Representative studies conducted at the Warsaw School of Economics (SGH) in 1999-2000 portray the picture of this disparity (Gardawski 2001). The lower level of entrepreneurs is not very different from contractual employees. It consists of the self-employed, owners of family businesses, and owners of micro-businesses employing up to a few employees. Many entrepreneurs from this level function partly in the shadow economy and their status is volatile. It often happens that they return to the status of contractual employee or even lose their jobs. The higher level of private entrepreneurs, in turn, is quite diverse internally, but in terms of social position and broad views it is clearly distinct from the representatives of the lower level of this class.

Former workers account for more than 1/3 of the owners of micro-businesses. Their average educational level and other demographic features are close to the national average. It is also important that the views of micro-business owners on the economy are similar to those of the majority of Poles. They favour the general rules for a market economy and privatization, but they fear foreign capital, unemployment and want to limit the privatization of Poland's largest enterprises. The composition and views of the upper level of the entrepreneur class are fundamentally different. Among owners of businesses employing more than 15 persons, 64% have completed higher education, 80% have previously been employed in state enterprises and 62% have held management positions in those enterprises. They were proponents of an open, liberal, privatized economy (which can feature unemployment), but they were also apprehensive about the excessive expansion of foreign capital (Gardawski 2002).

## The Intelligentsia

When describing the intelligentsia in the PRL period in Chapter 1, we pointed to its diversity in terms of backgrounds, skills, income levels and views. The diversity of this class is even greater today as new groups have joined its ranks. Above all, it is a more numerous group. Around 40% of employees now work in non-manual positions. This group can be divided into two subgroups of almost equal size. The first group encompasses politicians, upper level public administration officials, managers and experts. According to 2002 census data, this group accounted for 19.3% of those employed. The second group includes office employees, technicians and other middle-level staff – encompassing 20.6% of total employment<sup>4</sup>. Experts, sometimes called meritocrats,

<sup>4</sup> When analyzing the structure of white-collar employees according to a somewhat different classification than the one currently used in statistics, a significant increase is to be observed in the employment of administrative staff. It might seem that the market economy would contribute to a decline in administration. In the event, the opposite has happened. The reform of local government administration has led to a significant increase in the number of bureaucrats, while Poland's EU entry is exacerbating this effect at present.

have the largest share in the structure of the intelligentsia (13.1% of total employment). When considering international comparisons, this share of professionals in the social structure is similar to that observed among Poland's southern neighbours, while compared to Western Europe it is close to the share observed in Portugal and slightly higher than that in Greece. (Domański 2004).

The first group of non-manual employees, namely experts, are the largest income beneficiary of the transformation process. And indeed, the white-collar group of employees has benefited as a whole. The ratio of salaries in non-manual positions to those of manual jobs has reversed. For whereas during the PRL manual workers on average enjoyed higher incomes, as soon as in 1990 the intelligentsia had higher earnings. The ratio of its incomes to those of manual workers amounted to 1.20 at the time, while in 2000 this ratio reached 1.36 (Deniszczuk 2002).

The improvement of the situation of non-worker employees has had a significantly positive effect on the educational aspirations of the public. The drive to obtain higher education has surpassed all expectations.

The improvement in the income status of the intelligentsia has been accompanied by the phenomenon of the weakening of its traditional mission in society: the promotion of higher values, ethical attitudes, and the right to proffer perspective and explain complexities.

## Farmers

The transformation period has wrought a very strong differentiation of the agricultural population, and on average, a substantial deterioration of its material position. First of all, authentic farms emerged, ones having an area much larger than average (farms larger than 15 hectares currently account for 35% of farmland). It is estimated that the population making their living from these farms (farmers and their

families) amounts to around 1.7 million persons (Wilkin 2002). Secondly, there is a clearly observable group of peasant farmers, i.e., those who have stopped producing for the market and work on their land only to satisfy their own needs. There is also a less distinct group of peasant-workers or worker-peasants, i.e., the group that is currently described as the "multi-profession peasant population". As it is not easy today for peasants-workers to in fact find a permanent job outside agriculture, the living standards of this group have deteriorated substantially.

In the agriculture sector there is also a significant group of people making their living from social transfers. In the period of real socialism farmers' rights to social benefits were limited only to those who gave their farms to the state. In the transformation period, the handing over of farms ceased to be a prerequisite for obtaining social insurance. Moreover, a special social insurance institution for farmers was created – KRUS. This heavily subsidized institution provides old age pensions and disability benefits for 1.7 million people.

The average material situation of farmers has deteriorated very substantially. Farmer incomes are equivalent to just 40% of that of the non-farmer working population. The extent of poverty among the farmer population has increased. However, peasant poverty is different from that of other groups of the population. Peasants have their own food supply and housing for which they do not pay rent. Other groups of the population, particularly those from the former state-owned farms (PGRs) are in a much worse situation. This is also due to the inability (or sometimes impossibility) to take up independent work whether in farming or outside it.

## Pensioners and recipients of disability benefits

A particularly distinct element that has shaped the social changes in the transformation period is the increase in the number of the population living from non-salary income. In

1988 this group accounted for 21% of the whole population, while by 2002 that figure had gone up by 16 percentage points to 37% (National Census GUS 2003). This group primarily includes pensioners and recipients of disability benefits. In 1988 their number was 7.4 million, while in 2002 – 10.5 million. This is more than 1/4 of the Polish population. The number of old-age pensioners increased by 63% in the 1988-2002 period, while the number of disability benefit recipients by 22%. However, this increase is not the result of the population's ageing. It is related to the social policies of the initial period of transformation (see Chapter 2) and the natural propensity to escape from the labour market in a situation of uncertainty about work and maintaining incomes. As Mirosława Marody put it, a significant part of the population was pursuing the strategy of "obtaining a pension or disability benefit", a strategy less risky than becoming self-employed and not requiring such effort as that of obtaining additional skills, something that is often necessary when changing the place and form of work.

The propensity to seek disability benefits, early retirement pensions and full retirement pensions is a consequence of the relative stability of decent social benefits. This is due to the indexation principles adopted at the beginning of the transformation period and written into law. Over the years several attempts were made, some more successful than others, to limit the gains from indexation. Pensioners and benefit recipients, being a strong electorate well aware of its interests, spoke out strongly against such attempts. Its voice was institutionalized in 1994 with the creation of The National Party of Pensioners and Benefit Recipients – KPEiR. Although this party does not have any members in Parliament, it did win a number of seats in the 1998 local elections. Today every major political force has to take into consideration the views of this multi-million electorate.

In 1989, the average pension benefit was equal to 53% of the average salary. In the mid-1990s this relationship was improved by around 20 percentage points. At the close of the 1990s this relationship, called the replacement ratio, had declined to around 60% and then fell below 60% (see

Chapter 5 for details). In spite of this, pensioners and disability benefit recipients are considered a group that has gained during the transformation period. One of their benefits is the opportunity to work, which is quite frequently taken advantage of by persons with higher skills, often in the shadow economy.

## The unemployed

Throughout the transformation period Poles have had to deal with the problem of open and rising unemployment. The unemployed from the first period of the transformation (1989-1993) mainly included persons entering the labour market for the first time, namely young people and women becoming professionally active. Laid-off employees were a smaller group (Sztanderska 1995). There were relatively few older people among the unemployed, as that age group took advantage of the opportunity to obtain benefits from the social insurance system.

The attitudes of the unemployed in that first period can be described as passive and conservative. They would collect benefits and await a job offer from a state-owned company (Reszke 1995). This was a telltale consequence of the legacy

### 3. Inequality and poverty

of socialism, where an "employee market" rather than an "employer market" existed. Moreover, the passive-conservative attitude revealed a lack of trust in the private sector. The unemployed were characterized by a low level of education (basic vocational qualifications at most), but also by the lack of an active approach towards further education. Contrary to the arguments frequently raised that the unemployed are in fact not unemployed, because they are employed on the black market, the vast majority of unemployed were decidedly not active professionally and their benefits (collected by 80% of unemployed) importantly contributed to their family's income.

The second wave of unemployment, evident since the end of the 1990s, is very large in terms of size – 3.5 million people (according to the National Census). It is characterized by a different structure and circumstances. Although young people predominate among the unemployed, the number of jobless from the two subsequent age groups (25-34 and 35-44) is not significantly lower. Unemployment among persons in pre-retirement age is minimal (3.3% among those above 55). The unemployed have low skills. The majority of them are graduates of basic vocational schools (40%) and people with no skills whatsoever (20%), namely those with elementary or incomplete elementary education. There are also graduates of high schools among the unemployed (33%). The problem in this group is the type of school they graduated from, for it was either a comprehensive high school (which does not teach specific skills), or it was a technical school of a type that did not meet the needs of employers.

The long-term unemployed account for 46% of those without a job today. This segment of the population is slightly older than the national average and has the worst skill level. The long-term unemployed usually do not receive unemployment benefits. They are a group threatened with social exclusion – and are often already excluded from mainstream social life.

As we wrote in Chapter 1, social inequalities in Poland began to form in the 1970s, they developed in the 1980s and in the 1990s they were initially halted only to begin to increase again, and at an altogether rapid pace.

The period of the declining increase in social inequality as the 1980s swung into the 1990s was associated with the introduction of a stabilization programme aimed at combating high inflation. One of the elements of this programme was the introduction of a tax on excessive increases in salaries. Another was that of offering a broad range of social transfers to groups threatened with unemployment.

Social inequalities began to increase again with the overcoming of the transformation crisis, that is, after 1993.

What are the sources of the new social inequalities?

First of all, they were associated with the process of privatization. The line of income disparities runs not so much between the sectors, but within the private sector. Here one can observe the high affluence of a much broader class of entrepreneurs and the low incomes of contractual employees, on average lower than in the public sector. A different line describing income disparities runs between the sections of the economy. Such sections as finance, insurance, and telecommunications, but also public administration and defence, are far ahead of average figures. Meanwhile, the situation is worse in the health care and social assistance sectors. Another dividing line of high-income disparities runs between the management staff and line employees. Very high salaries for managers came as a completely new phenomenon, and one typical of the transformation period. Public officials' salaries also became higher. This is supposed to help attract highly-skilled people to public service and to prevent corruption.

Inequality has also increased in agriculture, which still significantly impacts the overall measures of Polish society's income situation. On the one hand, this sector contains a broad group of people with very low incomes (or without monetary income at all), and a clearly distinct group of owners of large and very large farms.

The high rate of unemployment has exacerbated inequality, as a large number of the unemployed have minimum incomes coming from social transfers (unemployment or pre-retirement benefits), or obtain irregular incomes from casual work or work in the shadow economy.

The Gini index<sup>5</sup> is used as a synthetic measure of income disparities. Its value for Poland is 0.33. This is a level of disparity similar to that observed in Central European countries belonging to the EU. In Northern European countries the disparities are smaller (below 0.3), while in Southern European they are greater, even exceeding 0.4 – as is the case in Portugal and Greece.

Compared to other post-communist countries, income disparities in Poland are higher than those observed in southern neighbouring countries and lower than in eastern ones, with the exception of the Baltic countries, where they are more or less similar.

The high income disparities currently observed in Poland imply growing poverty on the one hand, and high affluence on the other. Such a social structure is described as "narrow in the waistline", meaning that the middle group (identified as the middle class) is not numerous.

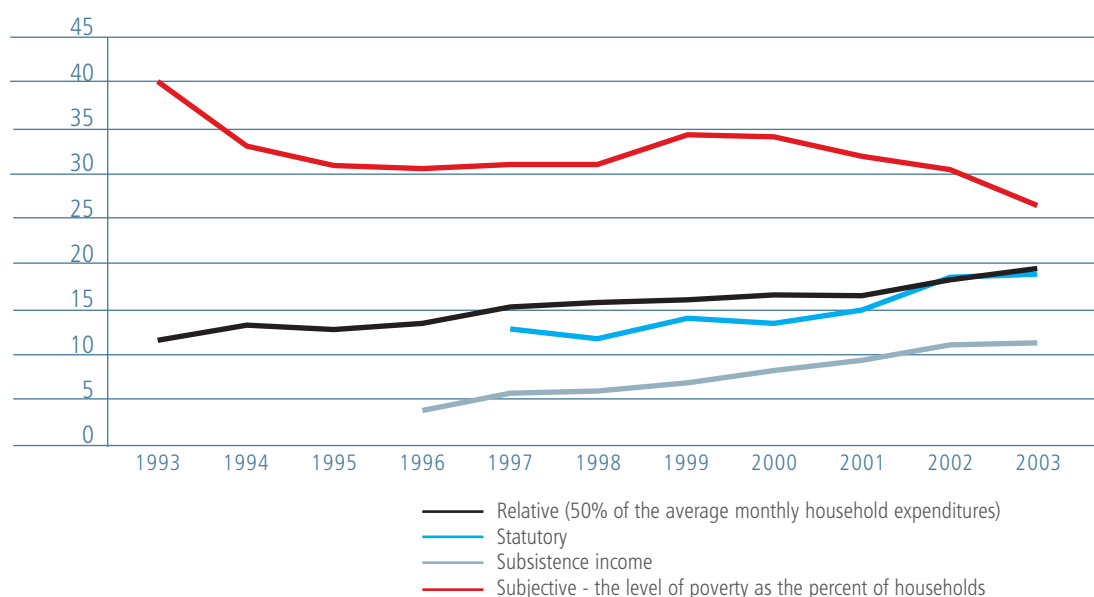
The increasing scope of poverty is a very worrying social phenomenon. The graph below presents poverty tendencies according to different definitions. In the lower part of the graph the scope of poverty is defined as the number of people not achieving a certain level of income, whether: (1) 50% of average consumption spending; (2) an income level which entitles one to social assistance benefits; and (3) minimum subsistence income. The upper part of the chart depicts

the tendency of how poverty takes shape according to a subjective definition (self-assessment). It is interesting to note that the self-assessment line (the upper one) and the lines representing objective measures (the three lower lines) converge. Previously we had observed quite a large difference between subjective and objective measures. This could indicate that the phenomenon of poverty is now more present and recognizable in social life. Previously it often had concerned communities and places not known personally.

Other studies also show that income disparities are becoming more publicly noticeable. At the same time, they confirm the aversion to such a direction of development that would lead to excessive social stratification: deep income disparities are not socially accepted. According to a recent survey by the CBOS opinion polling centre on this matter, 90% of Poles claim that income disparities are too high and 63% believe that they will further increase.

<sup>5</sup> The Gini index in theory assumes values from 0 (when everyone has equal incomes) to 1 (maximum disparity). In practice, the value of the index is usually between 0.2 and 0.6 (in Latin American countries).

Figure 1. Poverty in Poland according to different measures



#### 4. Civil society, entrepreneurship and social capital

The change of the political and economic system should contribute to the foundation of a society which at one and the same time is (1) civically active, (2) enterprising and (3) rich in social capital. Civil society is conducive to the development of democracy, entrepreneurship is the foundation of a market economy, while social capital helps a society live in concord, be supportive of one another, and achieve a strong measure of cohesion despite competition and the focus on individual success. Each of these desirable features of society requires individuals to be active and to participate. Civically active members of society work for the common good, participate in elections, respect public institutions and place a check on them. Enterprising persons undertake ambitious

economic challenges, are not paralyzed by fear of risk, and inject dynamism into their environment. Finally, social capital is featured by those communities that evince an aptitude for self-organization and a culture of mutuality and trust.

Analysis of the attitudes of Polish society over recent years indicates a weakening of civic and enterprising attitudes, but with a maintenance of grass-roots social activity. While membership levels in parties and trade unions is declining fast, and turnout in Parliamentary and local elections has been low, this is not reflected in the weakening of grass-roots social activity in the form of associations. The strong role of family and of circles of friends has also been maintained. In response to a CBOS survey question on where help can be obtained the fastest, 88% responded "first and foremost from family and friends" (CBOS 2003).

Social attitudes are conditioned by the values a society professes to uphold. Studies of social values conducted from an international perspective show the persistence of strongly

materialistic values in the post-communist countries, including Poland. Such an orientation is observed not only among the general population, but also the elites, both economic, as well as political (Siemieńska 2004). Conversely, in mature democracies and more affluent countries, post-materialistic values prevail. These values are not always professed by all of society, but they are nearly always professed by the political elites.

The results of studies obtained from transformation countries, results which indicate the predominance of materialistic values, are associated with a country's current level of economic development. The societies of these countries are catching up with Western living standards and are busy building market economies for both individualistic and materialistic motives. Understanding this tendency does not relieve one of anxiety regarding the fact that such values and attitudes are represented by political elites.

A noteworthy aspect of the studies of social values cited here is the fact that Polish society is demanding greater influence on decisions made in the workplace and in the place of residence. This clearly indicates an insufficient level of democratic development in those areas, ones which, after all, are the closest to people. It also explains why there are so many dissatisfied people in Poland, many more than in Western countries. This also explains why social activism occurs rather more within self-help organizations and in the realm of private initiatives than within the structures of social institutions.

### Civic spirit

In his book 'Not a prince, not a merchant – a citizen', Jerzy Szacki, one of Poland's most renowned sociologists, characterizes civic or republican spirit in terms of: involvement in civic matters, elections (particularly local ones), and in local initiatives. Szacki also stresses the citizenry's control over what authorities do, this being impossible without the prerequisites of freedom of speech, decentralization, and self-

governance. Another important issue is access to the institutions of justice (the legal system) and its efficiency.

The exertion of effective pressure on administrative authorities, including that of local government, along with social control over the day-to-day operation of institutions of power – this is the hallmark of a well-functioning civil society. Through the well-organized and constant interaction of citizens and the decision-making institutions of power, the deficiencies of representative democracy can be alleviated. Indeed, a representative democracy that is not buttressed by effective citizen organizations can, and often does, spawn a division of the society into a narrow group of politically active citizens and the rest, namely those who limit their participation in political life at most to occasional participation in parliamentary and/or local elections. Such a silent majority perceives political authorities, albeit democratically chosen, as an alien body. They may also view the entire class involved in politics (the political elite) as "them", as being foreign to "us", the majority of citizens. Lest any such chasm between society and the authorities yawn, forms of democracy emerge that are typically referred to as "participatory" democracy. This does not entail a replacement of representative democracy, but rather its augmentation.

The involvement of the bulk of Polish society in organizations and initiatives belonging to civil society is meagre. One might say that Poles are replicating models of behaviour from the period of state socialism. As we wrote in Chapter 1, state socialism has left behind a society fractured into small family, social, or informal groups. Hence, while there was a high degree of trust within those groups, society's identification with official organizations was very limited, even among those persons who were in fact members of official organizations. Indeed, even when people did participate in official socio-political life (for example in marches or various community campaigns), it was often out of constraint. When communism was finally overturned, masses of Poles opted for withdrawal – freedom was now treated as the freedom from having to belong and participate. A 2003 CBOS survey devoted to this issue asked persons who were not members

of social or political organizations whether they would be willing to join such organizations: 80% of this group (which accounted for 70% of the total population) responded negatively. Therefore, seven out of ten Poles declared that they are not a member of any organization and have no intention of joining one. It is worth pointing out that only 0.3% of citizens declared membership in a political party.

This lack of desire to participate in civic issues is also related to how self-government at the local level developed in its initial stages. The CBOS survey quoted above also showed that only 22% of Poles believe that the interests of residents are important to their local governments, while 53% were of the opinion that those authorities really only care about their own and their friends' interests. Such the case, it is hardly surprising that numerous efforts are undertaken to persuade

people to fulfill their civic duty of participating in elections. To this end, priests for example, encourage their parishioners to participate in elections, explaining to them the significance of democracy and pointing out to them the possibility of influencing programmes and advancing local interests.

The data on voter turnout during the transformation period presented in the table above shows that only around 50% of eligible voters participate in elections. Compared to other European countries this is a low figure. The highest voter turnout figures are observed in presidential elections – above 60%. The lowest are in local elections – under 50%.

Table 2. Percentage of voter turnout in elections

| Election years | Presidential | Parliamentary | Local government |
|----------------|--------------|---------------|------------------|
| 1989-1990      | 60.6 i 53.4  | 62.5          | 42.3             |
| 1991           |              | 43.2          |                  |
| 1993           |              | 52.1          |                  |
| 1995           | 64.7 i 68.2  |               |                  |
| 1997           |              | 47.9          |                  |
| 1998           |              |               | 46               |
| 2000           | 61.1         |               |                  |
| 2001           |              | 46.3          |                  |
| 2002           |              |               | 44               |

Source: National Electoral Commission figures: after: Wiatr et al. 2003, p. 211

<sup>6</sup> It should be added that the main source of conflict is currently seen in the relationship between democratically elected authorities and the public – the voters. This is reflected in increasing disappointment with democracy as a whole. Studies show that just slightly more than half of Poles have clearly positive associations with the concept of "democracy" – 17.7% of Poles assess democracy negatively and 20.3% said that they have no associations. However, this picture (at least in mid-2003) has not translated into a significant increase in support for authoritarian power. Only 33% of the public agreed that in crisis times, power should be handed over to a person who would individually answer to society. Conversely, in 1991, 51% of employees of industry responded affirmatively to a similar question (Gardawski 1992).

## Entrepreneurial spirit

Poles see themselves as being a resourceful and enterprising society, and these traits have been confirmed by historical experience and numerous social studies. This conviction is particularly justified when referring to the initial period of the transformation. The introduction of economic freedom, after years of constraints, precipitated an eruption of private commercial initiatives.

The entrepreneurial spirit of the first period of the transformation could be seen everywhere. Street trading was the most visible. This street-vendor stage of the transformation, which provided a source of capital for something "more serious", came to an end fairly quickly. It is interesting to note that the people who were involved in street vending at that time, having first gone on trading trips to Berlin or Vienna, often had higher or at least high school education. Many had either lost their jobs or felt that they soon would. Others simply did not want to be "stuck" in a public enterprise anymore. Studies on entrepreneurship carried out at that time indicated that these persons were more mobile in their careers, changing jobs more often (Domański 1994). The decision to "go it alone" was associated with a temporary degradation. It was not fulfilling for an engineer from a once respectable public enterprise to begin selling goods on the street or hot-dogs from a booth. But this was a means to an end. Many street merchants achieved that end and now own various distribution or wholesale companies. Some of them even own production plants, although this is less common.

Another type of grass-roots entrepreneurship that involved people concerned the privatization of the state enterprises they worked in. Employee companies were often created, only later to be transformed into corporations with one or more owners.

Concerning social public services, entrepreneurial spirit was reflected in protecting the future existence of one's own insti-

tution (see chapter 2), under the aegis of which sundry associations and foundations were created, initially with the intention to support the "mother" institution. In the next stage, they would become detached, creating for profit organizations and more often exploiting the infrastructure and staff of the public institution than supporting it. This type of entrepreneurial activity occurred primarily in the health care sector.

The societal nature of entrepreneurship could initially be observed in the process of creating non-public schools. Organizations of parents and teachers founded private "schools with a mission", and called them social schools. In time, entrepreneurship in the area of education took on the features of a "normal business".

After a several-year boom in the creation of new enterprises, the situation became complicated. In the second half of the 1990s a process of weakening entrepreneurship took place. Firstly, the Russian crisis and constraints on the visits of citizens hailing from countries of the former USSR caused a decline in production for many small companies focused primarily on the Eastern market. Afterwards, due to a general economic slowdown coupled with an increase in unemployment, domestic demand declined and problems of excess supply emerged on the domestic market. Meanwhile, imports were increasing in step with the successive abolition of customs barriers, something that was taking place as part of Poland's preparations for EU membership.

The deterioration of conditions for entrepreneurship was not countered by government policies that might have supported its further development. Access to capital was still limited, fiscal burdens and administrative barriers were increasing. It is thus hardly surprising that the energy needed to create new businesses and become self-employed clearly weakened. Today, however, it appears that with Poland's accession to the EU a new stage of entrepreneurial development shall set in. There are now broader opportunities for obtaining capital and the lobbying power of employer communities on government decisions has increased.

Notwithstanding this, there is still a marked need for greater awareness on the part of politicians as to the role of entrepreneurial spirit in the development of Poland's market economy and in the creation of new jobs.

## Social capital

While one talks about civic spirit in Poland with some concern, the matter of social capital is to be evaluated somewhat differently.

Social capital is a feature of micro-communities that cannot be identified solely on the basis of participation in formal structures. Social capital is what characterizes effectively functioning communities. Therefore, studies of social capital in various societies<sup>7</sup> take into account such things as neighbourhoods, self-assistance, the ability of a community to organize itself for a specific purpose, the existence of factors which help in such organization (for example community or local leadership), trust, elements of social control, the degree of social integration, etc.

No studies on social capital have been conducted in Poland. However, there does exist a large body of knowledge about non-government organizations. The creation of these organizations can be treated as an element of society's ability to organize itself and create networks of contacts. This is not, however, a sufficient indicator to describe the presence of social capital in a given country, for a large portion of behaviours that indicate the existence of social capital (or a lack thereof) are not captured by official statistics. Only specialized studies can help to uncover and portray those features of a society that allow people to function well as a community: to cooperate and support each other based on trust and mutually recognized norms. Social capital is a feature that is

clearly conducive to entrepreneurship and to the development of civil society. However, we might also be dealing with social capital limited to the social domain.

Sociological observations and studies conducted by various organizations in Poland permit us to propose the hypothesis that social capital is present in Polish society, but it is limited; it does not reach beyond specifically oriented, small social structures. Polish society exhibits self-organization mainly in areas such as social and humanitarian assistance, education and health care.

Putnam divides social organizations into those that integrate individuals within a community (bonding) and those that integrate the individuals from one community with another one (bridging). However, it seems that it is not this distinction that is decisive as concerns Polish social organizations. What is decisive is the objective and subject of activity. In Poland two types of organizations are developing most intensively: aid organizations and those that are oriented on protecting and promoting the interests of their members. Currently these are the dominant non-government organizations in Poland. Polish aid organizations are both of the bonding as well as the bridging type. The latter cover increasingly broad social milieux and are generally approved of. Their strong presence in contemporary Poland is not only the result of the weakness of public social institutions, but also of the direction of social policy that non-government organizations are included in for the realization of public tasks.

Conversely, organizations focused on promoting the interests of their members and of a lobbying character are an expression of corporationist tendencies, the closing of the social structure, but also of the fight over the division of income and privileges.

According to data from the KLON/JAWOR association, there are 42,000 registered non-governmental organizations operating in Poland. This suggests a significant potential for social involvement. The problem is in the distribution of this activity. In nearly 50% of Poland's municipalities there are no

<sup>7</sup> The studies of R. Putnam conducted in Italy (Putnam 1996) and the US (Putnam 2000) serve as a model of research on social capital. In recent years studies in this area have been undertaken by the World Bank, the OECD and national statistical offices, for example in the UK and Australia.

non-governmental organizations at all. NGOs are most numerous in intelligentsia-dominated communities, in large cities and regions with relatively strong residential traditions.

Studies into social activity usually encompass three types of measures: (1) formal membership, (2) time spent on contacting and cooperating with the organization and (3) material generosity on behalf of the organization or the objective promoted by the organization. The results of studies conducted in recent years in Poland show a ratio of social involvement of 22% to 30% (Leś, Nałęcz 2002). Compared to Western European countries this level of involvement is low, but it is similar to what is observed among Poland's southern neighbours, namely, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia. Certain differences are visible with regard to the subject of involvement. For example political issues play a greater role in Hungary, while sports and recreational issues have a greater profile in the Czech Republic.

## Conclusions

The picture of Polish society after 15 years of systemic transformation has many different colours. However, those colours exhibit but two tones: bright and dark. A number of studies give a dichotomous picture of the transformation and of the social situation. "Two Polands" (Gorlach: in UNDP 2000) or "A Country of Two Vectors" (Giza-Poleszczuk 2004) – these publications attempt to show that the transformation process has extracted and sharpened social differences, and that it has revealed fissures in the processes of modernization along with the limited capability (of a significant portion of the society) to adjust to the new rules.

Behind the average indicators of changes in living standards, attitudes and values (ones which are not significantly differ-

ent than in other countries undergoing the process of transformation) greater disparities are hidden. But Polish reality is not so much dichotomous as it is trichotomous.

The variables that distinguish societies pertain to education, age, the level of urbanization of one's place of residence, sources of income, and the availability of employment. These variables are frequently interwoven and can create communities with a syndrome of features strengthening their disconnection from the rest of the society.

On the one hand we have the group in "immobile age" (as demographers define those above 45, but before retirement), with at least basic vocational education, living in the countryside or in small cities, with limited access to decent (meaning well-paid and legal) work, i.e., the unemployed, small farmers, casual workers, shadow economy workers, seasonal migrants, workers without permits. When these features are compounded by additional factors such as dysfunctional family life or other social pathologies, it is easy for such people to find themselves completely on the margins of social life.

On the other hand, we have the younger group, with above-average education (post high school, higher vocational and

university degrees), from large cities, working in modern sectors of the economy and in a fully regulated capacity (employment contract, self-employment) and earning the highest salaries.

Between these extreme groups is the lower group of white-collar employees, smaller entrepreneurs and qualified workers who increasingly often work in the service sector (rather than in large-scale industrial plants), as well as farmers who survived through the hardest period on their own and have adjusted to market conditions and an open economy.

Social values and attitudes differ depending on the place in the social structure and the position one has attained. However, there are several features that are altogether common today in Poland: persistently high consumption and education aspirations; the willingness to migrate, more often abroad than domestically; and support from small groups, i.e., local communities and family.

Civic spirit has not developed to the expected and desired degree. Polish society has always been largely autonomous, regardless of what was going on in the institutions of power (civil disobedience). With today's scope of decentralization and local self-government (its quality and consequences aside), this autonomy of social life is incomparably higher. Yet at the same time, society has not reduced its activity at the local and community level – and it still draws strength from the family.

But the disdain for politicians, public institutions and the realm of power is also a consequence of the internal weaknesses on their part. Many leading politicians have little to offer, whether in terms of ethics, because of their poor skills, lack of concepts and programmes, their base drive for material enrichment, etc. Many basic public institutions are notably inefficient (courts, prosecutors, the legislative branch and several governments). This engenders low levels of public trust in these institutions. Eurobarometr surveys (RCSS 2004) show that the level of social trust in Poland for political institutions and the legal system is the lowest among the

10 new members of the European Union. These studies also show a low level of trust in banks. It is social institutions that enjoy the highest trust.

Although the years of transformation have provided the public with new mechanisms and institutions and have significantly changed living standards, they have not significantly altered social attitudes towards political power and institutions. Society is still developing quite autonomously, although it does make avail of public institutions, particularly in placing claims of the "homo sovieticus" variety. Society also has high expectations with regard to the European Union. Of all the new member states and candidate countries, it is the Poles who harbour the most positive image of the functioning of democracy and order in the EU. Poland, as an EU country with high societal trust in EU structures, is beginning a new chapter in her history. But what are the foundations of this trust? Is it justified? What is expected of Poland as an EU member and what can Poland contribute to European structures? To what extent can Poland's place in the EU contribute to the reduction of inequality and the achievement of greater social cohesion? As signalled in the introduction, these are the questions that the next *Social Report* of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation will address.

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## About the Foundation:

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The main issues which FES focuses on include:

- social cohesion and reform policy
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- innovations and safeguarding the future
- influencing globalization in a spirit of solidarity.

Poland is one of the most important countries for the activities that FES pursues. Indeed, FES has maintained a representative office in Warsaw since 1990.

Within the framework of its activities in Poland, the Ebert Foundation cooperates with a variety of partners:

- ministries and other institutions of the central government
- Parliament
- universities and research centres
- non-governmental organizations
- local government bodies
- sectoral and regional trade union and employer organizations.

By fostering the development of societal dialogue and civil society, and reinforcing democracy, pluralism, EU integration, and economic and political advancement, the Friedrich Ebert Foundation contributes to the strengthening of partnership and cooperation between Poland and Germany.