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Social Actors and the Transfer of Models in EU-27

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The influence of the European Union on the NGO sector in Poland – a benefit or an obstacle?

Anna Pacześniak

Introduction

Each citizen is a potential co-creator of the public sphere. Whether he or she exercises this right in a democratic state largely depends on his or her value system, pro-social attitude, level of confidence in others and willingness to participate actively in this sphere. The basic condition allowing citizens to take part in public and political life is their citizenship status and the rights it entails (e.g. voting rights, liberty of speech, the right to form unions). This objective condition has been fulfilled in Poland since the end of 1989.

Nevertheless, the picture of Polish society that emerges from many independent studies, mass media reports and everyday, unscientific observation invariably indicates shortcomings in civic behaviour, respect for the law and readiness to take pro-social and joint actions. The reasons for these deficiencies are to be found in cultural factors inherited from the previous political system, i.e. real socialism (a distrust towards public life, discrediting the idea of community work, a lack of organizational and managerial skills necessary for public activity); awareness-related factors, such as the feeling that one has no influence on the matters of one's country or environment, a lack of belief in the effectiveness of civic actions, low level of civic awareness; macrostructural factors unfavourable to civic activity, such as a lack of well-developed new middle class, which constitutes a social and financial base for non-governmental organisations in mature democracies or insufficient legal, financial and organisational support for these organisations provided by state administration (Pacześniak, 2007: 144). It is

commonly held that Poles are not very public-spirited and are individualists reluctant to help others. Even though this view, as every generalisation, might appear to be unjust and not consistent with reality, the results of *The European Social Survey* show that both the voter turnout, the level of confidence in fellow citizens and the voluntary association membership rate is lower in Poland than in other countries covered by the survey.

It is worth considering whether joining the European Union in May 2004 has influenced (positively or negatively) the level of civic activity in Poland, whether it opened new possibilities of participation and whether it was – as the title of this paper might suggest – a benefit or an obstacle for the development of the non-governmental organisation sector, which is the basis for civil society.

As passive as a Pole?

Modern Poland is a country of low civic activity. The voluntary association membership rate, i.e. the percentage of citizens admitting membership in voluntary associations, is much smaller in Poland than in the majority of other OECD countries. Only a small proportion of citizens admits taking any action whatsoever on behalf of their community. *The Social Diagnosis 2007 (Diagnoza społeczna, 2007)* conducted by the Social Monitoring Council (Rada Monitoringu Społecznego) also shows unfavourable changes in pro-social attitudes in comparison with 2005 and 2003, as the significance of common good for Poles considerably decreased. (Czapiński, Panek 2007).

Putnam's well-known thesis (Putnam 1993) states that there are certain cultural values, which might be treated as social capital, that support the efficient functioning of a civil society. These are as follows: confidence in people and institutions, broad social ties, caring about other people, interest in politics, a sense of control over one's life, effectiveness of action. Many studies prove that

people who are interested in politics, accept unconventional forms of political participation, value cooperation, have a sense of control over their life, have confidence in other people, the church and trade unions or spend more time with colleagues at work are more often engaged in activity in non-governmental organisations (Wódz, 2007:73). Poland is the country with the lowest percentage of members and voluntary activists of NGOs in East-Central Europe (Bartkowski, Jasińska-Kania, 2002). Sociologists emphasise that the development of civil society in Poland might be blocked by the dominant role of family, and due to low level of social trust. Familiarism does not support engagement in the activity of NGOs because the effectiveness of social capital is often lower in informal relationships, as in this case the risk of maximising individual benefits is considerably higher. (Czapiński, 2006: 204).

Civic activity might manifest itself in a variety of forms. Its indicators most often include:

- participation in parliamentary, presidential, local and EU parliament elections – active (voter turnout) and passive (standing for elections, forming citizens' electoral committees, etc.);
- engagement in the activity of associations, NGOs, foundations and trade unions;
- membership of a political party;
- participation in demonstrations, rallies, assemblies, pickets and protests;
- sending petitions and inquiries to politicians, institutions and public administration representatives.

Voter turnout in Poland is rather stable yet low, amounting to 40-50% in parliamentary elections. As the analysis of the General Polish Electoral Study (PGSW) affiliated with the Institute of Political Studies of the Polish Academy of Sciences shows, the percentage of people who are not voting deliberately is not high – less

than 15 % of people entitled to vote has never exercised this right. However, only one in four Poles participated in all the elections in which he or she had the right to vote. Approximately 60 % of eligible voters take part in elections only occasionally. Non-voters usually constitute over a half of the Polish population (with the exception of presidential elections – see Table 1.). Voters and non-voters differ above all in their level of education (among people with higher education voters constitute a straight majority – depending on the elections the voter turnout of this group amounted to 65-80 %, while among people with primary or vocational secondary education it amounted to 30-45 %); age – older people vote more often than young people; and frequency of religious practices – the more frequent the religious practices, the higher the probability of voting (Cześnik). Record low voter turnout was witnessed during the first elections to the European Parliament, when only one in five Poles decided to vote. Even the fact of having the possibility to vote in the EU parliament elections for the very first time did not persuade Poles to participate more eagerly (as was the case with other newly-joined countries).

Table 1. Voter turnout in Poland 1989-2007

Type of elections/referendum	Year	% of voters
Contract Sejm elections	1989	62,70 (25,31)*
Presidential election	1990	60,63 (53,40)*
Local elections	1990	42,27
Parliamentary elections	1991	43,20
Parliamentary elections	1993	52,13
Local elections	1994	33,78
Presidential election	1995	64,70 (68,23)*
Leasehold enfranchisement referendum	1996	32,40
Privatisation referendum	1996	32,44
Constitutional referendum	1997	42,86
Parliamentary elections	1997	47,93
Local elections	1998	44,67
Presidential election	2000	61,12
Parliamentary elections	2001	46,29
Local elections	2002	35,02
Accession referendum	2003	58,85
EU parliament elections	2004	20,90
Parliamentary elections	2005	40,57
Presidential election	2005	49,74 (50,99)*
Local elections	2006	45,99
Parliamentary elections	2007	53,88

*Second round of the elections

Source: own work on the basis of the National Electoral Committee data

Even though voting is the least demanding form of civic activity, the inclination of Polish citizens to vote is relatively low. We should not therefore be surprised that other forms of participation in public life are even less frequently practiced. In Poland citizens tend to be withdrawn from the public sphere, they do not engage in organising protests, pickets, demonstrations and rarely take part even in those organised on their behalf with the intention of protecting their rights.

The matter of membership in political parties appears to be even worse. For the last ten years, the percentage of Poles declaring themselves members of a political party has amounted to less than 1% (see Table 2.). This is most likely a legacy of the previous political system, when a large proportion of the population considered their membership of the Polish United Workers' Party to be forced.

Table 2. Declared membership in political parties or associations

Year	1998	1999	2002	2004	2006	2008
Percentage of the population declaring membership	0,3	0,8	0,6	0,7	0,7	0,4

Source: *Polacy o swojej aktywności społecznej (Poles about their Civic Activity)*, Survey report, CBOS, Warszawa, February 2008

Engagement in the activity of associations, NGOs, foundations and trade unions is equally low. Only 15 % of the respondents declared membership in organisations of that type, from which 12 % belonged to only one organisation, 3 % belonged to two organizations and 1% belonged to more than two organisations. Compared to the previous research conducted as part of *The Social*

Diagnosis in 2005 and 2003, the voluntary association membership rate has increased, but it is too early to consider this to be a constant tendency (Czapiński, Panek, 2007:257). It is, however, worth noting that the CBOS research from 2008 [1] shows the opposite tendency, indicating a withdrawal of Polish citizens from active participation in organisations and local communities.

Table 3. Members of organisations.

	2003	2005	2007
Members of organisations	12,2 %	12,1 %	15,1 %
Members performing functions	45,1 %	55,7 %	41,4 %
People performing functions among the whole population	5,3 %	6,8 %	7,0 %

Source: J. Czapiński, T. Panek (red.), *The Social Diagnosis 2007 (Diagnoza Społeczna 2007). Conditions and quality of life of Poles (Warunki i jakość życia Polaków). Report*, p. 257

[1] *Polacy o swojej aktywności społecznej*, Survey report, CBOS, Warsaw, February 2008

The percentage of citizens who are members of trade unions, which is also an indicator ofone of civic activity indicators, has remained at almost the same level.

Table 4. Membership in trade unions (percentage of the population)

year	'91	'92	'93	'94	'95	'96	'99	'00	'01	'02	'03	'04	'05	'06	07	'08
%	19	16	10	14	11	11	11	9	8	6	8	8	9	7	6	8

Source: *Przynależność do związków zawodowych (Membership in Trade Unions)*, Survey report, CBOS, Warszawa, February 2008

The voluntary association membership rate is not the only sign of the development of civil society. There is a view that even though Poles are reluctant to join organisations, they often do good for their local community informally. It turns out, however, that only slightly more than 14 % of the respondents states that over the last two years they have engaged in activities on behalf of their environment, neighbourhood or parish. There is a slow yet consistent increase in the proportion, as in 2005 it amounted to 13,6 %, in 2003 it amounted to 12,9 %, and in 2000 it amounted to 8 % (Czapiński, Panek 2007:258). Nevertheless, Poland is still far behind the countries of West Europe.

Another sign of civic activity is the number of petitions and inquiries that are sent to politicians, institutions and public administration representatives. In developed democracies, writing letters to the authorities, the government and members of parliament on behalf of other people is a popular form of expressing one's opinion and a means of influencing the decisions of the authorities. In Poland, only one in ten citizens has ever undertaken this form of civic activity. (Czapiński, Panek, 2007: 260). However, since joining the EU, Polish citizens have sent increasing numbers of petitions to the European Parliament. These petitions are a means of complaining

about the violation of European Union legisaltion and of pursuing one's rights as a citizen or a resident of the European Union. They can be sent by anybody who lives in a Member State of the European Union as well as by organisations, associations and companies whose premises are in the area of the EU. Each year, approximately 1000 petitions arrive at the European Parliament, most of which are submitted by the citizens of Germany, Great Britain, Spain, Greece, France and Italy. Interestingly though, of the new Member States, the citizens of Poland submit the largest number of petitions (in 2006 – 56). The most common matters on which Polish citizens turned to the European Parliament include: excise duty on cars, the ring road through the Valley of Rospuda, the expansion of the Kasprowy Wierch cableway and the planned Nord Stream pipeline[2].

This short review of the statistical civic activity (or rather passivity) of Polish citizens shows that they lack enthusiasm for grass-roots initiatives and tend to be unwilling to engage in such actions. In addition, Poles express disgust for politics and do not participate in elections. Can membership of the EU change anything in this respect? Do EU programmes and institutions have any influence on the civic activity of Poles?

Institutional framework and condition of non-governmental organisations

NGOs became a regular feature of the Polish political landscape after 1989. The early 90's were a period of particularly dynamic development of the NGO sector, which took place thanks to both endogenous factors and foreign assistance in the broad sense. As the number of registered NGOs rose, the relative rate of increase

[2] http://www.mojeprawo.pl/index.php?symbol=aktualnosci.htm&show=2165

(measured in relation to the number of NGOs in the previous year) declined. By the end of 1993, the annual rate of growth in the number of organisations stabilised at the level of approximately 115 %. Since the mid-90's there has been a consistent decrease in the development rate of the sector (particularly with regard to associations). Until recently, this was not caused by the number of newly established organisations dropping off, but because of the consistent growth in the number of organisations with each consecutive year, a number that served as a reference point for the annual comparisons. The number of newly formed organisations remained stable for years and amounted to slightly more than 4,000 associations and about 500 foundations per year. However, in the past few years the figures were lower. According to official data, about 3,000 associations and 650 foundations were established in 2007, which is 25% less than in 2003, when the figures showed that there were 4,000 new associations and 900 foundations (Gumkowska, Herbst 2008).

The fields in which Polish NGOs engage have been the same for years; the main areas of activity of the largest proportion of NGOs (38 %) include sport, tourism, recreation and hobbies. 13 % of organisations indicate education, culture and the arts as their main area of activity. Social assistance is the domain of 11 % of NGOs, whereas health care is within the scope of 8 % of NGOs. The activities of non-governmental organisations are often multifaceted, since many NGOs do not restrict themselves to only one field.

The legal framework of the third sector is formed by the following three acts: the Act of 1984 on Foundations (Journal of Laws of 1991, No. 46, item 203, as amended), the Law of 1989 on Associations (Journal of Laws of 1989, No. 20, item 104, as amended) and the Act of 2003 on Public Benefit and Volunteer Work (Journal of Laws of 2003, No. 96, item 873). Taking action on behalf of the development of the cooperation between the public sector

and non-governmental organisations is a component of the development of social dialogue, which is additionally emphasised by the Constitution of Poland, as in its preamble there is a reference to social dialogue being the fundamental principle of governing the country.

When the Act on Public Benefit and Volunteer Work came into effect in 2003, the Department of Public Benefit responsible for, among other things, taking action on behalf of the development of cooperation between the public sector and non-governmental organisations was created within the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy. In 2004 the department prepared the Civic Initiative Fund programme (Fundusz Inicjatyw Obywatelskich) and laid down the principles of the Strategy for Supporting Civil Society Development in Poland. The debate over the National Development Plan, whose important element was the Civil Society Operational Programme, was another important step towards developing the culture of dialogue in Poland.

Some units of local government decided to set up local public benefit councils and regional social dialogue commissions, which are to serve as an advisory base for the regional decision processes. Regional social dialogue commissions (WKDS) engage the strongest social partners, excluding, however, individual citizens. The latter have not yet found a suitable forum on the regional level. The blocking of the access of NGOs to the work of Lower Silesian WKDS is even more significant, since the WKSD operating in Wroclaw was the only regional commission in Poland in which the third sector made an attempt to involve in the regional dialogue forum. This example indicates a quite serious problem. According to the subsidiarity principle, the possibilities of establishing appropriate participatory institutions should be created; however, practice shows that this is not always the case (Sroka 2009:118).

Moreover, the cooperation of NGOs with local authorities leaves much to be desired. In some districts, civic activity in the area of public benefit is, in a way, licensed by the local government administration. It is sometimes the case that public officials whose responsibility is cooperation with NGOs encourage their acquaintances to set up non-governmental organisations in order to take public action, and thus use funds coming from the local government, which certainly is ethically unambiguous. It should be pointed out that such undertakings were initiated in places where there were relatively few NGOs, and the existing ones were rather passive. In this way the local government serves as both midwife and a specific incubator for the NGOs, helping them not only with the current functioning and drawing up application forms but also with accounting for the granted funds. Thus, it follows that subsidiarity as practiced by local governments in Poland might turn out to be a reflection of this otherwise noble principle in a distorting mirror (Sroka, 2009: 106-107).

Active citizenship as a priority of the European Union

That the matter of active citizenship is one of the priorities of the EU is demonstratedproved by a number of documents and their related financial instruments they created. The Treaty establishing the European Community (TEC) does not mention the notion of non-governmental organisation, but the references to the issues related to the third sector are to be found in articles 138 and 139 TEC concerning social dialogue and article 257 TEC establishing The European Economic and Social Committee. Article 257 TEC, as amended by the Treaty of Nice, establishes that the committee consists of representatives of various economic and social groups of organised civil society. In addition, two declarations were devoted specifically to the issues of the third sector. These are as follows: the Declaration No. 23 concerning cooperation with charitable organisations annexed to the

Maastricht Treaty and the Declaration No. 38 concerning volunteer work annexed to the Amsterdam Treaty. The fundamental documents issued by the European Commission that relate to the activity of NGOs include: *Promoting the Role of Voluntary Organisations and Foundations in Europie* [3] and *The Commission and Non-governmental Organisations: Building a Stronger Partnership*[4]. The matter of NGOs and their role in the development of civil society was raised in *The White Paper on European Governance* prepared by the European Commission[5].

The principle of partnership between public administration and the civil sector applies to the management of structural funds and the Cohesion Fund. In the current programme (from 2007 to 2013) it has been adjusted so that NGOs, environmental organisations and organisations promoting equal rights for men and women can take part in the negotiations concerning both the preparation and implementation of the programmes. The structure of the EU programmes, in a way, demandsforces good cooperation between the civil and public sector, which should, among other things, result in an increase in civic activity. According to the survey conducted by M. Fuszara (2005), since the end of 2004, the representatives of women's organisations in Poland have noticed positive changes in the way the third sector is viewed by public administration, which – in their opinion – is a consequence of the rules of the EU, where the NGO sector is treated as a full partner. Similar conclusions are drawn by the representatives of organisations dealing with the problems of ecology, regional development, and ethnic and linguistic minorities, proof of which can be

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[3] *Promoting the Role of Voluntary Organizations and Foundations in Europe, COM/97/0241 final.*

[4] *The Commission and Non-governmental Organizations: Building a Stronger Partnership*, COM (2000)11 final.

[5] *The White Paper on European Governance,* COM (2001) 428 final.

found in their statements collected within the framework of the *Organised Civil Society and European Governance* project (Wódz, 2007). Even though for many activists of the third sector the changes are obvious and positive, they stress that it is difficult to separate the changes caused by the accession to the European Union from those caused by many years of work of NGOs in Poland.

The effects of supporting civic activity by the EU

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[6] *Promoting the Role of Voluntary Organizations and Foundations in Europe, COM/97/0241 final.*

[7] *The Commission and Non-governmental Organizations: Building a Stronger Partnership*, COM (2000) 11 final.

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[8] *The White Paper on European Governance*, COM (2001) 428 final.
[9] http://sreview.soc.cas.cz/upl/archiv/files/512_ZprKrizkova.pdf

influence of international institutions (f.i. UNDAW), international foundations (f.i. Soros Foundations, Konrad-Adenauer-Foundation, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, Fondation Robert Schuman etc.) or the international networks of NGOs.

Conclusion

Public opinion surveys show that there are symptoms of weakening civic activity in Poland. A willingness to undertake voluntary and unpaid cooperation on behalf of one's local community is an increasingly rare phenomenon, as the number of people engaging in such activity is getting smaller and smaller. Stating that it is the effect of the Polish accession to the European Union would depart from the truth; however, it is not difficult to notice that these two phenomena have taken place in parallel.

The Polish accession to the EU in 2004 has brought about plenty of positive effects in various areas of political, economic and civic life. These positive effects are also present in the NGO sector, which forms civil society. However, this does not mean that financial transfers for organisations and associations and the promotion of practices and solutions desired by the EU should be perceived only as a benefit.

It is important that, thanks to Polish membership in the European Union, the attitudes of Polish authorities have changed. They have now begun to understand the necessity of seeking a new balance between public authorities and other entities (including NGOs). Equally, they have grasped the importance of developing multilevel governance based on a multilateral and task-oriented selection of partners interested in a given area of support and functioning in a broader context than a traditional partnership. The framework of the EU encourages an expansion of the number of participants in

projecting, making decisions and implementing specific solutions, which requires Poland to go beyond established governance practices.

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