

MAREK KŁODZIŃSKI

**Jerzy Wilkin and Andrzej Hałasiewicz (eds.):  
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Each subsequent report on the state of rural areas is a publication highly anticipated by various environments interested in the widely understood rural issue. Owing to careful selection of the authors and discussed issues, the Foundation for Development of Polish Agriculture made the reports an essential tool for disseminating knowledge on the key processes in rural Poland. An interdisciplinary approach and interpretation of many complex phenomena taking place in rural areas in a form understandable for the general reader ensured the leading and stable position of the reports on the readers market. A great advantage of the reports is their immutable, clear, and transparent methodology, which has ensured the continuity and comparability of their content for more than 20 years. This should be undoubtedly attributed to the originators of the reports as well their scientific editor, professor Jerzy Wilkin.

The first chapter of *Rural Poland 2020. The Report on the State of Rural Areas* is a synthesis by J. Wilkin, which, although untypical, immediately helps the reader to review the key conclusions from the individual chapters. The advantage of the synthesis is a form of summarizing the chapters written by individual authors that encourages the reader to search for more detailed elaboration on a specific issue. The synthesis was divided into six subchapters discussing the selected thematic groups. This led to combining certain contents in some subchapters, for example the paper on population by Monika Stanny with the paper on society by Barbara Fedyszak-Radziejowska, which makes the synthesis more logical and transparent.

When reading the report, one should ask oneself about the impact of the pandemic on the Polish rural areas and agriculture. Since the individual chapters were prepared at the onset of pandemic, they contained more questions than answers. Thus, evaluating the effects of the crisis affecting many aspects of life in rural areas both in the summary and individual chapters of the report was a difficult task.

The chapter by Monika Stanny and Paweł Strzelecki on rural population continues the studies on a crucial issue analyzed in the previous reports by the late Izasław Frenkel. It is worth emphasizing the fact that the authors maintained the structure of the papers introduced by I. Frenkel, while adding an important factor of the spatial structure of demographic processes. Depopulation affects 53% of communes, which co-exists with the increased share of population in the post-working age. Population growth in rural areas went down nearly to zero. Increase in the population size observed in 41% of communes results from migration from the cities to the countryside, primarily to the areas in the vicinity of large agglomerations, rather than from birthrate. Both the previous reports and the last one depict an intensifying phenomenon of deagrarization, which is the decreasing importance of agriculture in the rural economy, employment structure, income, etc. However, the course of these processes is different in the individual regions of the country, which will be critical for the nature of the adopted directions of development for each village, commune, or powiat. The paper misses an attempt to determine the necessary countermeasures for the increasing depopulation along the so-called Eastern Wall, primarily in the Podlaskie and Lubelskie Voivodeships.

In the chapter dedicated to social structure and transformations in rural areas, Barbara Fedyszak-Radziejowska points out at the decreasing distance between the countryside and cities in economic terms, which does not translate into unification of beliefs, value system, and religiousness, although certain changes are noticeable. Significant improvement in the education rate constitutes an important factor of social advancement of the rural population. 52% of the rural population has full secondary education, 20% has higher education, but only 60% uses the Internet. However, it should be noted that the pandemic has forced stronger digitization of rural areas, which is described in the chapter by Andrzej Hałasiewicz. The author concludes his paper with an observation that the “time, in which the ‘underdeveloped rural areas’ and ‘demanding peasants’ have been made responsible for any potential problems and obstacles in the country’s development is about to end”. While agreeing with the depicted direction of transformations, it would be hard not to notice that, for example, despite a great support for integration of Poland with the EU in the rural community, there is also a strong expectation that the state will increasingly satisfy their basic needs. The reason behind these expectations is the relatively moderate support (55%) of the rural population for the market economy. Considering the above data, the conclusion on a decline in demanding attitudes should be more careful and moderate.

The authors of the chapter describing the structure of Polish agriculture are Agnieszka Baer-Nawrocka and Walenty Poczta. Structural changes in agriculture have been a constant element of reports on the state of rural areas for years, simi-

larly to demography and socio-economic situation of the rural population. Despite the observed decrease in the number of small farms in Poland, this is still an initial stage of structural transformation. This process releases only minor resources of lands, which are frequently located in unattractive sites. Small farms are poorly linked with the market, have low scale of production and are unable to benefit from many forms of EU support. Conversion of land from agricultural use has become a worrying phenomenon, observed in particular in central and south-eastern Poland. In addition, small farms face difficulties with implementing the new environmental protection requirements. One should note that the authors of this chapter set the profitability threshold for agricultural production and economic viability of farms for the area of 30-40 of utilized land. Modernization of production assets has been taking place only in larger farms demonstrating a development capacity. The analysis showed that less than 1% of farms of an area below 20 ha benefited from the modernization measures available in the RDP for 2007-2013.

It should be emphasized that the chapter is written in a simple and easily understood language. The authors managed to briefly present both the positive and negative effects of the CAP on the state of structural transformations in agriculture. It is a pity that the authors did not mention the need for territorial differentiation of the agricultural policy to tailor it to spatial polarization of the farm structure in Poland.

The chapter by Iwona Nurzyńska dedicated to the importance of Poland's membership in the European Union for rural areas and agriculture describes numerous benefits from the accession. At present, when the positive effects of European integration are questioned with increasing frequency, the amount of both direct financial support from the EU and benefits from opening the EU market for Polish producers should be presented as often as possible. Specific figures of direct inflows received by Poland from the EU are the most appealing to the reader. At the end of 2016, this amount reached EUR 116 billion, which makes Poland the largest net beneficiary of the EU budget. EUR 56 billion from these funds was allocated for the common agricultural policy. 60% of this amount was targeted directly at farmers (1300 thousand of farms) in the form of direct payments that accounted for 45% of total farm income. In Poland, direct payments play a more significant role in stabilizing the farm income comparing to the other EU Member States. Each year, 1.3 million farmers receive PLN 14.6 billion.

It is worrying that the second component (pillar) of CAP, i.e. funds to be allocated to the Rural Development Programme (RDP), is transferred to directly support farmers. The author of the chapter suggests that the reason behind this is the deteriorating quality and efficiency of the institutional system managing the EU programs in Poland, which is manifested by, among others, poor interest in measures such as, for example, knowledge transfers and cooperation, as well as counteracting climate change. Poland does not benefit from the entire package of measures dedicated to crop and livestock insurance and withdrew from the income stabilization tool compensating the decrease in market income. The following programming periods from 2021-2027, during which the new EU programs under the "European Green

Deal” are to be implemented, may be much more difficult. The underfunded system of farm advisory and innovation transfer system may lead to depriving the farmers of crucial support, which is compounded by the need for consideration of regional differences. Large amounts (EUR 56 billion) received by Poland under CAP have not substantially improved the agricultural structure. However, one cannot ignore the fact that the EU funds have significantly contributed to a better standard of living in rural areas due to the investments in technical infrastructure, including roads, water supply systems, sewage systems, etc. The Polish agri-food processing industry reached a spectacular success manifested in growing exports, primarily to the EU Member States.

The following chapter by Barbara Chmielewska and Józef Zegar devoted to the standard of living in rural areas in relation to Poland and the European Union is a thorough analysis of a multi-dimensional category which is the standard of living. Since the standard of living of the population is determined by the income situation, the vast majority of the paper is dedicated to the level of income, its structure and relations in urban and rural areas. Many fragments of this paper depict a more rapid growth rate of certain values in rural areas comparing to the cities as a result of Poland’s accession to the European Union. For example, from 2004-2018 disposable income per capita in rural areas increased more rapidly than in the cities. The income structure has changed in terms of sources of origin, e.g. the share of agricultural work in the budget of rural families has decreased relatively at the expense of income from employment. In addition, research performed by the authors points out a significant share of social benefits in the rural household budget. The accession also resulted in a diminishing gap between rural and urban areas in terms of expenditure on clothing, household equipment, transport, recreation, culture, etc.

Despite these positive changes affecting the improved standard of living in rural areas, the disparities between urban and rural areas continue to be visible, yet are no longer so large. While in 2018 nearly 40% of the rural population assessed its financial situation as very good or good, in 2003, i.e. just before Poland’s accession to the EU, this answer was chosen by only 8.2%. However, one should remember that the benefits from transformation are distributed unevenly and that there are still extensive areas of poverty, which is referred to in the following chapter by Sławomir Kalinowski entitled *Rural Poverty – Its Evolution, Causes, Forms and Spatial Differences*. This paper is a more extensive and thorough analysis of the issue that has been merely mentioned in the previous reports in connection with, for example, the amount of income and structure of livelihoods. According to research by S. Kalinowski, despite the 500+ program, 13th pension and other forms of social support, rural poverty continues to exist. It should be noted that the analysis of poverty and misery is a complicated issue both in terms of methodology and definition. The most frequently used rate is the at-risk-of-poverty rate defined as the share of persons with an income below 60% of median equivalized income. The poverty rate calculated according to this definition amounted to 27.2% in 2005 in Polish rural areas and decreased to 21.1% in 2018. High rural poverty is associated with lower median equivalized income, which in 2018 amounted to PLN 36 thousand in large agglomerations comparing to

PLN 26.7 thousand in rural areas. Since such analyses depict only the economic disparities, the author also uses other rates determining the level of poverty, for example the extreme poverty defined by the minimum subsistence level, the share of population benefiting from social assistance, the Gini coefficient determining the level of income diversification, etc. Although these rates demonstrate the decreasing scale of poverty in rural areas comparing to the urban population, they continue to sound an alarm about persisting problems including, for example, considerable regional differentiation, meaning in general that the risk of falling below the statutory poverty threshold increases in areas located further from large agglomerations. Thus, the population from peripheral areas of individual voivodeships is at a greater risk of failure to satisfy its needs comparing to people living in the vicinity of cities. This situation cannot be solved by transfer of social benefits (handouts), which should be replaced by local communities activation programs. Although the paper is of a scientific nature, it should be remembered that the form of presentation should be understandable for a reader who does not use the terms used by scientists on a daily basis. This is why, it is worth using more common language to make the content easier to understand by the practitioners.

The chapter by Jerzy Bartkowski on political attitudes and behaviors of rural voters in Poland is a necessary complement to the picture of Polish rural areas. The rural voters with their majority support for Law and Justice (PiS) have become a strategic ally of the ruling party with a decisive impact on the election results. The elections to both the Polish Sejm and to the European Parliament demonstrated the unchanging preferences of the rural voter. However, in spite of the intentions of the government, the attempts to increase the dependency of local government elections at the community area from the party have failed. The need for stability in the local environment outbalanced the political maneuvers. Membership of a specific political party is of a greater importance when electing the mayors and regional governments. In rural areas, the entity with the greatest authority is the Catholic Church. Its continuous support for PiS largely affects the attitudes of the residents. Data presented by J. Bartkowski clearly demonstrate that this party has a dominating advantage in rural areas and in small towns. Between 2015 and 2019, the public perceptions in rural areas improved considerably, which widens the gap between the support for PiS and the remaining political parties.

The chapter by Andrzej Hałasiewicz on the concepts of rural revival and strengthening focuses on the “smart village” concept. The essence of this strategy is to reduce the existing differences between the urban and rural areas in terms of communication technologies related to the Internet and digitization. The author describes numerous benefits from building an information society in the countryside. Modern communication technologies facilitating access to many services and resources and reducing their costs are the key element of further rural development. There is an undisputed need to disseminate this program by providing the necessary knowledge and technologies (broadband Internet) as well as examples of successful use of IT technologies in many areas of rural life. The number of initiatives should be increased by different foundations and NGOs, including among

others the implementation of a project entitled “Active Villages. Building Information Society in Local Scale” by the Rural Development Foundation. It is a pity that the author described no “Smart Village” projects that have been implemented. I believe that this would add value to the paper and open up the reader to this concept. The paper also contains considerations on the impact of the crisis induced by the pandemic on the intensified digitization of rural areas. Closing schools has forced e-learning, while suspending customer service in offices increased the use of emails and the electronic platforms of administrative services. There can be no doubt that the information explosion has transformed our world in a flash. Advanced technologies, a knowledge-based world, is the only possible direction for further development. The changes occur so fast that we need to foster our education to keep up with it. The key for the success of Poland as a whole is adapting the rural areas, which account for 90% of the country’s territory and are inhabited by 15 million of people, to the digital era. Unfortunately, the author failed to include other concepts and programs of rural activation, such as the Rural Revival Program or the concepts of multi-functional development, in his considerations.

To sum up, one should emphasize that the group of recognized experts who presented their papers fulfilled the expectations. The papers are of high value and interesting for the world of science and practitioners. The role of the reviewer also includes submitting a few critical remarks, which are contained in the description of individual chapters. These comments do not prejudice the advantages of the report, which makes a significant contribution to the knowledge on rural areas and agriculture. The report ends with a 20-page translation of the *Summary* into English by professor Jerzy Wilkin, which makes the publication a perfect source of knowledge about Polish rural areas for foreign readers.

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