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Poland's Futures: A View from the Countryside

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At a time when its voters are in and out of voting booths – municipal elections at the end of 2018, European and national elections in 2019, and presidential ones in 2020 – taking the long view of Poland's future can help demonstrate what is at stake in these electoral contests. Large in size and politically crucial, the EU member state has changed much since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and continues to evolve. As part of the Green European Journal's exploration of the possible futures for Europe in 2049 and drawing on research conducted in the Polish countryside, Przemysław Sadura tells the story of a country for which multiple paths lie open. In sketching potential scenarios, socio-economic and political trends are revealed relevant not only for Poland but many other parts of Europe too.

The report *Rural Poland 2017: diagnosis and forecast* investigated the state of the Polish countryside over the past 30 years in order to analyse what the next three decades might look like.[1] In 1989, it would have been considered utopian or plainly misplaced to imagine that, in 2019, most Polish people would live in the countryside despite only 10 per cent of the population working in agriculture. Today, the countryside is more than ever the 'happening' place in Poland. Four trends drive this phenomenon: re-ruralisation, de-agrarisation, de-urbanisation, and internal migration.

Poland's countryside idyll

The principal driver of re-ruralisation is the rediscovery of the countryside as an attractive place to live. According to CBOS survey from 2015, just 18 per cent of Poles want to live in a large city, while 40 per cent think of living in the countryside as their ideal.[2] Contrary to the global trend of urbanisation, Poles started the 21st century by going back to the countryside. Material changes such as the ever-increasing ease of working remotely from home facilitated this shift. It is borne out in the numbers: since 2002 the proportion of urban dwellers has declined, while that of rural residents continues to grow. Currently 40 per cent of Poles live in villages and, if such a trend continues, by 2049 this figure will rise to 45 per cent of a population of 34 million (compared to 38 million today).

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Cities deserted by the wealthy and active part of the middle class are at risk of de-urbanisation, a trend whereby they lose their urban character. People cease to use the city and what it has to offer, and begin to care less about public spaces and the quality of the environment. This matters in a country like Poland where more energy is being spent on denying climate change than fighting it. The growing health and environmental awareness of the middle class helped make the high levels of air pollution in Polish cities visible. And urban movements, trying to respond to this change in attitudes, ran successful smog awareness campaigns in several cities that forced both reluctant local and central authorities to take action, to do their job. But the outflow of middle-class citizens could mean that the pressure driving more ecologically aware policies falls. The rising attractiveness of rural life and the multitude of problems in cities (smog, heatwaves, traffic, noise, lack of green spaces) may encourage people to make individualistic choices. Why should one fight for a high quality of life in the city, when you can leave it behind and go live in the countryside?

The countryside itself is the theatre of a third trend: de-agrarisation. Despite EU money, rural areas are losing their

agricultural character. Villages have less and less to do with farming land and are becoming a sort of rusticate Arcadia with peace, quiet, and nature at its core. While farming (at present) is still limited to the countryside, only 10 per cent of Poland's employment is made up of agriculture – by 2049 this figure may shrink to single digits. At the same time for growing category of people, a small plot of land next to their house is an element of their lifestyle.

Finally the trend of internal migration means that wealthier, more highly educated people are starting to come to live in the countryside, while people with low cultural and economic capital go to the cities. Villages near dynamic cities become bedrooms, while places near attractive tourist destinations are enclaves for people searching for a summer relax or a calm life as middle-class pensioners from the city. Such colonisation results in rising class conflict. Especially if we consider that another growing group in the Polish countryside is that of the 'NEETs' (people not in education, employment or training) – people that are inactive in cultural, social and political terms and whose views, research shows, may end up on the extreme margins of the authoritarian political spectrum.[3]

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The influx of people from the countryside does not even out the fall in urban population and is insufficient to satisfy the demand for labour. After Poland entered the EU many people chose not to settle in cities in Poland, but in British, German or Dutch ones. Against its widespread and lasting image of a mono-ethnic country that is closed to immigrants, Poland became a global leader in accepting seasonal workers last year. OECD data show that Poland is the biggest importer of labour in the world (bringing in not only Ukrainians, but also people from Bangladesh, India, Vietnam, and China). In 2030 its labour shortage will grow by a further 1.5 million people. Migration will have to rise – and it will do.

All those changes contribute to the unstable political and class relations that determine the balance of power between urban and rural in Poland. They create the structural context for populist mobilisation against various 'Others' (middle-class colonists in the countryside, rural migrants in large cities, economic immigrants and refugees in both environments), fuelling radical right-wing sentiment and activism. The best example in Poland is rising nationalism, which, stoked by anti-immigrant campaigns from the ruling Law and Justice party, heightens the risk of ethnic violence. Its combination of Polish nationalism, religious conservatism, anti-elitism, and attacks on those supposedly seeking to dictate to Poland about values and migrant quotas made Law and Justice the largest party in Parliament after 2015 election and is very likely to help it maintain its dominance in the forthcoming 2019 elections.

Poland 2049: forecasting a not so distant future

Considering these trends alongside possible political trajectories allow us to generate a few scenarios regarding the future. These speculative scenarios are informed by the research cited above and by the respondents interviewed within that research exercise. Actors such as local politicians, activists, and businessmen from rural communities were asked what the future looks like through the eyes of people living in regional Poland. Respondents identified two key determinants for the future of the countryside: EU membership and the level of autonomy exercised by local communities relative to politics at the national level.

Scenario I: neo-conservative dictatorship à la Atwood

Poland is out of the EU. A semi-authoritarian political system in which the ruling party occupies a dominant position limits the power of local communities, affecting the countryside especially. Centralisation means reduced powers for local authorities. The society becomes more and more closed. Nationalism and the top-down enforcement of traditionalism rises. Women are forced to retreat to the private sphere. Immigrants, in significant part temporary agricultural workers, do not have full civic rights. The government rejects climate agreements and supports a carbon-intensive economy – its rationale is to use as much coal as the country has got because there is not much of it anyways. Domestic policies towards rural development are focused on social transfers and on the subjugation of the countryside by the political centre. Representatives of the central administration in rural Poland watch over the situation so that class or ethnic conflicts do not spiral out of control. Funds devoted to cultural development support mass "popular" events. Being cut out of European markets limits economic growth, poses problems for trade, and slows technological progress. In this scenario, the Polish countryside loses its political autonomy and becomes the domesticated supporter of authoritarian central government. The traditional local community, adhering to the most anachronistic values, is the elementary unit of the "new" society. The traditional and authoritarian village community – as had been the case for centuries in rural Poland – is the model for the organisation of social life throughout the country. Poland becomes more and more of a community of authoritarian communities. Such a slow decline cannot live forever and leads to protests, conflicts, and strikes.

Scenario II: A European democratorship

Poland stays in the EU, which forces the government – at least formally – to abide to civic rights of the country's inhabitants, implement negotiated policies aimed at fighting climate change, and respect the rule of law and the independence of civil society. European Union allows for some deviation from the rules, as well as the mere nominal implementation of procedures, for fear of otherwise triggering a downward spiral. The government tries to limit the autonomy of rural communities by weakening and blurring the competences of local authorities and paralysing the activity of non-governmental organisations. These actions lead to apathy and lower social and political activism. As local authorities are turned into 'transmission belts' for central government, the leaders of rural communities gradually lose the trust of the society around them. Class and ethnic divisions, as well as economic inequality, undermine the cohesiveness of rural communities and make fertile terrain for the mobilisation of populist sentiment. The capture of state funds stunts the development of local communities and the central government's access to EU funds grants it control over society. The countryside is reduced to fulfilling to the needs of cities for bedrooms for urbanites and services such as nursing homes. Cultural activity is driven by the needs of the tourism industry and the cities. Governmental policies with the silent acceptance of European institutions turn the countryside to an open-air museum.

Scenario III: de-centralised autarky

The EU either disintegrates or morphs into a two-speed union – Poland holds on to a political system that guarantees the autonomy of local communities. The expanded role of local government leads to larger disparities between different communities and conflicts between the local and national level. Cooperation with eastern neighbours Ukraine and Belarus develops in the EU's absence – and a possibility for a Visegrad Union with Czechia, Slovakia, and Hungary emerges. Social activity increases due to the return of Poles working and living abroad and the values and innovations that they bring. Support is given to larger family farms and businesses based on cheap migrant labour. Local production develops as export limitations create a domestic market for Polish producers. International trade diminishes in importance or alternative trading partnerships, such as with South-East Asia are developed. In this scenario, the communities of rural Poland keep their independence and diversity, and the integration of the Polish economy within other structures than the common European market provides sufficient resources for it to be able to function effectively. Progressive political movements develop in line with bottom-up

models of political change.

Scenario IV: the return of "warm water in the tap"

The term "warm water in the tap" refers to a strategy developed by Donald Tusk, a former leader of Polish liberal party Civic Platform and now president of the European Council, when he was the Polish prime minister. It was based on the idea that Poles would be happy with a competent but uninspiring government. In this scenario Poland stays in the EU and the political system supports local communities. A strong and stable legislative at the central level, as well as good cooperation between national and local authorities guarantees governmental support for local initiatives in rural areas of Poland. EU membership means a steady flow of information, development of tourism, international cooperation, and growth in global trade. Poland is part of a multicultural world – the growing influence of the migrant population (also from different cultures) leads to greater awareness and tolerance towards them. Social activism and engagement rises. Bottom-up initiatives grow, leading to rising social cohesion in local communities and help in managing class and ethnic conflicts. More and more people are involved in cultural activities.

There is no future, so seize the day

This essay does not pretend to be the proper political forecast and the scenarios above should not be read literally. But it is important to be able to hear and read what regional and local actors in Poland have to say about the future, what they feel is certain, what they are afraid of, and what do they not notice at all. Respondents expect to increasingly see the effects of climate change – but also that technology and politics will rise to the challenge and limit their scope. It is interesting that they do not see the climate as an especially important issue. Although they appreciate the EU and chose it as a key variable in their scenarios, in practice they are much more focused on internal Polish politics and issues related to the urban-rural divide and the relationship between national and local authorities. A scenario of "decentralised autarky" seems as positive for many as a vision of a thriving democracy that is part of the EU.

It seems that the colonisation of the Polish countryside by the urban middle class would not bring about the 'enlightenment' of regional Poland, but the provincialisation of modernisers. Democracy, a healthy environment, and wealth are seen as temporary goods, so it seems it is important to use them when possible, because whatever will be, will be.

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The problems identified in this essay are not just some Polish peculiarities. The gap between expert diagnoses and political therapies is getting larger all over the world. When the political imagination is limited, proven solutions from the past can seem like attractive models for the future: populism, autarky, escapism or restoring the *status quo ante*. These solutions too will contribute to shaping the horizon of political decisions for the foreseeable future. Escapist and individualistic ways of thinking among Polish local leaders will – along with the populist rule of the current government – make the worst scenarios for 2049 more and more possible. The rising ecological and demographic crises in Europe will be accompanied by class and ethnic conflicts and the manipulation of people's fears. Reversing such tendencies will require a strong counter-narrative of a utopian sort.

[1] The report Rural Poland 2017: diagnosis and forecast was commissioned by one of the first Polish NGOs on the occasion of its 30 years of existence. It looked at the Polish countryside over the past and into the next 30 years to include the view of people in rural, less wealthy, and populated parts of Poland. The present essay is a speculative text based on the study.

[2] CBOS, 2015, *Polska wieś: przemiany, trendy, stereotypy,* Warsaw.

[3] Szafraniec Krystyna et al., Zmiana warty. Młode pokolenia a transformacje we wschodniej Europie i Azji, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar, Warsaw 2017.

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