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Author(s): Krzysztof Zagórski, Mirosława Grabowska and Piotr Kosicki

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KRZYSZTOF ZAGÓRSKI
AND MIROŚŁAWA GRABOWSKA

Introduction

The Social Context of Living Conditions in Poland

Poles celebrate two anniversaries in 2009: the twentieth anniversary of the transition from communism and the fifth anniversary of admission to the European Union. Changes taking place at present in Polish society are no longer of such a radical nature as the reconstruction of a democratic, free-market system or integration with Europe. They represent first and foremost a gradual improvement of Poland's socioeconomic system, its adaptation to the conditions and requirements of an integrated Europe, and the acclimation by society to life under new conditions that, while already well established, continue to change constantly. These processes advance not without difficulty and undesirable negative side effects, though their direction is accepted and generally viewed in a positive light by

Krzysztof Zagórski is a professor of sociology and head of the Empirical Sociology Center at Kozminski University, Warsaw. He has served as a director of the Public Opinion Research Center (CBOS) and was a chief investigator of the CBOS research project "Living Conditions of Polish Society," which constitutes the subject of the present issue of the *International Journal of Sociology*. Address correspondence to zagorski@kozminski.edu.pl. Mirosława Grabowska is director of the CBOS and a professor of sociology at the University of Warsaw, Poland. Address correspondence to m.grabowska@cbos.pl.

Translated by Piotr Kosicki.

society, which is documented by systematically conducted public opinion research.

The ultimate goal of all socioeconomic and political changes, both radical and gradual, should be to maintain a modern state and society as well as to ensure living conditions that correspond to the aspirations and needs of the people—in other words, guarantee broadly defined appropriate living conditions and welfare. The multifaceted description of these conditions and their differentiation, determinants, and consequences was the goal of an enormous research project “Living Conditions of Polish Society: Problems and Strategies,” conducted in the second half of 2007 by the Public Opinion Research Center (CBOS) thanks to a grant from the Polish government.¹ This research project consisted of several segments. First, a series of representative surveys titled “How is life treating us?” was conducted by the method of face-to-face interviews on a address-random samples of the adult population of Poland. The largest of these involved a sample of 38,866 people from Polish society at large. This was a representative strata sample taken from a complete register of all household addresses prepared by the Polish government’s Central Statistical Office (GUS).

The chosen system of weights guaranteed cohesion of the sociodemographic structures of the final interview sample with current statistical data. Two types of weights enabled us to use the same data set for the analyses in which the units under study were households and, when appropriate, individuals. The very large size of the sample as well as the complicated system of weights made it possible to conduct the analysis on a national scale while also studying specific socioprofessional groups, provinces (voivodships), and metropolitan regions.²

Using the same survey questionnaire, research was also conducted on sixty-four representative samples for specially selected counties (*gminas*): the smallest administrative units dividing Poland. These were also random samples of addresses taken separately for each selected *gmina* from the same register, which was used as a base for the national sample. Given the often small populations of *gminas*, these samples varied in size. In total, 24,745 inhabitants of *gminas* were interviewed.

Altogether, 63,611 survey interviews were conducted.³ Most of the articles in this and the following issue of the *International Journal of Sociology* were prepared on the basis of data at the national level. One of the articles is, however, devoted to data from the gmina samples.

In the course of analyzing both national and gmina data, we note in each case whether they refer to the population of individuals or households. We also use the terms “household” and “family” interchangeably. We recognize that such usage constitutes a certain simplification, yet almost all Polish households are defined primarily by family.⁴

To deepen our research and better understand the phenomena under study, we also performed qualitative research on a scale rarely seen. This research was conducted by two institutions working in cooperation with the CBOS, the European Center for Regional and Local Studies (EUROREG) at the University of Warsaw and the research company ERESTE.

EUROREG conducted research of local elites in sixty-three selected gminas: this study included 601 semistructured interviews with representatives of the most important local institutions. In seven selected gminas, ERESTE conducted 336 in-depth individual interviews with inhabitants and 51 focus-group interviews.⁵

Polish sociologists have never before carried out a research program on this large scale with such a high degree of complexity. Nor do we know of similar research in other countries.

This and the next issue of the *International Journal of Sociology* contains selected analyses of the results of both the representative surveys and the in-depth qualitative research.⁶ For reasons of space and thematic cohesion, we have not included a discussion of the results of the semistructured interviews with the representatives of local institutions. We have likewise avoided discussion of material that would likely be less interesting to non-Polish readers (e.g., regional differentiation of living conditions). Here we can only assert in passing that they are, indeed, significant. In the course of selecting content for the journal, we concentrated on the following questions: Which living conditions shape Poles' sense of life satisfaction and “well-being”? What roles do social

capital and employment play in Poles' lives? How does the entire socioeconomic context influence Poles' economic behavior at a micro- (household) level?

The first article, by Jadwiga Koralewicz and Krzysztof Zagórski, titled "Living Conditions and Optimistic Orientation of Poles," pertains to the most general aspects of living conditions, such as satisfaction with life and its various dimensions, psychological well-being, as well as a sense of resourcefulness and control over one's own fate. The authors examine these issues in the broader theoretical context of happiness and optimistic attitudes toward life. The conclusions drawn from their empirical and dynamic analyses can also be deemed generally optimistic despite the fact that far from all Poles have a sense of personal happiness and satisfaction with life.

One of the most important aspects of the social dimension of life is the sense of a bond and self-identification of individuals with broader social groups and milieus. These issues are the focus of Tomasz Żukowski's article "Poles' Self-Identifications and Their Influence on Social Activism." The author supports the thesis advanced earlier that, from the point of view of subjective identification and perceived bonds, one can no longer speak about the "social vacuum" that in communist times separated "macro-identifications" with the nation and the fatherland from "micro-identifications" with primary groups, such as family and friends. One can also observe positive correlations between the strength of bonds felt with a social milieu and different manifestations of social activism; although these correlations are not very strong, they are statistically significant.

Continuing with these issues are the reflections of Tomasz Żukowski and Maria Theiss in their article, "Islands of Civic Engagement: Differences in the Level of Civic-Associational Social Capital," on the codependency of individual ties to social organizations and social activism, which together form a "civic-associational social capital," with two additional, more personal forms of social capital—"neighbor-friend capital" and "family capital." The authors claim a significant correlation between the strength of bonds

with primary groups (family, and, especially, neighbors and friends) and a share in civic-associational capital.

These three articles comprise the present issue of the *International Journal of Sociology*. To complete the presentation of the most important findings of the research project, three other articles will be published in the next issue (Spring 2010).

A significant form of ties to the social milieu surrounding us is provision of aid to others and reliance on aid from other people. Renata Siemieńska's article, which will open the next issue, deals with the "Self-Reliance and Self-Sufficiency of Polish Families and the Role of Social Networks." The author underscores the great role of noninstitutionalized forms of aid, particularly in reference to broadly defined family, and, to a lesser degree, acquaintances and neighbors. She also observes strong tendencies among households to take upon themselves all of the responsibilities necessary for a well-functioning family.

The manner in which families attempt to guarantee their own effective functioning, in particular the satisfaction of their needs, and, above all material needs, is the topic of the next article, "Strategies of Family Adaptation to Material Conditions in Polish Local Communities," by Katarzyna M. Staszynska and Krzysztof Zagórski. Combining conclusions from quantitative and qualitative research, the authors attempt to show how families adapt to new living conditions and what kinds of strategies they employ to deal with material challenges in different types of gminas. (Qualitative and quantitative research were combined in gminas only.) The article frequently refers to issues addressed in the previous texts. Individuals' bonds with their social milieu are examined from the point of view of the nature of local communities,⁷ as well as reliance on aid from other individuals or institutions. Specific behavioral models of economic adaptation in the family have a bearing on two adaptation strategies: income maximization and need reduction. These strategies appear in different proportions depending on the level of development and the type of gmina as well as on the type of household and its degree of affluence. It must be underscored that changes for the better take place more frequently in less developed

gminas, which early on were hardest hit by the negative side effects of the transformation that began in 1989.

Individuals spend most of their lives in the workplace, which is at the same time the primary source of means for supporting oneself. For this reason, we conclude our selection of texts with Michał Feliksiak's article, "Work and Unemployment." One of the most serious problems facing Polish society is the fact that only slightly more than half the adult population is employed. Even more serious is the problem of unemployment. Although the unemployment rate was 12 percent in 2007, as many as one-third of adult Poles have experienced unemployment at some point in their lives. In this situation, Poles are relatively satisfied with work, as long as they have it. They are most satisfied with its autotelic values, such as a sense of meaning and importance of the completed tasks, as well as the fact that their work is interesting and challenging. The employed are most dissatisfied, however, with instrumental, specifically material aspects of work, such as income and fringe benefits. Their satisfaction with chances for professional development and advancement is also relatively low. Independently of the relatively high level of satisfaction with autotelic aspects, those aspects influence the overall level of job satisfaction more strongly than material aspects.

We leave to our readers to determine whether the research results presented here demonstrate that Polish society has recently, after going through the radical systemic changes and integration with Europe, entered onto a path of gradual normalization and modernization of a wide spectrum of living conditions. Our research project was completed before the current financial crisis enveloped the entire world. It is still too early to assess the influence of this crisis on living conditions in Poland, particularly since it has not dramatically affected the Polish economy, at least thus far.

Notes

1. The CBOS is an independent foundation that conducts monthly research on Polish public opinion. It often works in tandem with academic research institutions, conducting academic research in the fields of sociology and political

science jointly with them or at their request. The foundation, though independent, is financed primarily through annual grants from the state budget. To supplement those funds, the CBOS also conducts commercial research, including market research. It publishes approximately 200 research communiqués annually on various aspects of current public opinion, as well as other publications, including the English-language monthly bulletin *Polish Public Opinion*. More information about the CBOS, as well as results of its research, can be found at www.cbos.pl.

2. Poland's sixteen voivodships constitute the largest territorial units of administrative division of the country. Metropolitan regions are the largest Polish cities with adjacent urban and rural areas that have strong functional links with the central city.

3. Given the unprecedented cumulative size of the samples, the survey was conducted in the field by combined interviewing teams of the CBOS, the Polskie Towarzystwo Statystyczne (Polish Statistical Association), and the research firm 4P. The data sets, at present unfortunately documented only in Polish, are available at the Archiwum Danych w Naukach Społecznych (Polish Social Science Data Archive).

4. The preliminary results of representative surveys on a national scale were presented in Krzysztof Zagórski, ed., "Jak się nam żyje?" [How Is Life Treating Us?], *Opinie i diagnozy* 1 and 2, no. 9 (2008); results for selected metropolitan locations can be found in Janusz Hryniewicz, Bohdan Jałowicki, and Anna Tychołska, "Jak się żyje w przyszłych metropoliach?" [How Is Life Treating Those Living in Future Metropolises?], *Opinie i diagnozy*, no. 10 (2008); and results for particular provinces in sixteen separate coauthored volumes: "Jak się żyje w województwie . . . ?" (How Is Life Treating Those Living in the . . . Voivodship?), *Opinie i diagnozy* 1–16, no. 11 (2008).

5. The results of the qualitative research have been summarized in two publications: Grzegorz Gorzelak, ed., *Polska lokalna 2007* [Local Poland 2007] (Warsaw: EUROREG and Scholar, 2008); Katarzyna M. Staszyńska, ed., "Poza metropolią: Jak się żyje w polskich gminach?" [Outside the Metropolis: How Is Life Treating Those Living in Polish *Gminas*?], *Opinie i diagnozy* 1 and 2, no. 12 (2008).

6. We present only selected and somewhat abbreviated articles previously published in Polish in Krzysztof Zagórski, ed., *Życie po zmianie—Warunki życia i satysfakcje Polaków* [Life After The Change: Poles' Living Conditions and Satisfaction] (Warsaw: CBOS and Scholar, 2009) and one paper (by M. Feliksiak) from Zagórski, "Jak się nam żyje?"

7. The administrative units of *gminas* are so small and comprehensive that their populations can be treated as close equivalents of local communities.

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