

Challenges for the civil society: educating for democracy in Poland

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The contemporary Polish society has been going through a process of radical changes for the past dozen years (and the process is still continuing), not only within the economic and political spheres, but also at the level of peoples' mentality. Undertaking the problem of the perspectives for educating for democracy, one should begin by diagnosing the condition of a citizen society indicating the conditions for building such a society.

The paper presents the degree of forming civil society in contemporary Poland with reference to exercising the right of electing the authorities of various levels, participation in associations, voluntary organizations, social movement and the level of social trust. Finally, the paper focuses on the perspectives of education for democracy in Poland.

Key words: civil society, social trust, education for democracy, education for a dialogue

INTRODUCTION

Post-socialist societies are now facing many important challenges that have emerged due to building democracy after the period of the socialist regime and the difficult, complex processes of the first years of the transformation. Blaming the "specific character of the transition period" for the insufficient citizens' awareness and the low degree of implementing democratic freedoms pose a real threat that the temporary condition of a "society aspiring to democracy" may become reinforced and sustained.

The turn of the 20th and 21st centuries is the time of the increasing demands and expectations of an individual – the participant of the contemporary social, political, economic and cultural processes. Forming new generations does not solely mean preparation for the functioning within the post-industrial society framework which, according to Bell, needs a "participative revolution" (Bell 1994: 238). Since the community spirit is a prerequisite for reaching the set objectives, the elaboration of the culture of dialogue has become the basic problem of the developed societies of the 21st century.

The object of the present paper is contemporary Polish society which has been going through a process of radical changes for the past dozen years (and the process is still continuing), not only within the economic and political spheres, but also at the level of peoples' mentality. Thus, while characterizing this area, it is important to mention the first few years of integration with the European Union, and further on, the implementation of the principles and rules of the market economy. Finally, we must not forget the building of a civil society that is open, regulated by the principles of democracy both in terms of internal affairs and international relations. The aim of the article is to describe the condition of the civil society in Poland, indicating the conditions for building such a society, and then reflect over the possibilities of educating for functioning within a democratic framework. The author uses

some research results to describe the behaviours and attitudes of Poles in the area of “practicing” civil society and democracy. The data used here are taken from the opinion poll reports and a research done within the framework of the project “Diagnoza Społeczna” (Social Diagnosis) – two last editions (2005 and 2007). Thus, the character of the paper is rather empirical than theoretical.

THE DEGREE OF FORMING A CIVIL SOCIETY IN POLAND

Discussing the condition of a civil society in Poland, it is important to indicate that among the prerequisites for the formation of that society there is a legally binding law that allows a varying degree of participation in the social life. The Constitution of the Polish Republic does not in any way limit the right of participation. On the contrary, it highlights the principle of **equality** within this area. A real problem is the interpretation of the law and its application in practice. Other problems involve the methods of exercising power, where the citizens expect **listening to their voice, taking their opinion into account**, the possibility to **monitor** those in power, respecting the principle of **fairness**, and ensuring **security**. In turn, it is important to form the necessary competencies for an active participation in the social life and the attitudes such as openness, tolerance, drive for success, the need of achievement. It is equally important to gain communication competence, instil the sense of authorship, raise the awareness of one’s own needs and see the ways of fulfilling them, and stimulate aspirations.

Exercising the right of electing the authorities of various levels is one of the important indicators of the functioning of a civil society. In Poland, this indicator is definitely too low, and only about 40% of the eligible voters exercise their right (the figure is much lower for the elections at the regional level). Even lower are figures representing an active participation in the election campaigns (a few per cent).¹

Forming the elements of social capital, in particular a numerous participation in associations, voluntary organizations, social movement and the level of social trust contribute to another indicator that may be used in the assessment of the processes of building social trust.

In the discussion of the changes in the propensity of Poles to participate in non-governmental organizations it is worth mentioning a characteristic “explosion” in the emergence of such organizations in the first two or three years following the breakthrough year 1989, only to be followed by equally dramatic decline of its dynamics and the downturn of the activity of the already existing institutions. Depending on the applied definition, different figures are quoted to show the number of NGOs in Poland. It seems reasonable to list 95 thousand of them, even though only some are active. The surveys conducted by KLON / JAWOR indicate that most of them are short-lived.

It should also be noted that most societies and organizations have been established in large cities (e. g. there are 30% of foundations in Warsaw which is also the seat of many other organizations and societies). Beyond any doubt, this is the consequence of the characteristic features of large city communities, as well as a better access to information, better opportunities for raising resources and finding sponsors. This also means that such organizations do not emerge in places where social problems (such as unemployment, poverty, social exclusion, etc.) are most acute.

¹ In the first free elections held on 4th June 1989, 62.7% of eligible voters took part, and that was the highest attendance in history. It started dropping in each successive election (1991 – 43.2%, 1993 – 52.13%, 2001 – 46.29%, 2005 – 40.57%, 2007 – 53.88%).

The figures illustrating the number of people actively engaged within the 3rd sector are quite interesting: in 2004 this figure was estimated at 7–7.5 million people, and it has been continually declining (Gumkowska, Herbst 2006).

Since 1st January 2004, Polish citizens have the right to allocate 1% of their income tax to a public service organization of their choice. In the first year, 15.4% of Poles were aware of such a possibility, and 39.4% declared they were willing to allocate funds for that cause. One year later the number of people aware of such possibility increased to 29%, yet only 18% were eager to use it (in 2006, 50% and 18%, respectively). Hence, the number of people that actually used this opportunity is continually decreasing.

Non-governmental organizations may be supported in a number of ways such as membership (particularly active one), working as a volunteer, and finally giving financial support. The indexes of activity for Poles in those three capacities are not high in comparison to other developed countries (Table 1).

Table 1. Various methods of supporting non-governmental organizations and the engagement of Poles

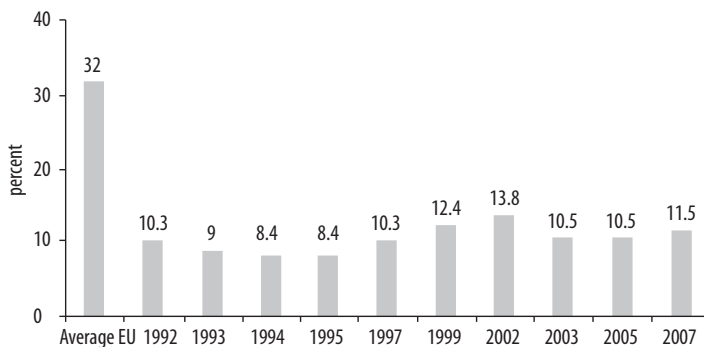
Activity of mature Poles in successive years	Volunteers %%						Donors %%				Members %%			
	'01	'02	'03	'04	'05	'06	'03	'04	'05	'06	'03	'04	'05	'06
	10.0	11.1	17.7	18.3	23.2	21.9	34.4	39.2	41.8	31.5	17.5	20.3	22.8	22.4

Source: *Volunteers, philanthropists and 1% – Report from the Survey 2006* (Klon / Jawor Society).

Among the reasons for engagement the respondents most frequently quoted the necessity to help others (based on moral, religious or political premises). They were convinced that once you help someone he will reciprocate. Hence, there is quite a considerable potential for becoming involved in helping others, yet supporting that process by the appropriate educational activity seems indispensable.

Social trust observed in a society, both in other citizens and in public institutions, is one of the most commonly applied measures of social capital (hence also the degree of emerging of a civil society). In Poland it has been traditionally low, and it has remained at the same level for many years (Fig.).

Figure. Percentage of people trusting others in Poland in 1992–2007 and the average level of trust in the EU in 2004



Source: *Social Diagnosis 2007*, p. 270.

This index is three times lower than the average for the EU, and despite a rise noted in 1997–2002 it fell once again to the level of 1998. The European Social Survey of 2004 indicates that in terms of social trust level Poles ranked last within the European countries.

While attempting to forecast the direction of changes within that scope, it should be noted that trust in other people and institutions grows in line with education and income. It is quite characteristic that the dwellers of large cities declare more trust in others than the inhabitants of smaller communities. Hence, it is to be expected that the degree of trust within the Polish society will grow in line with the increasing affluence and popularization of tertiary education.

Public life institutions such as the government, the Parliament and the Senate, political parties and large corporations have had a low level of trust (43–68% declare the lack of trust). Still the majority of respondents (82–86%) declare trust in non-governmental organizations. However, it should be borne in mind that the survey included some recognizable, reputable organizations. When asked about any non-governmental organizations, the respondents ranked them much lower. It should be stressed that territorial governments scored good assessment results irrespective of the size of a community (Table 2).

Table 2. Assessment of territorial governments. Transformations in 2004–2008

Assessment of territorial governments	Assessment of respondents by the time of surveys, %										
	X'04	II'05	VI'05	X'05	II'06	VI'06	X'06	I'07	V'07	IX'07	I'08
Good	50	51	48	54	54	56	61	68	70	68	68
Bad	39	35	37	35	32	32	30	20	18	22	23

Source: The opinions about public institutions activity, Report from the survey, BS/16/2008, www.cbos.pl

On the other hand, it is quite disturbing that, irrespective of a relatively high assessment scored by the territorial governments, the predominant part of those communities do not consider they can influence in any way the activity of the governments so that they would correspond to their expectations (Table 3).

Table 3. Assessment of influence on territorial governments

Suppose you want the territorial government to improve your environment. What would be your chances for success?	Percentage of responses
Very likely	2.4
Quite likely	19.2
Rather unlikely	37.7
Quite unlikely	20.3
It is hard to say	20.4

Source: *Volunteers, philanthropists and 1% – Report from the Survey 2006* (Klon / Jawor Society).

The apparent discrepancy between the relatively positive assessment of the territorial governments and the possibilities of making an impact might prove that citizens are rather on the receiving end than actively shaping the local policy. This is another proof of the need to educate for democracy which is a system very much dependent on active participation and collaboration.

The question to be asked is to what extent Poles are satisfied with the functioning of the state. That is also one of the indexes of a civil society. The support of democracy in Poland has stabilized after a time of uncertainty and turmoil during the transformation of the system, and it has been sustained at a high level through the last decade (Table 4).

Table 4. Transformations of attitudes towards democracy in Poland in 1992–2006

Would you agree that democracy is superior to other forms of government?	Answers of respondents by the time of survey, %										
	X'92	XI'93	IX'95	XI'96	X'97	III'99	X'00	XI'01	III'02	V'04	XI'06
I agree	52	61	61	67	63	64	70	63	66	60	62
I do not agree	15	16	17	12	16	19	12	17	14	18	18
It is hard to say	33	23	22	21	21	17	18	20	20	22	20

Source: Critical democrats. The acceptance of democracy in Poland and the assessment of its functioning, Report from a survey, BS/7/2007, www.cbos.pl

It is quite interesting to note that there is still a relatively numerous group of people in Poland accepting, under certain circumstances, non-democratic methods of wielding power (approx. 30% in the mid of 2007), even though it is smaller than the group rejecting the possibility to accept a non-democratic government (40% in the mid of 2007). It is encouraging to note that the support for non-democratic ways is continually declining.

PREREQUISITES FOR THE FORMATION OF A CIVIL SOCIETY AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS DEMOCRACY

Forming a civil society requires free communities characterized as the 'grass roots' movement that emerge from the needs of people that created them, as well as free individuals that interact with other individuals or communities. The 'grass roots' character and the free will of community founders spell independence of civil society subjects from other economic and political sectors and actors (such as the media, political parties, etc.) (Gliński 2004: 59).

A crucial element of civil society prerequisites is "possibly mature social identities" that may not, however, have a fundamentalist character and that should be built on values accepted by certain democratic structures. Still better, a democratic system is a pre-requisite for a civil society, mostly the so-called participative society (Gray 1997: 265).

Individual and group social activity translated into engagement in civil and public issues is another pre-requisite for a civil society. A civil society is also characterized by a far-reaching tolerance of dissimilarity, needless to say in compliance with the rules and legal framework binding in a given country. It is worth mentioning that it is not feasible to form a civil society amidst acute social conflicts caused by various reasons (Gliński 2004: 61–62).

This means that setting up the mechanisms protecting against society from ethnic and economic conflicts is particularly important for sustaining a civil society and democratic rules. Properly formulated laws are crucial, but also are the system of values, a proper social policy, the existence of opinion makers, and propagation of certain models of social life. Cherishing civil virtues, both by individuals and institutions, is equally important.

The research results show that education is a particularly important factor in forming the attitudes to democratic values. Interestingly, political views do not differentiate attitudes to democracy to the same extent as education. The higher its level, the more accepted and

cherished are democratic values and the democratic system of the government. It is equally important to note how the functioning of democracy is assessed in a given society. The more critical is the opinion of the respondents on the functioning of democracy in practice, the more often they are willing to accept (under special circumstances) non-democratic governments (Demokracja – Oceny i postawy... 2007: 6–7).

Hence, we may observe a double impact on democratic attitudes exerted by the experience gained with a truly functioning democracy. On the one hand, for almost two decades Poles have been learning that many problems emerging from the relationships with the authorities or various institutions are efficiently solved by applying democratic rules, and that they have instruments to defend their rights. On the other hand, the functioning of many elements of the democratic system is far from perfect, and in many cases citizens have felt helpless when dealing with the authorities. Hence, the number of people who are “in general” well-disposed to democracy is on the rise, but at the same time there are many critical comments on the “truly functioning democracy” (Table 5).

Table 5. The level of satisfaction with the functioning of democracy in Poland in 1993–2007

Are you generally satisfied with the functioning of democracy in your country?	Respondents' answers by the time of surveys, %										
	XI'93	X'95	XI'96	X'97	V'98	XII'99	X'00	XI'01	III'02	V'04	IV'07
Satisfied	36	30	44	40	63	36	37	34	24	21	31
Unsatisfied	52	58	47	50	16	55	51	53	64	68	59
It is hard to say	12	12	9	10	21	9	12	14	12	11	10

Source: Democracy – assessment and attitudes. Report from a survey, BS/75/07, www.cbos.pl

The standard of living, the feeling of security and stability are another important indicator. It follows that the prospects for increasing the acceptance of civil society values and democracy depend on the average standard of living, the emergence and growth of the middle class with a substantial disposable income and a high level of needs.

The Social Diagnosis research presents still another type of prerequisites for the attitudes to a civil society and democracy, i. e. the degree of orientation to materialistic and postmaterialistic objectives. The derived data allow to ascertain that the values connected with the freedom of speech, opportunities for self-fulfilment, freedom of congregation are not perceived to be the basic values for the Polish society. Moreover, their importance in relation to postmaterialistic value has dropped in the past few years. This can be explained by the fact that many members of society feel that their standard of living is threatened, there is a “social disorder” in public life, and there are numerous adverse processes that characterise social life in Poland (Czapiński 2005: 180–181; 2007: 216–217).

The foregoing allows to conclude that creating a climate conducive to the development of a civil society and the acceptance of democratic principles which grant certain rights, but also impose responsibilities on citizens expecting them to be active, to be responsible, to make choice, etc. is by no means a fast process. What is needed here are both initiatives of institutions and working on the system of values and the way of thinking, i. e. changes within the realm of culture. Thus, socialization plays an important role in the preparation to functioning in a democratic system.

PROSPECTS OF EDUCATION FOR DEMOCRACY

Education for democracy is a constituent part of political socialization aimed at moulding a citizen. It is school, much more than family, that is responsible for sustaining, developing, and bequeathing cultural heritage and knowledge. Within the framework of that institution we learn professional roles, competition, assessment, reactions to success and failure. Schools also teach the principles of social integration, patriotism, ways of defining the national interest, and other important elements of political socialization. Formation of competencies necessary for functioning in a democratic society is a great challenge. Other challenges of “civic education” comprise both the traits of modern personality and the aptitude for a citizen’s behaviour among others (assuming that we are capable of accepting “the others” and we do not identify them with “the aliens”), and finally to participate in education.

Political education, i. e. teaching “democracy, self-government, understanding of processes taking place on the social, political and economic scene of the country and the world” does not have a proper place in the system of education (Tuziak 2002). Western countries put much greater emphasis on the education “for democracy”, providing knowledge about the mechanisms governing the world of economy and politics, preparing for an active participation in social life, exercising civic rights.

Prerequisites for political education pointed out by Tuziak are worth our reflection. There is no easy formula that would make citizens active and politically aware; what matters is the “general education”, raising the level of knowledge, strengthening cultural bonds, making people understand the meaning of “a citizen”, propagating pro-social and entrepreneurial attitudes. We will revert to those questions in the part devoted to creation of a civil society.

Education for the dialogue that makes it possible to use the existing opportunities created by the multi-cultural environment is an important element of preparation for functioning in such a multi-cultural world. The diversity of values, points of view and ideals represented by various cultures may become a valuable resource for such development.

Socializing education within the framework of a family, apart from the importance of institutional education, plays an important role in the preparation for functioning in a democratic system, even though not all families are capable of imparting democratic values. The media have a significant role in moulding the public opinion by means of various forms of cultural messages they disseminate. The primary function of those messages is the establishment of an appropriate set of values and norms that regulate behaviours ensuring the feeling of security and normality. This function is implemented by various objectives of cultural transmissions. **Explaining** the world of nature and the social scene and giving them a meaning is one of the crucial objectives.

Then, regulating and to some extent controlling the behaviour is another important objective. The culturing processes, which are part of socialization, cause that when growing up within a certain culture we acquire not only explicit cultural rules and prohibitions, but also some hidden cultural models so apparent that we are not fully aware of them. Hence, cultural elements play a key role in the **socialization** processes providing individuals with the indispensable knowledge about the expectations and demands of society, and substantiating certain activities while refraining from others. They also provide criteria that are helpful for making choices in conditions of conflicting expectations and requirements. They provide the recipient with the tools and means that are helpful in dealing with all kinds of situations.

Elaborated by society, cultural ideals that are conveyed by cultural artifacts (relating to personality, exercising social roles, various institutions) are crucial for the socialization processes. Hence, each culture elaborates the ideals of beauty, personality, a citizen, mother, father, as well as a city, the state, university, etc. Equally important are the sets of values on which authority can be built. Presently we are witnessing an on-going erosion of authority.

At present, it might be difficult to find commonly accepted authorities, yet the values the authorities are built on are not familiar to all society members. And what is more, presently there are all kinds of short-lived idols and stars in pop culture that seem to replace the old authorities.

If all activities were indeed to propagate civic attitudes and aspirations for an active participation in a democratic system, they must be "compatible". The theory cannot swerve from practice, the messages created and transmitted by various media cannot be contradictory. However, the crucial issue is to ingrain the need for "being a citizen" in the minds of the younger generation who is much keener than their parents to accept democratic values (even though not fully). There is frequently a tendency for the selective treatment of democratic values, highlighting the rights while shoving the duties and responsibilities. This is one of the biggest challenges for the educational institutions in Poland and other countries undergoing rapid transformations.

CONCLUSIONS

The degree of civil society in Poland nowadays seems to be inadequate, especially in comparison with more developed, established democracies. The number one issue is probably the low level of social trust, but also the low level of "civic awareness", which may be indicated by an insufficient engagement in civic and public issues. As mentioned before, there is still a relatively numerous group of people in Poland accepting, under certain circumstances, non-democratic methods of wielding power, which might be a pessimistic sign for the development of civil society in Poland; however, it is encouraging that the support for non-democratic ways is continually declining. The most important factor influencing the acceptance of civic virtues, civil society values and democracy is, as the research results show, the higher level of education. The attitudes of acceptance to such values are most frequent among young educated people living in an urban milieu. This allows to expect substantial changes in social awareness in the predictable future.

Received 16 September 2008

Accepted 4 July 2008

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