



CAP in Poland

As a major agricultural nation in eastern Europe, Poland has a significant interest in how the reform of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) will unfold.

In this article series, journalist Hans Wetzels gets to grips with CAP in Poland, in particular how Polish farmers and Polish policy makers will adapt to likely changes, including a lower overall CAP budget, greater environmental focus and the new delivery model.

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Plans, Promises and Policy

The vast fields around Szczecin are covered with a thin layer of winter mist. These parts around the old German port-town are known for being the greenest in Poland. I sit down for a talk about the new European Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) with Edward Kosmal at the National Agricultural Support Centre (NASC) just outside the city centre.

The chairman of the agricultural wing of the influential Polish union Solidarność is not a great fan of the EU, he almost immediately admits: "The EU was supposed to make everything more equal. But the exact opposite happened. Most money goes to big farms while small farmers are faced with costly red tape and regulations they cannot afford to live up to."

He looks up some graphs in a pile a paper he has brought with him. In the voivodeship of West-Pomerania there currently are about 28.000 farms, he points out – mostly sized between 30 to 70 hectares. "But there also used to be dozens of milk-factories and other processing facilities. Due to EU-regulations and imports those have all but disappeared. Foreign capital is after the cheap Polish farmland and farmers have become dependent on European subsidies to survive."

The NASC-building looks old. A small Christmas tree stands hidden away in the far-end of the meeting room. On the walls hangs a big provincial map of Poland and a couple of paintings depicting picturesque farms and traditional landscapes.

Kosmal himself runs a farm near the small city of Stargard. In total he operates about 200 hectares of land and mainly produces sugar beets and potatoes. Most farms in West-Pomerania are smaller than his and focussed on grains, he stresses. But Polish production of all those crops has declined since EU-accession. "Also look at meat-production in this area," Kosmal adds. "We used to have twenty million pigs in Poland, producing high-quality meat. Now we officially have about ten million. But according to data from the Polish statistical agency GUS at least eight million of those are imported. They're just kept here because the fodder is cheap. As a result, Poland has become a net importer whereas we were a pork-producing powerhouse."

Apples – and other Polish produce



It may come as no surprise that the policy proposals from the European Commission for the new CAP-period (2021-2027) have raised eyebrows in Poland. Brexit has blown a big hole in the EU-budget and farmers all over Europe will feel some pain. Thus, Polish Minister of Agriculture Jan Ardanowski has sworn to fight tooth and nail to rake in more money for his farmers: 'Our market is totally open to all EU produce. Despite all that Brussels still tells us that we should remain a second category of farmers countries.'

It's true that per hectare Polish farmers receive about half the amount of money their German counterparts get. Nevertheless, Poland has become a leading producer of apples, berries, poultry and milk production is increasing steadily.

According to data from the European Commission Polish farmers are the fifth-largest beneficiaries of EU-subsidies. On top of that, the European Commission wants to maximise the amount of money an individual farm can receive to avoid big agricultural holdings drawing in all the money. A proposal that would go well with Solidarnosc, Kosmal hesitatingly admits: "I think the new CAP could be going in the right direction. But we will need to see structural changes in farming policy. Up until then more financial support is necessary to keep Polish farms profitable."

National plans

In a time where nationalism seems to be on the rise in Europe, one of the most striking proposals from the European Commission is to loosen control over farm policy and give more power back to national capitals. Brussels is meaning to define a set of Europe-wide economic, environmental and social objectives for agriculture – according to which member-states should draw up their own national plans for the coming CAP-period. “Direct payments will be conditional on enhanced environmental and climate requirements and member states will have to offer eco-schemes to support farmers in going beyond the mandatory requirements, funded with a share of their national direct payments’ allocations”, the European Council of ministers concluded in unison on 19 November 2018.

Nevertheless, minister Ardanowski underlines the division between western and eastern member-states in a conversation with European Agricultural Commissioner Phil Hogan. “It’s not only Poland that is protesting against the proposed budgetary changes and radical cuts in funding for the CAP,” Polish newspaper *Gazeta Polska* reports about the matter. “Our views are shared by many countries in our region.”

Promises and Policy

Ardanowski is a member of the Polish ruling party Law & Order (PiS) – a conservative group that at, least partially, rose to power over widespread rural dissatisfaction with EU-policies in the past. “The creation of national plans will allow for greater flexibility and better adaptation to local needs,” a spokesperson of the ministry of Agriculture in Warsaw writes in response to the proposals of the European Commission. “But Poland opposes the large cuts in the total CAP-budget and the concentration of these cuts in the second policy pillar for rural development.”. The ministry is also concerned with “introducing a mandatory eco-program and more complex conditionality requirements for direct payments”.

Also the Polish parliament (‘Sejm’) has been critical about the new policy proposals, Jaroslaw Sachajko says. He is a member of the populist-conservative Kukiz ’15 movement and chairs the agricultural committee in the Sejm. “We can only hope the new CAP will be significantly changed and funds for agriculture, rural areas and rural resourcefulness or rural entrepreneurship are guaranteed,” he comments in an e-mail just before his Christmas holidays. “The plans of the European Commission to make cuts in the second pillar of the CAP are very disturbing. That way small and medium sized farmers will not have the financial resources to develop their agriculture-related activities like food processing. |

support the minister in trying to get more money but also should be honest with farmers and stop making promises we cannot keep.”

Cosmetic changes

Miroslav Drygas works at the Institute of Rural and Agriculture Development at the Academy of Sciences in Warsaw. He has been following the CAP for over twenty-five years and even was president of the agency distributing subsidies among Polish farmers.

For him, policy changes are more or less cosmetic when there is less money available for agriculture in general: “For Poland, one of the most important changes in the new CAP would be the introduction of result-based payments because it will take time to prepare ways of measuring this. But the more general criticism of course concerns the smaller than expected size of the total budget. The Polish Parliament but also several farmers’ organizations and the four ministers of the Visegrad Group have underlined that new challenges for agriculture would require an even bigger budget than the current one. Especially when it comes down to the environment and climate change.”

The critique resonates with Edward Kosmal. His big farmer hands bounce off the table in Szczecin when he speaks. Outside a soft December rain drips against the windows. “In this new CAP there would be even more emphasis on requirements regarding the environment and climate thresholds. But the question is who will bear the cost of that? What is being forgotten is the fact that corporations rule the food chain. All this processed food is kept cheap for consumers, but for farmers it’s getting more expensive to grow it. This is the structural change we would like to see. Polish farmers want to have a dignified pay for the amount of work that we do instead of being compensated by Brussels all the time. Until these conditions are met, we cannot support this new CAP.”

Over the past years the Polish government has slowly established itself as leader of Eastern European countries dissatisfied with surfacing disparities between old and new EU-member states.

Polish Budget Battles in Brussels

It is halfway through December 2018 when minister Jan Krzysztof Ardanowski of the Polish party Law & Order (PiS) reads out a statement in a brightly coloured meeting hall in the heart of Brussels' European Quarter. Despite severe objections and earlier attempts at radical CAP-reform the Polish government has reluctantly decided to accept the proposals for a new Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) the European Commission presented earlier that year.

The European ministers of Agriculture have met today for their monthly AGRIFISH meeting in the Europa Building at Rue de la Loi in Brussels. Ministers of several countries at the same time welcome the proposals and express concern. Brexit has severely slashed the EU-budget and farmers across the continent are bound to feel pain because of severe cuts. "Poland stresses that, as a rule, the country supports pursuing environmental goals through CAP, because agriculture is a sector whose environmental impact potential is significant while at the same time being strongly dependent on the environment," Ardanowski tells his fellow ministers. "But for us the most sensitive element of the Commission's proposals is financial. Support in the new CAP is now strongly focussed on environmental and climate goals, which cannot be reconciled with a simultaneous reduction of the budget and further liberalisation of the trade policy in the area of agriculture."

Eastern bloc

Over the past years the Polish government has slowly established itself as leader of Eastern European countries dissatisfied with surfacing disparities between old and new EU-member states. In March 2018 Warsaw teamed up with the governments of the three Baltic states to give a joint declaration on the (then still brand-new) CAP-proposals. The four countries underlined that they still cannot accept the fact that their farmers will continue to receive less European money per hectare than their German or Dutch counterparts. "Poland would like to equalize those payments," Zofia Krzyzanowska explains in her office at the ministry of Agriculture in Warsaw. "But in the European Council there is a strong opposition. After Brexit the EU simply does not have enough money to raise payments to farmers in Poland or Slovakia. But governments in Italy or the Netherlands also don't want to reduce support for their farmers. As an Eastern bloc we foresee difficulties in gathering support to equalize farm subsidies anytime soon."

Krzyzanowska has been working on European policy for seventeen years. She served as deputy minister, was member of the team negotiating the terms for Polish EU-accession in 2004 and has been Counsellor General for European affairs at the ministry ever since. We sit down at a big wooden desk deep within the thick walls of the ministry in the centre of Polish capital. Despite reservations on unequal payments, Poland does consider voting in favour of the proposals currently on the table, the Counsellor General stresses: “We would like to support this proposal, but do want change on some issues. What is difficult for us is the cuts. I realize Europe has to deal with Brexit, a migration crisis and climate change. But funds like this reflect the priorities for European society and cuts this big are disproportional.”



Voting but not talking

Despite the financial issues of the EU, CAP does still represent a whopping 38 percent of the total EU-budget. The main novelties in the proposals are the (somewhat surprising) idea of the Commission to let national governments draw up their own strategic plans on agricultural investments, the maximization of subsidies at farm level, an even bigger focus on the environment, but less money for rural development.

On May 30, 2018 the European Parliament also had its say on the agricultural policy proposed by the European Commission. After a vote the parliament drew up a resolution

supporting the new CAP. The Parliament ‘welcomes the intention to simplify and modernise the CAP for the economic benefit of farmers’, but emphasises that overriding priorities must remain with ‘the integrity of the single market and a truly common policy’ to support ‘sustainable agriculture, and ensures safe, high-quality and varied food, employment and development in rural areas.’

Of the 680 representatives present during the vote in Strasbourg, 468 were in favour of the resolution. But almost all of the parliamentarians of the ruling Polish PiS-party abstained from voting. Beata Gosiewska is the only Polish representative even voting against. During a phone conversation her assistant tells me Gosiewska is too busy to comment on the vote. None of the other PiS-members bother to react to inquiries at all.

Czeslaw Siekierski is a member of the traditional Polish farmers’ party Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe (PSL) and currently chairs the parliamentary Committee on Agriculture and Rural Development in Brussels. “I do not represent the same political opinion as the ones currently in power in Poland,” he comments carefully. “The support of Polish citizens for the EU is very high. The government often attempts to evoke anti-EU sentiments under the guise of national identity. This does not serve the well-being of a united Europe.”

Mercosur

Siekierski grew up in the small town of Stopnica in central Poland. He has been a member of the European Parliament since Polish EU-accession in 2004. “My party in general highly praises the functioning of CAP, which has brought measurable benefits to Polish farmers,” he explains. “We have achieved food security and a significant surplus of food exports. But we are still at the beginning of the road as far as the modernization of Polish agriculture goes.”

Most members of the Committee on Agriculture and Rural Development usually agree on the direction European agriculture should take, Siekierski stresses. “About agriculture we tend to think similarly in the European Parliament, regardless of our countries of origin. Problems start to arise when it comes to trade policies or agreements with for example the South-American trading bloc Mercosur. Such a trade deal would lead to excessive inflow of competitive goods from countries like Brazil or Argentina, where EU-standards are not respected and production takes place on a very large scale. In Poland a lot of current problems in agriculture are the result of the Russian embargo and the opening of the EU to Ukraine. Polish farmers can’t sell fruits in Russia anymore, while at the same time cheap grains, soft fruits and poultry from Ukraine come streaming in.”

Visegrad Group

Poland lies more eastwards and is more vulnerable to open borders with Ukraine than Belgium or Spain. But Polish farmers also generally feel more threatened by economic globalisation than their western counterparts where agricultural sectors are better developed. This divide not only influences agriculture, but also accelerates already existing rifts among EU-member states. For nationalist politicians like Hungary's Viktor Orbán, the Visegrad Group (a club compounded of Poland, Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic), is growing evermore important, whilst the Poles and the Hungarians have vowed to support each other in Council decisions needing unanimity affecting the other negatively.

Even bigger CAP-cuts might as well aggravate dissatisfaction in the rural communities where EU-sceptical populist parties find parts of their voter-base, Zofia Krzyzanowska argues: "Polish farmers receive 200 euro's per hectare. Big farms around Szczecin in the north of Poland compete with German farms, just across the border, that receive double that amount. How do we still explain this situation to them?"

Giant exhibition

Friedrich Ostendorff is member of the German Greens in the Bundestag and spokesperson for CAP-related issues for his party. We meet during the annual agricultural convention called Grüne Woche. For a whole week an enormous convention centre in the outskirts of Berlin is transformed into one giant exhibition hall. Inside, the smell of Ukrainian dumplings competes for attention with beer stalls, all kinds of advocate groups, companies selling farm equipment and even whirlpools.

Despite understanding the emotion, the Polish push for subsidy equalization might change nothing for small farmers, Ostendorff argues. "I know Poland quite well. If you look at the important European axis Paris-Berlin-Warsaw, I think we should listen more to the needs of Polish farmers themselves. At this point we have a system wherein the biggest farms get the most money. The simple fact that the amounts of money farmers rake in are bigger in Germany than in Poland does not change the madness of that entire system. Despite nationalist Polish rhetoric about equalizing payments, it's still not in the interests of the small Polish farmers that are completely misrepresented in Europe. Polish farmers could gain more from ecological transition or protecting biodiversity than equalizing payments. That is something the Law & Order Party does not seem to comprehend."

Poland ranks fourth in the European Union when it comes to arable land. But even here the past partition of the country between Germany, Russia and Austria-Hungary is still recognizable.

Small Farms, Big Farms & EU Relations

Poland has a turbulent history. The country was ripped apart by the great European empires of the past, suffered under the yoke of dictatorial communism and is now slowly finding its place within the new Europe. Poland ranks fourth in the European Union when it comes to arable land. But even here the past partition of the country between Germany, Russia and Austria-Hungary is still recognizable. Most Polish family farms are located in the south – according to Habsburg inheritance tradition farmers divided their plots equally over all children. The north-western part of Poland is characterized by big and highly productive farms – under German tradition the eldest son received the whole farm.

Counsellor General Zofia Krzyzanowska takes a pen and invisibly draws out the dividing lines on a big map hanging on her office wall inside the ministry of Agriculture. Outside snowflakes come swirling down from a leaden sky. According to data from the European Commission Polish farmers are the fifth-largest beneficiaries of EU-subsidies. Big farms especially benefit greatly from the European money flowing into the country. Even the ruling – and heavily nationalist – Law & Order (PiS) party cannot deny that.

But cashflow doesn't mean all is well in the Polish countryside. "Because of the interest of foreigners in our cheap land it gets harder to keep Polish farms Polish," Krzyzanowska explains. "Then you have the problem of succession, drought and higher temperatures. Pigs have always been an important part of Polish agriculture, our pork sausages and hams are famous. But that has been going down since the sector was struck by African swine fever. Furthermore, the position of sugarbeet growers has been getting worse since the EU abolished the sugar quota system so Polish agriculture does have some challenges to face."

Agricultural Chambers

Poland still ranks first in Europe concerning the production of apples, poultry, berries and mushrooms, while milk production is rapidly growing. Despite rural problems, Polish agriculture is a net benefactor of EU-subsidies, Henryk Dankowiakowski immediately stresses. Dankowiakowski is the director of the Agricultural Chamber in Malopolska region – in the very south of Poland. Since the nineteenth century, Polish farmers' interests are represented by a regional network of independent, self-governing Agricultural Chambers. Members are all those who pay agricultural tax. "The average farm in this region is less than four hectares big. The national average is about ten," Dankowiakowski explains. "The form

of agriculture varies with natural conditions, geographical location, soil class and traditions. In mountain areas animal farming dominates, while in the lowlands cereals, corn or sugar beets are grown.”

However, small farms are slowly disappearing in his voivodeship, Dankowiakowski says: “Even the largest farms above fifty hectares completely rely on new technologies to be able to compete in food markets.” According to the Agricultural Chamber, European CAP-money is crucial for farmers in Malopolska. The anti-European stance the PiS-party takes in Brussels naturally fall doesn’t fall too well with Dankowiakowski, he argues: “Over the years, Poland has become one of the largest beneficiaries of EU-support. Subsidies are a very important part of the finances of every farm. We do, however, regret that the subsidy is still based on acreage instead. The number of small and organic farms is declining due to this and the European quality control demands that they must fulfill.”

Flourmill



Janusz Sliczny and his wife Iwona run a small farm in the village of Kamienisko in Upper Silesia. Sliczny takes off his boots after coming back from the fields while his wife serves fresh herbal tea with handpicked ingredients. She takes out a big book with photos and notes. Since 2001 the couple gives training for farmers that want to turn organic: “As an organic farm we have birds and insects around and healthy soils with a lot of animals living

in it. Soils are vitally important to all of us. My favourite days are when I can just focus on the ground under my feet and count the worms.”

The Sliczny farm dates back to 1933. He sports a big grey moustache and has bright, sparkling eyes. Nowadays the couple grows potatoes, beetroot, carrots and different kinds of grains on their ten hectares of land. Each year they receive about 200 euro's in CAP-subsidies per hectare. Still the Slicznys need jobs on the side to make ends meet. During the summer they receive tourists and give on-farm classes to students. “The European subsidies are meant to guarantee cheap food for consumers,” Sliczny says. “For farmers market prices are much too low so we're dependent on the subsidy. To make enough money you have to upscale your production and sell more, make sure you earn more per kilo by processing your crops into consumer products yourself or take another job. The conventional farmers I know farm around fifty hectares. They all borrow money to buy modern combines or tractors. If commodity prices are low or harvests turn out bad they're still indebted and the bank comes knocking on their doors.”

But Sliczny fears that before long there will be no option left but to upscale if he would want to continue farming fulltime. We walk around the snow-covered fields around the small house. Sliczny opens the door to a barn. He used to run a mill here, he shows. Green milling equipment and big bags of flour stand around. After years of producing flour and flakes from their own grains, the couple recently had to close shop. The costs for getting the necessary certification were just too high for them to bear, Sliczny explains: “There are a lot of European rules for processing food and Polish law changes quite often. As a small farm we have to abide to the same regulations as the big mills do and certification costs a couple of hundred euro's. Now that we've stopped making flakes ourselves we have to find another way to get rid of our grains without losing money.”

Stronger economic performance

For the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), reducing the number of small farms is exactly the point. Land consolidation active economic diversification policies would lead to a stronger economic performance of the Polish countryside, the organization writes in its yearly rural policy review. Since EU-accession Polish agrarian export has been steadily growing. In 2017 Poland exported for more than 27 billion euro's of agrarian produce. Especially productive sectors like meats, grains, tobacco and dairy are doing quite well, the Polish statistical agency GUS reports.

According to the OECD, successive Polish governments have indeed put too much political emphasis on small farms rather than commercial agriculture: 'A 2015 review of CAP (Pillar 1 implementation) [by the European Commission] found that Poland is one of the countries that has tailored the common agricultural policy most in order to meet national priorities. Going forward, Poland should provide a more balanced policy framework. Reducing (for example) the Poland's Farmer Social Insurance would help accelerate the adjustment of many households out of unproductive farms.'

To keep Polish exports on par the European market is crucial, Zofia Krzyzanowska tells me in her office in Warsaw: "For Polish farmers, the common market is a big benefit. Competing with cheaper products from other continents, however, is not. Especially since minimum prizes have long been replaced by subsidies as a form of compensation. Farmers prefer to get a good price for their produce, but they need direct payments from the EU as security."

But it is also precisely that market dynamic forcing farmers to constantly upscale and intensify their production, Krzyzanowska says: "We support the direction the European Commission is taking the new Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) for the next budget period. Taking care of the environment and keeping animals in better conditions are important issues. But the discussion about high volatility of prices stay open and market interventions are still not discussed."

Industrial farming

The unrest among small farmers has been gratefully used by the ruling party Law & Order to spice up the anti-EU rhetoric. Nevertheless, we shouldn't forget that domestic Polish politicians also have big stakes in agribusiness, Dorota Metera points out. She works for organic certification body Bioekspert and is a member of a new NGO-grouping called Living Earth Coalition. "I hope the European Union will put some effort into containing the power of Polish industrial agriculture," she says. "There are big players involved in the poultry market, in grains and the apple market is also quite concentrated."

Sitting in a train rolling southbound out of Warsaw is a spectacle to behold during wintertime. Snow covered birches, bright white fields and a deep blue sky make the countryside look like old Russian novel by Dostoevsky. Fields of apple trees pass by. Total apple production amounted up to 5 million tons in 2018 – making Poland the biggest apple producer in Europe. But the Russian embargo is still hitting Polish fruit growers hard. The resulting overproduction has given big processing companies the opportunity to dictate the price of apples, forcing farmers to let their produce rot in the fields. Metera: "The production of

apples was so high this year that big processing companies could press down prices. Many farmers decided never to harvest their apples because of that.”

During the summer of 2018 the Union of Polish Fruitgrowers also pleads with its members not to harvest soft fruits and calls upon the ministry to take me action against all-powerful processing companies depressing prices on fruit markets. “The previous Polish government was very liberal and supported big farms and food processors,” Metera explains. “The lobby of big poultry producers or fruit processors is still quite big. But the current government at least makes a point of fighting rural unemployment, even if I don’t agree with the nationalist parts of their policy. I personally am very happy that the new CAP has higher environmental and food quality standards. But a too liberal trade system is against the interests of consumers, farmers and the environment.”

To be able to offer some form of support to small farmers in Malopolska Serafin teamed up with local activist groups and formed a foundation to build a so-called 'kitchen incubator': a collective cooking facility where farmers can turn their raw produce into value-added products like juice or cookies.

What Options for Small and Organic Producers?

Rafal Serafin sports a big grey beard and talks in a thick British accent. We've been driving westward for almost an hour after starting our journey from the old town centre of Kraków. The landscape is hilly, the churches look old and the towns cosy here in the south of Poland. We are in the Malopolska region – just north of the old industrial zone stretching from Kraków, through coal-city Katowice (where the last COP climate summit took place) towards Gliwice in the south west. Besides a thriving woodworking industry, this part of Poland historically has a high number of small (and mostly organic) farms, Serafin tells me.

But over the last years those farmers have been losing out against powerful players entering the Polish production chain. "International supermarket chains like Lidl and Carrefour have taken over the rhetoric of biological production," Serafin explains. "So in the end also in the ecological food chain most added value stays with the retailers. In the end foreign capital is capitalizing on the backs of Polish farmers. That's a strong sentiment for populist nationalists to ride on with the European elections coming up. Politicians in Western Europe seem not to understand that in the east it matters how the rural areas will vote."



Supports at the Small Scale – the Kitchen Incubator

Serafin steers his car through the snow up a steep hill in the small town of Stryszów. There are about 140.000 small farms registered at the Agricultural Chamber in the region. Only about ten percent of those are actually beneficiaries of some form of EU-money.

To be able to offer some form of support to small farmers in Malopolska Serafin teamed up with local activist groups and formed a foundation to build a so-called 'kitchen incubator': a collective cooking facility where farmers can turn their raw produce into value-added products like juice or cookies. "Farmers around here are either too small or just don't know how to apply for European subsidies," Serafin explains. "In this incubator they can cook jams, bake bread and get practical or legal assistance."

This facility is part of a larger vision to create a brand new distribution channel directly from small farmers to the consumer in Kraków. Our message to the minister is to regard experiments like this not as competition to vested interests but as possibilities of innovation. Shorter food chains ensure better livelihoods for people in the countryside and gives them the opportunity to stick with producing organic instead of upscaling their production."

The incubator in Stryszów was opened in September 2016. Photos of production certificates and the official opening line the white walls. started in 2016. The four story building has storage rooms, a big meeting room with a view over the snow-covered hills and even a small shop. The building used to be no more than a storage shed, one of the employees shows me on a photo. The kitchen area looks clean and professional. There are big ovens to bake breads in and heavy machines made of Italian steel to press pears, apples and other fruits into fresh juices. "In the peak months of the year, during harvest time, there would've been so many people working here you could hardly find a sport," Serafin laughs. "But also after a hailstorm farmers would come in to process the fruits that would've otherwise left to rot."

Serafin grew up in Great-Britain after his parents fled Poland during World War II. After the Iron Curtain came down he returned to his motherland. Currently he sits on a government set-up commission to chart the economic possibilities of shorter food chains.

The construction of the facility in Stryszów has been financed from an EU structural fund that is financed by Norway and Switzerland – two non-EU countries that still have to pay financial compensation in order to be part of the European Economic Area. "The money that Norway and Switzerland pay goes straight into a fund for the development of new EU member-states in the east. Foundations or NGO's can access that on basis of a tendering system. We received 3 million euro's to create a self-financing food-system by and for small farmers

within eight years,” Serafin laughs. They created an association of farmers from Malopolska in which every individual has equal voting rights and started building the incubator.

Serafin’s foundation is talking to big tech companies about building an app (not unlike UberEats) to directly link urban consumers looking to buy fresh farm products to the farmers and producers in surrounding areas. Serafin: “You can talk hard and long about setting up alternatives for the current system. But making it work in practice is often difficult. Regulations concerning processing are just too tight for small farmers.”

Subsidies – how do small farmers in Poland fare?

A lot of these regulations are drawn up in the same Brussels that divides the subsidies among farmers all over Europe. Polish parliamentarian Jaroslaw Sachajko is a member of the populist-conservative Kukiz '15 movement and chairs the agricultural committee in the Polish parliament ('Sejm').

He acknowledges the financial dependence of Polish farmers on EU-subsidies, but is critical about the policies concocted in the European capital. Halfway through 2018 his parliamentary committee presented its agricultural reform program to the Polish government. They come up with a list of rural reforms necessary to increase the competitiveness of Polish farmers on the European market – expecting the government to carry that stance to Brussels where discussions about the new European Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) are ongoing. Despite historical reductions the CAP still represents almost forty percent of the total EU-budget. That is a lot of money. But because EU-farmers are paid their subsidies according to the acreage of their farms, the system doesn't help small farmers in regions such as Malopolska, according to Sachajko.

“Under the current CAP regime only twenty percent of agricultural holdings benefit from more than eighty percent of direct payments,” Sachajko argues in his spacious working room deep in Sejm. “At the same time, we are not able to ensure additional payments for small farmers so they don't have the financial resources to develop their agriculture-related activities like food processing or trade. But we must keep in mind that in Poland there is enough room for both small farms and big agricultural holdings.”

That said, it's worth noting that Poland is in fact one of nine EU member states to avail of CAP redistributive payments. towards smaller farmers. These are “an alternative way to focus income support on smaller farmers by granting an extra payment per hectare for the first hectares below a certain limit.” according to CAP expert Alan Matthews in a post from

December 2017. Matthews adds: “however, in Poland, holdings with less than 3 hectares were ineligible for the redistributive top-up which was confined to those with between 3 and 30 hectares of eligible area (who received €40.10/ha).”

On 16 May 2017 the Polish Council of Ministers gathers in Warsaw to decide on the national priorities for the new CAP – at that moment still on the drawing board of the European Commission. The ministers explicitly state a new CAP should guarantee the functioning of the European market while allowing member-states to utilize their comparative advantages in the field of agriculture. Also the ministerial document stresses the importance of producer groups and cooperatives to counter ‘unfair trade practices in the agri-food chain’ and ‘further development of alternative channels of distribution, including direct sales’.

“We need CAP-legislation to guarantee diverse entrepreneurship in rural areas,” Sachajko comments. “Ecological practice is usually automatically practiced by small farmers. We have to realize this is not only good for the environment but also brings in money since there’s a large market for organic fruits and vegetables in Europe.”

Scale, milk, and frothy ecological claims

Despite that roaring rhetoric about small and organic farming – the tendency in Poland, just as in most EU-countries, goes towards more intensive farming. “Policy-wise Brussels and Warsaw are on the same page saying, look, the world is going in that direction and well just have to follow,” Dorota Metera of the new NGO-grouping Living Earth Coalition says. “It’s a scandal Poland still claims to be transitioning to ecological agriculture. Almost all organic milk sold is imported from Germany or Lithuania because many small farms in Poland just stopped production after the European Commission ended the milk quota and they just couldn’t compete anymore.”

Initiatives such as the incubator in Stryżów are more than welcome, she stresses. But they can never be a full-blown solution on an agricultural market still dominated by big capital and where farmers are left to fend for themselves by their political representatives. “The concentration of big farms in Poland is already too high,” Metera explains. “We will have all kinds of environmental consequences to face, from soil erosion, livestock disease such as African Swine Fever or water stress. Unfortunately, environmental policies are not a priority for this government, nor for the previous one, when there is money to be made. Fertilizer pollution or ground water problems are easily neglected when you can look at nice country landscapes that draw in tourists during summer.”

Thus, the main issue is related to the way innovation processes evolve - in whose interests, and with who's participation, do they emerge? We should realise that innovation lies in the creative process, not only in the generated tool itself. Bearing this in mind, it becomes evident that it is the lack of autonomy that matters - in other words, the absence of the end user's engagement in the technology's development. Appropriately used, technology can share power with all actors collectively involved in developing the innovation. And this appropriate use of technology allows us to democratize knowledge.

It comes as no surprise that the big cuts the European Commission is now proposing for the new Common Agricultural Policy (CAP – 2021-2027) have led to fierce critique from Warsaw.

In a Triangle of Tension?

It's late February in 2015 when the agricultural attaché of the American embassy in Warsaw sends a cable back home to Washington to report on emerging farmers' protests in Poland. Hundreds of small farmers have descended on Warsaw to block major roads leading in and out of the Polish capital. 'The main demands of the farmers include compensation for crop damages caused by wild boars, reimbursement of all milk quotas purchased by farmers, export subsidies for pork, governmental purchases of agricultural products for intervention stocks, a ban on imports of grain from Ukraine and sale of land to foreigners,' the American diplomat writes. He goes on to quote the head of Ogólnopolskie Porozumienie Związków Zawodowych (OPZZ – one of the big agricultural unions in Poland) calling civil servants at the ministry of Agriculture 'traitors' with whom there was 'nothing further to discuss'.



Nationalist party

Later that same year tensions are still high. Disgruntled farmers in the countryside help the controversial nationalist Law & Order (PiS) party rise to power. "Up until now, several administrations stuck to building pavements and fixing sewer systems in the countryside. At the same time farmers were getting hammered by the international market," Rafal Serafin

explains while steering his car through the snow-covered countryside of South-Poland. “But for political elites in Warsaw small farmers simply don’t play a role anymore in the economic system.”

Serafin lives and works in the Malopolska region – just north of the industrial zone around the old city of Kraków. Currently he sits on a governmental commission and researches the economic possibilities of shorter food chains for marginalised small farmers. “The last couple of years we had politicians of the traditional Polish farmers party Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe (PSL) telling farmers that selling directly from the farm to consumers was distorting the market,” he explains. “They even said it was unfair competition to retailers. So then a party like PiS comes in, gives all the farmers 500 zloty and at least gives them the idea they are being listened to.”

Weimar triangle

It comes as no surprise that the big cuts the European Commission is now proposing for the new Common Agricultural Policy (CAP – 2021-2027) have led to fierce critique from Warsaw. Polish farmers not only expect to receive less money once the new CAP gets implemented – but also the differences in payments between Eastern-European farmers and their western counterparts will mostly likely not be addressed – again. ‘Our market is totally open to all EU produce,’ Polish Minister of Agriculture Jan Ardanowski stated on the matter. ‘Despite all that Brussels still tells us that we should remain a second category of farmers countries.’

To relieve the emerging political tensions, German, Polish and French top-level government officials have engaged in discussions about regenerating the so-called Weimar Triangle – a trilateral political alliance established in 1991 at the German Schloss Ettersburg in Weimar. In the Weimar context France represents southern Europe, Germany the industrial heartland and an assertive Poland the countries of the east. To make EU-policy work these three core-countries at least have to agree – in theory.

Having gone some time without having meetings, they initiated again in 2016 – just after the Brexit-vote. Diplomats started exchanging views on judicial reforms, open borders and the new Nordstream 2 gas pipeline leading from Russia into Europe. Towards the end of that year, the agricultural ministers of the three Weimar countries come up with a proposal to send surplus beef to EU-countries under pressure from an influx of Syrian refugees.

Shared views

But in the broader agricultural context, discontent in Eastern-Europe keeps on growing. Early 2018 Poland teams up with the four Baltic countries to give a joint declaration on their collective unwillingness to accept the new CAP-proposals. "It's not only Poland that is protesting against the proposed budgetary changes and radical cuts in funding for the CAP," Polish newspaper *Gazeta Polska* reports about the matter. "Our views are shared by many countries in our region."

Polish farmers in general feel more threatened by economic globalisation and the open market policies proposed by the European Union than their western counterparts. Cuts in the CAP-budget might even aggravate that dissatisfaction in the rural communities where EU-sceptical populist parties find parts of their voter-base. During the first months of 2019 several protests once again erupt around Poland. Farmers demand restrictions on food imports and compensation for the low prices for farm produce. This time, the unrest is fiercely criticised by the PiS-government once supporting the farmers.

As the chair of the agricultural wing of the influential Polish union *Solidarnósc* Edward Kosmal has been involved in the protests from the beginning. He operates a farm near the small northern city of Stargard in West-Pomerania. "I operate four different holdings totalling about 200 hectares, mostly growing potatoes for the processing industry and sugar beets," Kosmal tells me. "Most farms in my region are smaller and specialize in barley, corn or milk. More than sixty percent of the grain production in this area is exported onto the European market."

Poland produces a lot of grains and meats, ranks first in Europe concerning the production of apples, poultry, berries and mushrooms, while milk production is rapidly growing. The country has gained a lot from access to European money and the internal market, Kosmal admits. But the EU also is a double-edged sword since the same farmers profiting from hefty EU-subsidies also have become completely dependent on them since farm-prices are low on a world market characterized by unequal power relations. "As a beet grower, direct subsidies help me to keep my farm profitable," Kosmal explains. "When it comes to revenue as much as 40 percent is EU-subsidy. The problem is that we have become heavily dependent on the global economy. If there's a downward trend in milk prices or overproduction of apples, farmers quickly run into trouble."

Organic Information

When farmers get into trouble tensions can run high politically and fuel nationalists taking aim at the European project. But in reality, only part of problem lies in EU-policies, sociologist Ruta Spiewak explains. We meet in a spacey room in the Polish Academy of Sciences right in the heart of Warsaw. A big statue of Nicolaus Copernicus proudly gazes out over the streets of the Polish capital. Domestic Polish politicians also have big stakes in agribusiness and farmers themselves are quite disorganised, Spiewak stresses: “Organic farmers often receive EU environmental payments but don’t produce any actual food for the market. Most of the organics available in Polish supermarkets are imported from abroad because it’s cheaper. Small farmers organizations in Poland are weak, not very well informed and unprepared for debates about technical policy-issues like CAP. So the government doesn’t see them as real partners for debate, their interests don’t get served and they are unable to capitalize on the opportunities that are actually out there.”

Early 2018 Spiewak co-authored an extensive research article on the impact agricultural lobby groups have in Poland. It turns out that the actual influence of farmers is very limited, the sociologist argues. Because small and organic farmers are so unorganized, vested interests can prevail: increasing export value and equalizing EU-payments are the main agenda points of the Polish government on a European level. “The Polish government has its priorities wrong,” Spiewak explains. “Polish fruit exports, for example, consist mainly of fresh produce. So the added value doesn’t go to farmers but to powerful processing companies. There’s just not enough political will to pursue the interests of the organic sector. But right now small farmers are quite happy to just receive European subsidies. When those payments will become less under the next CAP they will be very disappointed. That will have political consequences, so the next elections in Poland will be very important.”

“I have been working in certification and the organic movement for more than twenty years and would be very careful with such general statements,” Dorota Metera replies. She works for organic certification body Bioekspert and is a member of a new NGO-grouping called Living Earth Coalition. “It is true that many products in supermarkets are imported, but that is because of many reasons. Polish producers are often too small to organise big amounts of produce of the same quality for supermarkets and the processing of organic produce is underdeveloped in Poland. That’s why there are many Italian sauces and olive oils or German sandwich spreads in the shops. There is no reason to blame the subsidy system for this, although there are errors. For example, the subsidies for animal farms are very low so there is not enough organic milk produced which then is imported Lithuania, Germany or the Czech Republic.”

In fact, there are cases of a strong market focus in organic farmers in Poland. For example, back in 2015, Dorota Metera wrote about organic fruit and vegetable farming in south east Poland for [ARC2020](#) where she noted that “in a 10 year period in the voivodship Podkarpackie, the numbers went from just a dozen organic farms to about 2000 by 2011.”

Metera pointed out that these farmers had long standing orchards, a hilly terrain and a small farmer structure: nevertheless, they have shown significant innovation and apt use of various CAP measures. An example is the 100 or so organic fruit farmers who formed an association (called “Truskawka” - Strawberry) and also a producer group, while sourcing funding (two million euros) to invest in an organic fruit processing unit. The Producer Group “helped develop a collective efficiency by organizing common purchasing of seeds, planting materials of strawberries and raspberries, biological plant protection products and fertilizers allowed for the use in organic agriculture” Metera wrote.

The group, with turnover of one million Euros a year, worked with companies to distribute to the EU and also the US. Individual members also form their own companies to supply large local farmer’s markets in Warsaw and Katowice.

As ever, situations can be more complex than preconceptions allow for. Poland is a big country, with differentiated production, structures, traditions and approaches. How the country relates to its Weimar and EU neighbours will be fascinating to see, with political perspectives and emphasis – in Poland, Weimar and the EU – so at variance with each other.

About the Author



Hans Wetzels (1982) is a Cultural Scientist and freelance journalist from the Netherlands and living in Berlin. His work appeared in well-known Dutch magazines such as De Groene Amsterdammer, OneWorld Magazine and international outlets like Africa Renewal, MO* and Knack. The research Hans does focuses on trade policy, food system analyses and development.

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