

Land Issues and land struggles in Poland

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Poland is rich in arable land: more than half of the area of the country is used for agriculture. In 2012, farming occupied about 17.2 m ha whereas the total area of Poland is 31.3 m ha.¹ The smallest farms are in the South and South-East of Poland. The largest ones are in the North-West where large state-owned farm holdings (PGR) operated during Communist rule. Around 90% of the land under cultivation is occupied by family farms, which are the mainstay of Polish agriculture. Of the more than 1.6 million farms in Poland, over 60% are self-sufficient, small peasant farms averaging approximately 10 ha.² For the most part, these holdings fulfil all the criteria of genuine ecological sustainability, practicing a time honoured, traditional form of agriculture that shuns chemicals, rotates crops and returns all biodegradable matter to the soil. They are family run enterprises for whom farming is a way of life and whose first objective is to feed their families. Surplus production is marketed and sold locally.

This way of life is however changing as farmers face pressure to expand their farms and make them more competitive for it is only the larger farms that receive support and are considered to be profitable and hence 'viable' enterprises. These commercial pressures are also proving to be a barrier for young people would like to acquire land and start farming. Recently, an increase in the price of land can be observed in Poland. Moreover, although officially foreigners cannot buy land in Poland until May 2016, Polish farmland is being sold-off to foreign multinational corporations. How is this possible?

“Substitute” buyers

The body responsible for the management of public land is the Agricultural Property Agency (Agencja Nieruchomości Rolnych). It plays an important role, as it makes decisions affecting the nature and structure of agriculture in Poland. Farmers, especially in the North-West, lease public land from the Agency. However, the Agency has recently started to dissolve land-lease contracts with farmers in the West Pomerania Province (Województwo Zachodniopomorskie) in order to sell off land on a large scale. This land is being bought by foreign companies of mainly Dutch, Danish, German and English origin for the establishment of large industrial farms, for the cultivation and sale of GMO crops, and for purely speculative purposes as land prices are expected to rise in the build up to the liberalisation of the land market in 2016. The foreign companies make use of “substitute” or fake buyers to acquire farmland.

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These substitute buyers are people hired by the foreign companies, usually farmers having a hectare or two who meet the criteria for a limited tender. They outbid other buyers and then immediately transfer the land to the foreign company.

Such practices have been going on for a while in the West Pomerania Province and are a serious cause for concern among Polish farmers who cannot compete and are easily outbid. According to the Director of the Agricultural Property Agency, only 22 000 ha in West Pomerania land is in the hands of foreigners but according to local farmers, it is closer to 0.5 million ha. Edward Kosmal, the leader of a series of farmers' protests against land grabs in West Pomerania, explains that the official statistics of the Agency take into account only the land legally and fairly acquired by companies with foreign capital. The farmers take into account also the land that is leased by such companies and the land that has been bought by substitute buyers. "They will not give this land back", says Kosmal. "They will wait until 2016 and when the land market has been freed, they will buy this land". The unofficial farmers' statistics in the West Pomerania Province are as follows:

- 117 thousand ha – land bought by companies with foreign capital
- 200 thousand ha – land leased by these companies
- 100 thousand ha – land bought by fake buyers

To sum up, "We have over 400 thousand ha with 937 thousand ha of arable land in the province – it means almost half of the land is in foreign hands", says Kosmal.³

The consequences of this sell-off of farmland in Poland to foreign corporations can already be seen in different areas of life:

1. The increase in unemployment among farmers, which in turn will have an influence on the whole economy.
2. Serious barriers to young people who would like to start farming: the price of land sold through public tenders is far too high for them.
3. Threats to the environment: large-scale use of chemicals and planting of GMO crops.

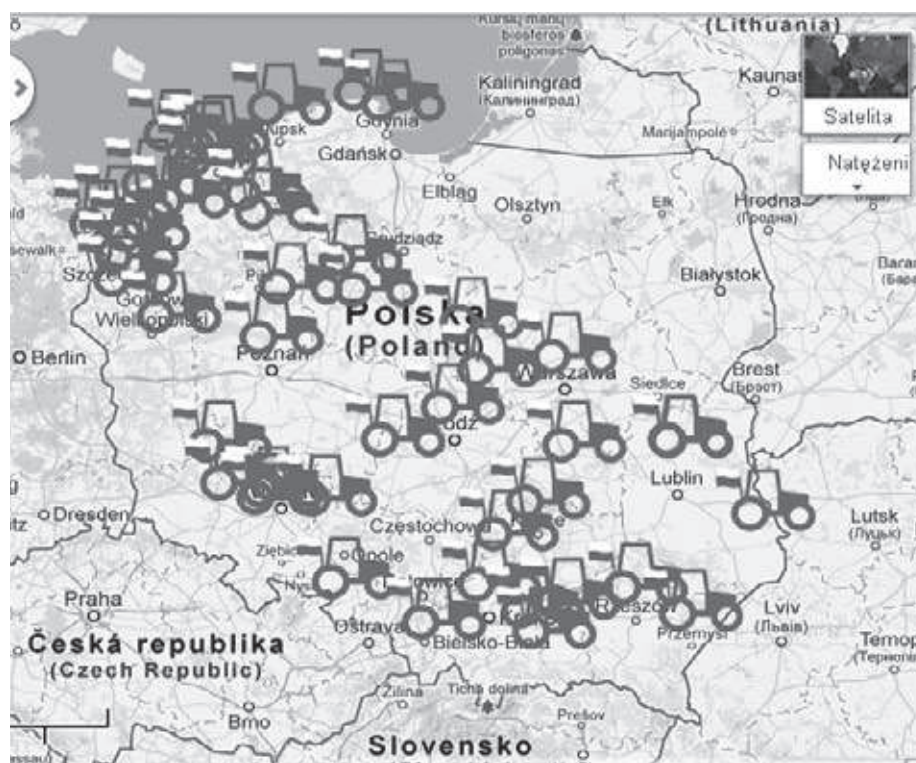
A protest movement

Farmers tried to talk to the Minister of Agriculture as well as the President of the Agricultural Property Agency. However, these talks did not bring about any results and the farmers decided to start a protest movement, beginning with demonstrations in the West Pomerania Province. On 5th December 2012 the Protest Committee of the West Pomerania Farmers filed a petition with 14 demands. They called for a change in the regulations concerning land sale and lease by the Agricultural Property Agency and for the introduction of legal provisions supporting family farms. According to the farmers, steps should be taken to enable the expansion of family farms and to prevent the massive sell-off of land after 2016. According to them land leases should become a fully legal form of land use. They also protested against the introduction of an income tax for farmers which, in time of crisis in the Polish countryside, will be an additional burden and make the already difficult situation of Polish farmers even worse. They also called for the upkeep of the current social security system for farmers (KRUS), which is significantly lower than the regular social security system (ZUS). Another important issue raised in the petition was the demand for a change in the regulations that do not allow farmers to sell food processed on their farm without meeting prohibitively high standards. Finally, the farmers expressed their opposition to

the government's attempt to legalise GMO crops by the 'Seeds Act' and called for a ban, by law, on the planting and trading of GM seeds in Poland.

Protesting farmers drove tractors to the centre of Szczecin and demonstrated in front of the office of the Agricultural Property Agency. The tractors were adorned with Polish and 'Solidarity' flags. Many of them carried labels such as 'property of the bank'. The farmers wanted to stress the fact that once the Agency dissolves a land lease contract, they are left with machines and equipment for which they had acquired bank loans and which they then cannot pay back.

The main protest in West Pomerania lasted for 77 days (5th December 2012 - 19th February 2013) and even harsh winter conditions did not scare off the farmers. Convoys of 20, 50 or 100 tractors blockaded town and city centres, main roads and roundabouts, and offices of the Agricultural Property Agency. Placards attached to tractors conveyed the messages: 'Stop selling off Polish land', 'Polish land for Polish farmers', 'Polish land in Polish hands', 'West Pomerania is still Poland.' Farmers from other parts of Poland also joined to show their support for the West Pomerania farmers and in January the protests spread to five other Polish provinces. The map below shows the scale of the protests:



Source: <https://maps.google.com/maps/ms?msa=0&msid=212503004250317984555.0004d38f6b4610b73f90c&hl=pl&ie=UTF8&t=m&z=8&source=embed>

As a result of the farmers' protests, the regulations concerning the sale of land by the Agricultural Property Agency were changed. According to the new regulations, the farmers who buy land from the Agency will have to cultivate it for the next 10 years. This should prevent the further transfer of land acquired through public tenders by fake buyers to foreign companies. The members of farmers'

chambers were allowed to participate in tender committees so that they can make sure tenders are not pre-arranged. Yet, this also means that now the responsibility for the sale of public land is partly shifted to farmers.

The farmers still did not see any initiative from the government which promised further support and cooperation. They apologised for the inconvenience their demonstrations caused but it was clear for them that only large-scale protests could force the government to take action. In March the protest was revived. This time it was an all-Poland protest led by the 'Solidarity' Independent Self-governing Trade Union of Individual Farmers (NSZZ RI "Solidarność"). On 14th March numerous demonstrations took place in many towns and cities throughout the whole country. Two days later, the workers' union 'Solidarity' organised a meeting in Gdansk during which the critical problems raised by the farmers were also addressed.

Although farmers and NGOs from the whole country got involved in the struggle of West Pomerania farmers for Polish farmland, the demands of the protesting farmers have not all been met and their problems remain unsolved. Farmers are now working in the fields, but they say that in the autumn they will resume their protest.

Leaky anti-GMO regulations and limited access to traditional and regional seeds

The land-sale process links to the passing of the Seeds Act and directives issued by the Polish government concerning GMO plants, which came into effect in January 2013.

Genetically modified food is firmly rejected by 75% of Polish citizens. The Seeds Act and two related regulations officially prohibit the planting of GM seeds but allow them in through the back door since it does not ban the trading of such seeds. The Act places Poland in conformity with EU regulations concerning the 'free trading' of GM seeds which require that countries establish special 'GMO Designated Zones' for the commercial planting of GM Seeds. It turns out that the land which is sold off by the Agricultural Property Agency and purchased by foreign companies can be used by them for the planting of GM crops in special designated areas. The government does not plan to increase funds for controlling measures. In such a situation the contamination of traditional plants is unavoidable. The responsibility is shifted to the farmers, many of whom are unaware of the threats GM crops carry.

The Seeds Act also limits access to traditional and regional seeds. It says that the regional varieties of seeds cannot exceed 10% of all the seeds authorised for sale on the market. Farmers are also protesting against these unfair regulations. Regional varieties of plants have been developed by generations of farmers and traditional seeds are highly valued. Limiting access to traditional seeds means hindering the potential Polish farming can offer at a time when traditional and ecological food is ever more appreciated. Farmers are demanding that new regulations should be passed that will protect traditional seeds and guarantee unlimited access to them.

Extremely strict regulations preventing the sale of farm produce

Farmers face yet another problem. The regulations concerning food processing on farms are too strict and discouraging for many of them. As it stands, farmers can not engage in direct selling but must set up a company and meet the same standards as big food processing companies. A change in the law is required:

“The sanitary regulations concerning such activities should be adjusted to their scale and seasonal character. Current regulations prevent farmers from processing their produce, which could improve the financial condition of their farm holdings, save the Polish countryside from poverty, and provide consumers with access to local products”.⁴

Consumers want to have access to local food and farmers want to produce and sell it. However, current regulations allow farmers to sell their primary products only. “In practice it means that the farmer can sell milk but not butter or cheese”, says Roman Wlodarz, the Chairman of the Silesian Chamber of Agriculture.⁵ The same applies to the processing of meat. The farmer can sell a pig, but it would be a lot more profitable for him to sell ham, sausages or other pork products. There are also limits concerning the amount of farm produce that can be sold. According to Roman Wlodarz, the greatest advantage of direct sale of farm produce is the fact that the margin that is normally earned by middlemen and salesmen stays with the farmer. However, only a change of regulation can revive the direct sale, through farms, market places and the internet.

ICPPC – solidarity protests in the UK

ICPPC, the International Coalition to Protect the Polish Countryside, is an NGO set up in the 2000 with the following mission:

Poland has a unique countryside, with very rich wild nature, beautiful landscapes, cultural traditions and many generations of farmers who love their work. It's a national treasure. However decisions made in Brussels over the past decade have dramatically degraded the life and quality of the Polish countryside and its food. The protection of the natural wealth and diversity of the countryside and the food security of the nation is a vital issue for Poland, as it is for all countries. In order to help realize the goal of protecting our countryside and food chain, we created in November 2000 the International Coalition to Protect the Polish Countryside (ICPPC). The coalition was initiated by 41 organizations from 18 countries.⁶

In the last thirteen years ICPPC has participated in and completed many projects connected with environmental issues, food safety, and the preservation of the natural and cultural heritage of the Polish countryside. It has been actively engaged in the anti-GMO campaign in Poland and tried to block the Seeds Act. Recently, ICPPC has also become involved in the struggle of the Polish farmers against the government's sell-off of prime Polish farmland to foreign multi-national corporations. On 9th January 2013, together with two other NGOs (Koalicja Polska Wolna od GMO and Best Proeko), ICPPC organised two protests in Krakow (the capital of Malopolska Province) and in Zywiec (Slaskie Province). The demonstrators repeated the demands of the West Pomerania farmers.

In order to make the problem of land grabbing in Poland known abroad, ICPPC organised two symbolic actions in the UK. On 26th January, in a show of solidarity with Polish farmers, a group of British farmers and Polish supporters drove tractors in a convoy from the Hardwick Estate, Oxfordshire, to the local town of Pangbourne, 5 km away. The tractors were adorned with Polish flags. Placards tied to them conveyed the messages: 'Stop Land Grabs', 'Local Food not Global Food' and 'No to GMO'. The food chain is globalised and therefore it is very important to recognise that this issue affects us all. Europeans have rejected GM foods and the broad body of evidence indicates that they are not about to change their minds. “Selling off farmland to corporations makes all of us slaves to organisations that are unaccountable and have as their sole goal profit and power”, said Sir Julian Rose, the owner of the Hardwick Estate and President of ICPPC.

Another solidarity demonstration took place on 7th January in front of the Polish Embassy in London. The protesters brought a copy of the letter which had been sent to the Polish Ambassador a week earlier and demanded that he should support the position being taken by the Polish farmers.

The British protests attracted the attention of the media. These and also other efforts of ICPPC gave the problems that Polish farmers face more publicity. Many organisations and individuals from the UK and other European countries wrote letters of support for Polish farmers addressed to the Polish government.

In an open letter to the Polish nation published on 16th March and written for the meeting in Gdansk organised by the workers' Union "Solidarity", ICPPC again emphasised the three main issues:

1. Stop the sell-off of farmland to foreign corporations.
2. Introduction a total and effective ban on the growing and trading of GMO plants.
3. Changing the prohibitively strict regulations that do not allow farmers to process food on their farms and sell it in local shops.

According to ICPPC, only these changes can guarantee the realisation of the fundamental issues at stake: food safety and food security for all.

Endnotes

1. Main Statistical Office (GUS)
2. www.arimr.gov.pl
3. <http://www.strefabiznesu.gp24.pl/artykul/edward-kosmal-minister-nie-dotrzymuje-slowa>
4. Demands of the Protest Committee of the West Pomerania Farmers, <http://protestrolnikow.pl/postulaty-2/>
5. <http://www.farmer.pl/prawo/przepisy-i-regulacje/rolnicy-za-umatwieniem-sprzedazy-bezposredniej,42169.html>
6. <http://icppc.pl/index.php/en/about-icppc.html>