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## **Democracy and Local Government in Poland — an Analysis of Change in the Past Twenty Years**

Marie-Claude Maurel and Maria Halamska: *Democratie et gouvernement local en Pologne*, CNRS Editions, Paris 2006, 265 pp.

The academic publishers, CNRS Editions published “*Democratie et gouvernement local en Pologne*” (Democracy and Local Government in Poland) by Marie-Claude Maurel and Maria Halamska in 2006. This book is the result of observations and research carried out in three rural communes in Poland: Drobin, Stęszew and Zator, for over twenty years. Continuing research in the same area allows researchers to carry out analyses and comparisons not only within three communes in three historically and economically diverse regions of Poland but it is also an analysis of the transformation and an observation of the mechanisms of change within the communes themselves which, considering the limited amount of regularly conducted research in Poland is the great advantage of this material.

The birth of the Solidarity movement and the events of 1981 were an inspiration for undertaking this research. The aim of the initial research was to check the kind of response the coming into existence of the social movement would have in rural communities, the peasant milieu in particular. The first studies were an opportunity to observe the shaping at grass-roots level of acting and building relations between the authorities and grass-roots forces which had been brutally interrupted by the announcement of martial law.

The research undertaken after the interruption caused by political events concentrated on the analysis of relations between the state and the peasants and gave particular attention to the way family agriculture functioned in Poland. The research was based on questionnaires backed up by interviews and frequent field trips, personal observations of changes taking place in the communes.

These issues took on a new significance after the events of 1989, the Round Table talks and the first partially democratic parliamentary elections. The fast changing system transformation and the introduction of reforms brought about new research prospects for the analysts of social life in Eastern Europe.

In the social sciences the mechanisms of passing from a people's democracy and centrally planned economy to democracy and the free market economy became the topic of much theoretical debate. These mechanisms were above all described at the macro-social level of specific countries or of the whole region. Changes at local level were of lesser importance although the rank of processes taking place on a micro-scale for the emergence of a civil society is of great importance. There were many reasons for this, including those of a methodological nature: the observation of change at local level is tedious, requiring personal engagement and results are, on the whole, not particularly stunning. The authors analysed the process of system transformation at local level in an almost anthropological manner, respecting the local "long history" and in it searching for regional-local explanations of the diversity of the processes of transformation. Having access to data from 1980 they returned to the three rural communes with their research in 1990, on the eve of the first local government elections. Observations of the changes in local government were continued in 1994, 1998 and 2002, twice (in 1990 and 1998) conducting extensive sociological and political science research on the new local political elites. Political transformation and the emergence of new elites manifested themselves by new ways of ruling over the communities, the new authorities making decisions concerning development which they intended to introduce in the researched communes.

With such extensive empirical material deriving from various periods of time, the authors raised the question of the trajectory of the changes taking place. Being familiar with local reality and frequently returning to the same research area carries the risk of weakening one's sharp perception, yet, on the other hand, it is an opportunity to really delve into the life of the researched community and capture the factors of change which are inaccessible to people from the outside, which is what has been achieved in this book. The past twenty five years have been an opportunity for the Poles to learn the principles of democracy, a lesson in having to cope with their hard-earned freedom. This book bears testimony to that experience, it is a record of the emergence of new institutions, the history of the reinforcement of new governing bodies as well as the first delusions concerning their activities.

This work consists of nine chapters, grouped into three sections. The first, entitled "From Monopoly to Power Sharing" gives the French reader an

opportunity of getting to know about the history and mechanisms of the shaping of local power and seeing the changes which came about until achieving the current system of institutions and divisions of competence. The authors raise the issue of local politics, they discuss two decades of change and system transformation in Poland and they then explain the way in which the process of the shaping of the local political system became operational and consequently the topic of studies and research. They finally make a reconstruction of institutional change at local government level in Poland, which often tends to get overlooked in the large-scale work of Polish researchers and which is probably due to assuming that living in Polish reality we are aware of the changes taking place. In actual fact this is a standard description of the process of transformation of the institution of local democracy and its principles where the starting point is a surface socialist democracy and it ends with the description of a "target model", barely mentioned in 1990: a three-level local authority with the direct universal elections of borough leaders and town mayors. This shows the reader the scale of change which took place in Central Europe during the period of transformation, since the outline of the description is perfectly suitable for application in other countries in this region.

In this part of the work the authors also explain the principles of choosing communes where long-term observations took place. When choosing the criteria which they followed, geographical, historical and various economic differences were taken into account concerning agriculture and its role, the structure of the economy and the population's sources of income. The communes which were selected for research were: Stęszew in Wielkopolska, Zator in Małopolska and Drobin in Mazowsze. Each of these communes saw different processes of change in the eighties. In the nineties the dynamic of democratic change was different, so was the structure of political forces, the attitude to integration with the European Union as well as the directions of change, expressed in the economic strategies of the communes and their local development strategies. These differences are expressed in different levels of economic, social and political capital. The lowest levels can be noticed in the commune of Drobin, whose development strategy is traditional and demanding. The commune of Zator is the direct opposite which while having a low level of economic capital has a high level of social and political capital, it launches its innovative development strategy, referring to specific local resources which have largely been created by the local leaders.

The level of development and functioning of the three researched communes, as well as the differences observed in them clearly indicate the extent to which local government decisions influence the rate and directions of changes taking



place there. The diversity of trajectories, according to which the changes take place in the researched communities shows the great importance of reflection on the functioning of local self-government, analysing the consequences, decisions made by the local authorities and the reflection concerning their usefulness for others.

The second section, "Re-Composition of the Local Political Scene" is dedicated to the changes which took place on the local political scene in the researched communes. The authors compare differences in political behaviour, various scenarios which emerged in the researched communities, they search for sources of the observed citizens' attitudes, they analyse the motives which influence Polish people's choices, they also compare the local context with choices in parliamentary and presidential elections. Analysing successive local elections in Poland in this work attention was given to the hope of renewing local elites, as was the case during the 1990 elections. An analysis was also made of the causes of disappointment and discouragement expressed by voters by their very low turnout in the 1994 elections and the growing process of politicisation of local government elections which took place in the 1998 elections and the phenomenon of diversification on the local political scene. Two topics in this section deserve particular attention: one, devoted to the scope of exchange of the local political elites as well as the social and psychological portrait of representatives of the new local elite. As far as the process of exchange of the local elites is concerned it is worth noting the specific, slow rhythm of this gradual exchange, which points to the specific non-political criteria of evaluation of local politicians as well as the rather narrow scope of authority among the local elite as it is difficult to take by storm even during a revolution. Entering the local elite in new democratic conditions is a long process: there is the recruitment phase, then pre-selection and selection which select a new elite and legitimise its presence on the local public scene. The model portrait of a councillor — a mature man, rather well educated and professionally active, often connected with agriculture and rather well-off — also points to values appreciated by the rural community. It also draws attention to its worrying and unfavourable traits from the point of view of civic society: rather the desire of being well-governed than taking part in governing, authoritarianism, mistrust and criticism even towards their own people, frustrations and misunderstanding of political mechanisms, an aversion to liberal economic mechanisms. These traits are regionally diverse and contribute to the way of managing communities and reveal an entire range of problems faced by the building of civic society in the central European, post-Communist countryside.

The third section, "Towards New Local Self-Government?", is devoted to the analysis of the functioning of self-government in specific communes

– dependencies between centres of power, an analysis of relations between the organs of local government and governing as such, i.e. solving current problems in the community. Particular attention is given to someone who is of considerable significance for the commune and its development, i.e. the mayor who should be a central figure for local government. This part of the book includes a presentation of the financial strategy of the communes (striving towards financial autonomy and gradual development in Stęszew as opposed to a strategy of acquiring subsidies and debts in Drobin), the structure of commune budgets was analysed and the influence of new legal regulations for creating them, views and attitudes of councillors concerning issues regarding local finances and the local economy (their critical evaluation and a considerable tendency to approving state solutions), carried out and planned investment strategies. Important and difficult problems for the local government administration is maintaining a network of schools and widespread areas of poverty (particularly in the most agricultural Drobin), requiring social intervention. A long chapter is devoted to local entrepreneurship which was registered from 1990 and separate research concerning new entrepreneurs was conducted in 2001.

Local policy is in many aspects imposed and limited by national policy. Recently, one of the important tasks of local government has become the management of financial resources destined for education. The reform of the education system in Poland, which included the introduction of a new type of secondary school, compelled the local government authorities to make investments and changes in the financing of education. In this book we find a comparison between the educational situation in the three researched communes. The obligations of the communes connected with social assistance are similarly compared. It is interesting to see how the local governments of these communes have coped with these new obligations. In this context a reflection on the limits of independence of the local actors is important.

This book presents the development strategies of specific communes: the authorities of each of the communes prepared a document, representing a development plan for over a dozen years. The authors analyse these strategies from the local point of view: market conditions, the position of the commune, various means which can enable the implementation of these plans, placing their strategy in the policy of territorial development.

Having collected such a vast amount of knowledge about these particular communes the authors had the possibility of noticing the enormity and diversity of changes taking place. The comparative material concerning the changes enabled them to recreate an outline of those changes. Apart from visible changes in the economy and politics they raise the issue of the condition of civic

society in the researched communes, they consider the level of social capital of their inhabitants and the functioning of democracy in the smallest administrative units. Towards the end of this section the authors consider the possibility of governability in local communities in Poland and post-communist Europe, where real socialism led to the destruction and deformation of both the economic and social fabric, resulting in the collectivist way of perceiving so many issues, the frail fabric of civic organisations, the shrinking of social ties, mistrust and frustration, often the consequence of a bad financial situation. The communities now face a new socialisation with the participation of new local elites. Will they manage to cope with these challenges? The authors do not answer this question, yet revealing certain negative characteristics of the local elites and communities, they seem to signal the potential threats to this process.

The specific nature of this research which follows events, means that the presented work can be seen in two ways. It can be seen as a monography of three Polish communes with a precise historical, economic, social and political description. Particular attention was given to the analysis of processes shaping local government and the history of its development, and finally an analysis of the factors which brought about this type of development.

However, this work is not only the presentation of the results of research carried out over many years in three diverse regions of Poland. The authors present three different trajectories along which changes took place and the local government authorities were shaped under the influence of various external factors. Not all the communes found a place for themselves in the new conditions and made the most of the opportunities offered by the transformation in Poland. This book is not only a monographic, rich description of change taking place in various external conditions. It is also an attempt at analysing the factors which influence the direction of change, and an attempt at answering the question concerning the efficiency of managing a commune. Published in French this work will no doubt be a source of considerable information about Poland and the changes taking place there.