Land reform – was it a breakthrough?

The 100th anniversary of Poland’s independence is an opportunity to remind ourselves about important and breakthrough socio-economic and political events. Such events include the decree of the PKWN (the Polish Committee of National Liberation) of September 6, 1944 on implementation of the land reform.

For decades of the Polish history, the agrarian issue had the dimension going beyond agriculture itself and rural areas. It was a nation- and economy-wide matter. People used to say that farmers (peasants) feed and protect. And, in fact, it was the case. Therefore, in my opinion, the land reform carried out after World War II had a breakthrough effect not only on the shape of the agricultural system of that time in Poland, but also on the transformation of the socio-economic system of the entire state that occurred after 1989.

I am aware of the controversies connected with its implementation. But while evaluating the land reform and its significance for the reconstruction of the agricultural system in Poland today, a number of circumstances that were important then must be taken into consideration. The circumstances that existed within rural areas, as well as connected with international situation, which affected the political changes in Poland. In this context, it is legitimate to say that the land reform was “against the wind” of the system changes in the post-war Poland.

Here, I will quote a somewhat different view on this reform. According to Prof. Janusz Kaliński, the way of implementing necessary land reforms was a sign of domination of political goals over economic goals [Kaliński, 2014].

Changes in agriculture were divided into two stages. In the first one, the government created an atmosphere of support for individual farms, and then in the second stage – after 1948 – it openly announced the need for collectivisation and state control of agriculture. The beginning of the collectivisation process meant a blatant transition to the realisation of the vision of an agricultural system following the example of the Soviet Union, regardless of the economic efficiency.

But was the second stage, involving the forced collectivisation of agriculture planned in advance by the Polish authorities forced by external factors? Can we talk about the second stage of the land reform, or about a separate process which was undertaken after the completion of the land reform?

As we know from the history, forcing collectivisation of agriculture has not delivered the expected results. As a consequence, a fierce opposition of Polish farmers, but also the change of power in the Soviet Union and in Poland, led to the withdrawal from forcing such changes in
agriculture, and there was even a process of de-collectivisation.

Here, it is worth to point out the international dimension of the Polish example of the de-collectivisation process. Prof. Henryk Cholaj wrote about this: *We barely remember the fact of historical analogy in terms of agrarian policy of the Polish People’s Republic and the People’s Republic of China. In the years 1978-1979, an agrarian revolution in a form of de-collectivisation took place in China, which radically changed the fate of an almost billion Chinese farmers. So, there is a similarity between Gomułka and Deng (Deng Xiao-ping - R.S.), in Poland the de-collectivisation took place in the memorable 1956* [Cholaj, 2011, pp. 221-222].

To come back to the land reform, the reform of September 6, 1944 was not the first reform undertaken in Poland after regaining independence. In the interwar period, there were laws concerning the land reform passed three times. The Sejm adopted a resolution on the principles of the land reform on July 10, 1919. It had a declaratory nature. Then, on December 15, 1920, the Sejm adopted an act on implementation of the land reform providing for compensation for expropriation. In turn, the land reform of December 28, 1925, was to involve the creation of independent farms and enlarging the existing ones.

The land reforms adopted before World War II, although they reduced some “hunger for land” among peasantry, did not improve the area structure of the farms belonging to them. The growing agrarian overpopulation was burdensome for rural areas and led to fragmentation of peasants’ ownership, with all negative economic and social consequences, and thus entailed unprofitability of production on small farms.

The continued “hunger for land” and all negative socio-economic features of the Polish agriculture, which transferred to the entire economy and population (scarcity of food for the entire population), were the basis of the implementation of agrarian reforms after World War II. An important reason for the reform was also the war damage, which according to the Central Statistical Office (GUS) reached 35% of the pre-war value of the assets in agriculture [GUS, 1965, p. 17]. Moreover, a lot of land was lying fallow.

A rapid recovery of agriculture from the devastation of war, as well as a fast development of fallow lands and an increase in agricultural production could be achieved by personal commitment, diligence and foresight of a Polish peasant. Psycho-social aspects could reveal their positive sides within small-scale farms. Peasants wanted that and fought for that and paid Poland back with their contribution in its socio-economic development in the most difficult times. It was the Polish individual farming in the post-war period that contributed to the creation of the “primary capital accumulation”, necessary for the construction of industry. The source of this accumulation comprised “compulsory deliveries” of agricultural products, which were paid for definitely below the “market” prices. The deliveries were abolished only in 1971. Human resources recruited from rural areas supported the restoration and construction of other branches of the national economy.

In the decree of September 6, 1944, it was stated that the land reform in Poland was a national and economic necessity, and the agricultural system in Poland would be based on farms that were strong, healthy and fit for considerable production, being a private property of their respective owners [Dekret PKWN, 1944]. Even if we agreed with the view of Prof. J. Kaliński concerning the real objectives of the land reform, we could state that despite the hidden second stage of the land reform which could not have been effectively realised, the reform fulfilled a
key role in the Polish economy. The credit goes to the Polish peasants, who did not let the unacceptable solutions to be imposed on them.

The implementation of the land reform was to meet three main objectives: political, economic and social. Among the political objectives, apart from system objectives, the attention should be drawn to the need for a rapid development of the Western and Northern Territories and their fast integration with the Motherland. The most effective way of quick settlement was the provision of land ownership. As is known, despite granting the land ownership, there were difficulties in the effective populating of the Western and Northern Territories. It was one of important reasons for the creation of state-owned farms on these areas.

The development of the Western Territories had also an economic dimension, because it was about a rapid growth of agricultural production and improvement of the level of nutrition of people.

The specific objectives of the land reform included:

• increasing sizes of the existing farms with the area below 5 ha of agricultural land,
• creating new, independent farms for landless farms, farm workers, agricultural workers and small tenant farmers,
• creating farms for horticultural and vegetable production near towns and industrial centres,
• reserving suitable sites for (agricultural) schools and state- or local government-managed centres for raising agricultural condition, seed production, breeding and agricultural industry.

The land reform and settlement in the years 1944-1949 covered a total of approx. 15.6 million hectares (including forests), which accounted for approx. 50% of the entire territory of Poland, approx. 32% of which was not subject to the disposal. These were forests (state-owned, which they are up to date), water and public roads. Peasants received approx. 6.4 million hectares, i.e. approx. 41%. There were over 800 thousand new farms created as a result of the land reform.

What were the effects of the land reform? The most important, positive effects from the point of view of that time include:

• intensification of land use with the application of the reserves of labour and capital factor,
• use of own means of production and stimulation of professional activity of farmers,
• bearing a part of social accumulation (primary capital accumulation) by farmers through repayment for the land and compulsory deliveries,
• relatively quick restoration of agriculture and a significant revitalisation of agricultural economy [Tkaczyk, 1979, pp. 308-313],
• activation of workforces living in the countryside.

Unfortunately, the implementation of the land reform, and I stress the execution, which was not necessarily in line with the assumptions, and also with the Constitution of that time, resulted in a number of negative effects. As Prof. J. Kaliński wrote, the decree of September 6, 1944, is contested by some lawyers as inconsistent with the then-applicable April Constitution of 1935. The Constitution stipulated:

…deprivation of property may take place only for public purposes and subject to fair compensation.

Meanwhile, the provisions of the decree allowed for the seizure of property without compensation and reusing it for non-public purposes. Lawyers raise objections, on the one hand, towards expropriation of landowners, and at the same time do not question the legitimacy of the acquisition of land by peasantry, re-
Land reform – was it referring to the Act from the times of the Polish People’s Republic of 1971 on the regulation of farm ownership. After 1989, the privatisation process covered the state-owned property, and in agriculture such a form of ownership was already present (without taking into account the state-owned farms, which had approx. 20% of agricultural land).

Another negative consequence of inadequate performance of the land reform was the reduction of the national heritage. It was due to the collapse of numerous palaces and mansions, often of high architectural value, plundering and destroying of valuable memorabilia, collections of art, furniture and libraries.

How does the Polish agriculture look like today?

The agrarian system in Poland declared and implemented under the provisions of the land reform of 1944 survived until the present day. The current Constitution of April 2, 1997, Art. 23 reads:

The basis of the agricultural system of the State shall be the family farm. Whereas, the Act of 2003 on shaping the agrarian system has reduced the maximum area of a farm to 300 hectares, leaving a few exceptions. Moreover, the Polish agriculture is subject to the rules of the Common Agricultural Policy of the European Union. This means a continuation of the growing trend of foreign sales, observed since the Polish accession to the EU – in 2017 a positive foreign trade balance amounted to EUR 8.4 billion and was 19% higher than in 2016. The share of agri-food products in the total value of the Polish exports stands at the level of 13%. The Polish agriculture does not participate, though, in the global competition, as evidenced by the fact that approx. 80% of the foreign trade in agri-food products is accounted to the EU countries [KOWR, 2018]. Will the opening of competition on the global market result in the need for a new reform, allowing for the creation of farms without area limits?

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References:
2. Dekret PKWN [1944], Decree of PKWN of September 6, 1944 on the implementation of the land reform, Journal of Laws of 13/09/1944 item 17.

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