
SOCIAL ALERT

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Only as a community of people and interests will we survive the crisis

A pandemic and the need to act in times of crisis do not justify abandoning social dialogue. What is important is the way in which changes and reforms are announced and introduced in Poland: whether this is happening democratically, involving various communities or not. The concept of autocratic decision taking – which is practiced in recent years and months – significantly increases the social costs of settlements. The current difficult situation and economic turmoil that can be expected in the near future reinforces the need for all the forms of dialogue. Only in this way can we develop effective and socially recognised forms of crisis prevention. Only as a community of people and interests can we overcome the crisis.

We are calling for the restoration of social dialogue with the use of existing institutions and the creation of a new model of social participation.

We are witnessing and participating in a crisis of “social dialogue”, understood in such a way that words, statements, decisions do not exist in isolation from others, but always occur in relationships. Our reality painfully reflects the postmodern thesis that there is no truth but there are only interpretations. “Yours” and “mine”, “ours” and “yours” have become an exclusive alternative. There is no room for common things. There remains a struggle to the end, leading to self-destruction. In a situation where we are dealing with an

“interpretation tender”, the advantage is gained by the one who has the power tools at his disposal.¹

If this cannot be stopped now that the threat posed by the pandemic is widespread and felt, then in our world, the processes where the most important is instrumental rationality, the domination of will (even without procedures, institutions and laws) and façade will become more and more intensive.

We think that two types of action are necessary in public spaces simultaneously that will attract and strengthen themselves – like two poles. The first is the practice of community coping with the epidemic and its social consequences. They will help, if they are firmly rooted in the foundation of co-presence, co-responsibility, mindfulness, meetings, conversations and empathy. That is, on what breeds the dialogue of everyday life.²

At the other extreme, we place reflection and discourse about the axiom of social life. About the reference to our individuality and community to ethical and existential values to what binds everyday life to the transcendence of humanity. And on finding this connection in the system of the state, law, economy and culture.

We can see the danger arising directly from decisions to prevent the development of a pandemic. In the absence of public debate, technological solutions with a potentially high social impact are being introduced: “contact tracing” tools that track the social contacts of potentially infected people. Such projects require a good balance between the public interest (public health) and citizens’ privacy. Such a balance should be developed within the framework of social discourse.

¹ More on this in a special alert "*Poland – goodbye to democracy? The word of caution (may it not be too late)*" prepared by professor Cezary Obracht – Prondzyński. It is available at:

<https://oees.pl/dobrzewiedziec/>

² We wrote about solidarity in the pandemic in The Social Alert I. There was also an online debate on the subject of solidarity in the pandemic entitled "*Solidarity exam*" available at:

<https://oees.pl/dobrzewiedziec/>

Challenges arising from the pandemic – real social self-support

The number of people in need of material help and mental support is rapidly increasing. There is no public authority or social organisation that can organise it effectively. That is why all kinds of support measures are needed, launched in accordance with the principle of self-support. The initiators may be local governments, existing institutions, but the main line of action has to be nevertheless created by local groups – social molecules of self-support and self-organisation. Only they can reach people in extreme need and respond effectively to their needs. Only they can overcome obstacles and limitations (including bureaucratic and poor public services).

Without solidarity, violence and selfish individualism will reign and the law of the stronger will prevail. We are in danger of irreparable collapse of social cohesion. There will be extreme material and social inequalities. These phenomena will become a source of political chaos in which the shamans of the conflict will rule.

The basis for social assistance activities is good communication and open (administratively unrestricted) access to information. This is the only way to resist and respond to misinformation, spreading panic and exploiting the difficult situation for radicalisation.

Our recommendations:

1. Carrying an open, sound communication policy of government with the public, local government units and social representations.
2. Some social organisations have to take on the task of developing communication skills in order to be able to reach those who are condemned to “information monoculture”.

Respect for the existing institutions

In a crisis situation, the political weakening of the institutions of social dialogue turns out vengeful. The Social Dialogue Council has already had limited social legitimacy. Now, in addition, the so-called the anti-crisis shield has introduced solutions threatening paralysis and being a political threat for the social partners. The law allows the Prime Minister to dismiss each member of the Social Dialogue Council representing trade unions and employers, which is a solution unprecedented in the history of institutional social dialogue in Poland after 1989. The President, signing the Act, said that he might refer the provision to the Constitutional Court. To this day, however, it has not happened.

Our recommendations:

1. The amendment of the so-called anti-crisis shield against the Law on the Social Dialogue Council and other institutions of social dialogue in order to restore its independence and safeguard the powers of the social partners.
2. Taking advantage of the statutory possibilities and inviting by the President of the Social Dialogue Council of representatives of other major national social, economic and smaller trade union organisations to work on crisis law packages (the foundation of a complementary advisory circle by the Social Dialogue Council).
3. Turning the Regional Councils for Social Dialogue into the regional centres for social and civic dialogue. Right now, during the pandemic, there have been many new actors, initiatives and institutions involved socially. They are building their authority which should be used to reinforce social dialogue.

4. The modification of the Social Partnership Centre “Dialogue” of Andrzej Bączkowski into a platform for dialogue for important think-tanks in the preparation of a new social pact aimed at broadening the representativeness and carrying out broad, actual public consultation according to the rules of deliberation. Participants in such a dialogue should include GAP, FOR, the Jagiellonian Club, Stocznia, Nowa Konfederacja, The Kalecki Foundation, Laboratorium Więzi, FISE, The Batory Foundation as well as watchdog organisations, e.g. Citizens’ Network Watchdog Poland, HFPCz.

Searching for a new formula for social participation

Before PiS took power, there was talk of a constitutional mandate for the Polish version of the social economic committee. The essence was three pillars: the Council for Social Dialogue, the Council for Civil Dialogue (after the change of the formula of the Council for Public Benefit Activities) and the Joint Government and Local Government Committee. This institution, a kind of “third chamber”, was not intended to replace dialogue with citizens, but rather to be their organiser. The first two institutions were marginalised long before the outburst of the pandemic. The way in which the government decides on public finances is proof that, although KWRiS meetings are held, local governments’ statements are not taken into account.

There is also no “sectoral” – industry dialogue. Sometimes such dialogue is used... against these industries. This happened a year ago during the teachers’ strike. The administration organised an "educational dialogue" to show it as a propaganda success. Social dialogue cannot be distorted, manipulated or used

against anyone. It is not only a question of the credibility of the social partners, but also of the credibility of the social debate.

The mechanisms of citizen participation in the legislative process have been destroyed. Public consultation has been discontinued. Government bills are often presented as parliamentary proposals in order to circumvent the requirement for consultation and to present assumptions and impact assessments. The government has disabled the existing (created by them) online consultation tools.

In our opinion, we have to find new mechanisms for participation as a society.

Our recommendations:

1. Government and local self-government should promote mechanisms for involving local and industry communities in identifying social and economic needs and problems. These can be citizens' panels, citizens' courts or deliberative polls.
2. Promotion of mass debates and discussions. In Poland, a substitute were the Civic Debates on Education (NOOE) (naradaobywatelska.pl) (conducted from the bottom up during the strike), with 4.4 thousand active participants in 150 locations in Poland. Within the framework of this project about 5,000 ideas on the modernisation of education were created). It can be a ready idea for discussing other issues that require a joint debate conducted in a dispersed way (it would be good if local self-governments joined it). This is how we can talk about local social policy, transport, security or climate. In such a formula, we can also talk about important local social agreements, such as the local education plan.

3. It is necessary to conclude new social agreements (both at the local and central levels) pertaining to the intergenerational solidarity, outlook issues or transformations related to climate.
4. The Sejm and the Senate should take advantage and promote citizens' hearings, debates and online consultations in the same way as the administration.
5. The local self-government and NGOs should take care and promote the development of territorial dialogue.

Various self-support groups and NGOs have strengthened their activities during the times of pandemic. This move should be used to force real social discourse between the administration and the society.

Social alerts are an initiative of the Open Eyes Economy think tank and the Faculty of Public Economy and Administration of the University of Economics in Krakow.

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