

## THE OTHER IN POLAND. INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION IN A NATIONAL STATE

This text discusses intercultural communication in Poland after 1989, especially the influence of post-totalitarian memory on current relations between the dominant population and ethnic minorities. Legal solutions after 1989, although they helped to initiate the process of multicultural social integration and accelerated the departure from the (ideologically and culturally homogenous) national state towards multiculturalism, only slightly modified unofficial attitudes of Poles towards the Other.

### 1. *Homo postsovieticus* – the social context of intercultural communication in Poland

The political breakthrough that took place in 1989 in Poland demonstrated to Poles that the use of freedom can be as difficult as its recovery. The unrestricted freedom of language use, of shaping one's own identity, forming beliefs and professing faith in a society which had previously lived within the strict boundaries delineated by the regime to be a challenge for the Poles. Slowly, it became clear that freedom was not anarchy and that it had its ethical boundaries. One of the freedoms that required restraint was primarily the freedom of

speech. Attempts to subdue the anarchy of words were countered by violent reactions: „it violates the right to free speech”, „people have the right to know”. The answers provided by the state were as follows: the law on the Polish language<sup>1</sup>, legal solutions for the protection of personal data<sup>2</sup> and (Waglowksi) personal property, stalking<sup>3</sup>, the dissemination of racial and ethnic hatred, including hate speech (Waglowksi).

The involvement of the Catholic Church in the recovery of freedom and its development after 1989 generated the problem of the neutrality of the state in matters regarding one's beliefs and worldview. By 2015, two social attitudes clashed within Poland; it was seen as a state in which all religions enjoy equal rights, a state free from public signs of religious beliefs, and now the „True Poland” is a country of Catholics.

An exchange of national holidays, amendment of the constitution, restoration of the senate, transition from a socialist to a free market economy, opening of borders, accession to the European Union and NATO, intensification of globalization processes, and last but not least widespread migration of young people did little to neutralize Poles' post-totalitarian identity.

The increasing interest of young people in uniformed classes and armed forces is an escape from freedom; young people believe that „in the uniformed services it is the commander that decides and there are clear procedures.” Adolescents born in the free Poland give up the possibility of making their own choices.

A guarded satisfaction with democracy and freedom is confirmed by the low turnout in elections, the blame placed on politicians for every possible failure, and a belief in the responsibility of the state, witnessed by the recently fashionable saying: „the state has proved of no use”. The state is a being which lifts Poles' personal responsibility for their own decisions and co-responsibility for fellow citizens.

The above analysis of communication patterns of Poles after 1989 is confirmed by the new definition of the concept *homo sovieticus*, proposed by Fr. Józef Tischner (Tischner 1992) and Jerzy Turowicz (Tu-

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<sup>1</sup> The Law on the Polish language, Journal of Laws of 1999, no. 90, item 999, <http://isap.sejm.gov.pl/DetailsServlet?id=WDU19990900999> (31.07.2014).

<sup>2</sup> The Law on personal data protection, Journal of Laws of 1997, no. 133, item 883, <http://isap.sejm.gov.pl/DetailsServlet?id=WDU19971330883> (31.07.2014).

<sup>3</sup> Amendment of the Penal Code, Journal of Laws 2011, no. 72, item 381.

rowicz). Fr. J. Tischner draws attention to the widespread attempt to escape from freedom, a phenomenon previously described by Erich Fromm (Fromm). According to Fr. J. Tischner, being liberated from one bondage, Poles seek a new one (Tischner 1993). J. Turowicz describes a unique incapacitation of the contemporary *homo sovieticus*, who expects all his problems to be solved by the state and the authorities. J. Turowicz's *homo sovieticus* cannot be critical, does not take initiative and is not creative.

However, these are not the only features that identify the post-totalitarian attitudes of many contemporary Poles. Interpersonal relations reveal features of the earlier *homo sovieticus* as fixed in social memory: subordination to a group, escape from responsibility, opportunism, aggressiveness towards the weak and humility towards the stronger, a lack of independent thinking and action, expectations that „someone will do something” for us, and intellectual slavery (Wdowiak).

Results of research on contemporary intercultural communication in Poland confirm that the contemporary *homo sovieticus* simultaneously adopts mutually exclusive attitudes:

- attempts to escape from freedom are often accompanied by equally destructive, immoderate immersion in freedom, bordering on anarchy, especially with regard to freedom of speech,
- global behavior and expectations are accompanied by cultural identity reinforcement, constructed on the Polish messianic vocation,
- a low sense of self-worth is accompanied by expectations that others will treat Poland and Poles in a special way, full of appreciation and respect.

The above analyses show that social relations between Poles are conditioned by totalitarian experience. This also applies to the communication between the dominant population and the minority groups.

## 2. Assimilation – intercultural relations in Poland after 1945

The new system, imposed on Poland after 1945, offered equal rights to citizens, regardless of their nationality. The idea of „communist internationalism” (Rozenal, Judin) constituted a guarantee of minority rights. However, the still vivid memories of wartime perse-

cutions and post-war „settling of old scores” – the resettlement of the Germans, Operation Vistula and the migration of the population to areas previously occupied by indigenous peoples, especially in Masuria and the Regained Territories – generated ethnic conflicts. According to the 1952 Constitution, the working people of towns and villages were the sovereign of the People’s Republic of Poland.<sup>4</sup> This constitution vested all citizens with identical rights and obligations. It recognised that the nationality of citizens was their private matter, yet it gave citizens the right to preserve their identity. In practice, however, the Polish authorities sought to assimilate national minorities. The national policy of the communist regime was contingent on the belief that cultural, national, ethnic, and linguistic minorities were wrong.

Sociologists and historians point to the assimilation process as a legal and social solution that strengthens intra-community relations (Funkenstein). As part of the assimilation processes, ethnic minorities, becoming ever similar to the dominant population, acquire, e.g., its axiological system, customs, language, and thus become fully-fledged citizens of a given country. Assimilation policy is to minimize the difference between members of ethnic minorities and the dominant society. This process is usually characterized by unilateral adaptation and absorption.

The basis for assimilation efforts is the legal and pragmatic requirement of national and ethnic minorities acquiring the language of the dominant group. The necessity of using the dominant language also in informal situations leads to the absorption of the attendant way of thinking, axiological system, the ways of categorizing and understanding concepts according to the dominator’s experience. Language conversion weakens a person’s identity and destroys his or her cultural roots (Kłoskowska). Johann Gottfried Herder and Wilhelm Humboldt drew attention to the identity function of the language (Schaff).

An ideologised newspeak grew more and more widespread in totalitarian societies. The society in the totalitarian state was equal / uniform, accepted the order (standards) established at the top, gave in to one-way communication, and did not ask questions. Highlighting the minority cultures would have divided the society, generated ques-

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<sup>4</sup> Constitution of the People of the Republic of Poland adopted by the Constitutional Assembly on 22 July 1952.

tions and enforced bilateral communication; in other words, it would have neutralised newspeak and weakened the authority of the regime.

The history of discrimination against national minorities in Poland can be split into several stages. In the mid-1950s there was a mass economic migration of the population, which was conducive to assimilation. The dominating society took over individuals moving away from the minority groups; hence, the consolidation reactions on the other side, which resulted in the emergence of closed ghetto-like minority communities. At the same time, the growing Stalinist repressions resulted in the concealment of ethnic identity and nationality and prevented its manifestation; knowledge in this respect was socially limited. At the time of the political „thaw”, those guilty of earlier terror were sought; it was the others who were to blame and that is why monitoring minorities grew even more stringent and they were persecuted for being disloyal. The Polish United Workers' Party (Polish: PZPR) was officially against nationality discrimination, yet in practice minority associations were required, like all citizens and associations, to implement in their activities the dominant party policies in order to speed up the assimilation process. Their attention was to focus on folklore and artistic activity. The state financed folk singers and theatrical groups, but at the same time limited minority education. These activities culminated in the year 1968, when Poles began to increasingly hide their being different. The Resolution of the Second Plenum of the Polish United Workers Party of 1976 „On the moral and political unity of the Polish nation”<sup>5</sup> reinforced the assumption „of the uniform character of the Polish state”, which was accompanied by further discriminatory actions. This policy brought about the ethnic conflicts inherited from the time of communism. The widespread lack of knowledge about minority cultures in Poland resulted in the reinforcement of negative stereotypes of ethnicity and caused a reluctance to admit to being „other // foreign”. The earlier policy of a homogenous state was reflected in school curricula. Young people learned about the minorities living in Poland during history lessons. There was no information on the influence of minority groups on the development of Polish science and culture. School textbooks did not broach the subject of the current status of minorities. No variety was

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<sup>5</sup> See *II Plenary Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party*, Warsaw, 1976.

allowed in the state, so it could not find its reflection in the education system. Poles were reconciled with the idea that they were a monocultural nation, and that a plurality of cultures, ideologies and religions threatens the stability of the country. They inherited a post-totalitarian fear of difference.

### 3. From integration to multiculturalism – intercultural relations in Poland after 1989

The Catholic and national character of the Solidarity movement did not result in a modification of Poles' attitudes towards minorities and their social situation. Only the political breakthrough of 1989 changed the legal situation of national and ethnic minorities in Poland. The Law of 7 September 1991 on the educational system introduced a requirement of maintaining national, ethnic, linguistic, and religious identities, in particular via learning the minority language, history and culture in public schools.<sup>6</sup> The Law of 29 December 1992 on radio and television broadcasting mandated the public radio and public television to take into account the needs of national and ethnic minorities.<sup>7</sup> The 1997 Constitution of the Republic of Poland stressed the necessity to protect the rights of minorities. The nation became the subject and source of sovereign power – a collective in a political rather than an ethnic sense. All those who had Polish citizenship and those who held such citizenship after November 11, 1918 became the Polish people. Next to the concept of the 'nation' there emerged the concept of 'civil society', which influenced the direction of Poland's state policy through various interest groups, including minorities, all pursuing their multiple goals. This constitution provided all citizens belonging to national and ethnic minorities with the freedom to preserve and develop their own language, to preserve customs and traditions, and to develop their own culture, enabling them to create their own educational and cultural institutions for the protection of religious identity. It also enshrined the right to unrestricted practice of religion, guaranteed freedom of conscience and religion, prohibited

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<sup>6</sup> The Law of 7 September 1991 on the educational system, *Journal of Laws* 1991, no. 95, item 425.

<sup>7</sup> Law of 29 December 1992 on radio and television broadcasting, *Journal of Laws* 1992, no. 7, item 34.

discrimination or privilege on the grounds of religion. The Republic of Poland, as a democratic country, granted minorities free access to cultural goods, public services, education and health services, and provided suffrage rights and the right to freedom of association (Waglowksi). The Law of 6 June 1997 on the Penal Code (Waglowksi) provides for the punishment of offenses committed on grounds of ethnicity, while the Law on the protection of personal data (Waglowski) prohibits the processing of data revealing ethnic origin. The legal personality of national and ethnic minorities in Poland was defined by the Law of 6 January 2005.<sup>8</sup>

Minorities in Poland, apart from constitutional legal safeguards, have guaranteed protection by means of international legal acts. As a member of the United Nations, Poland must respect the provisions of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights of 1966 and the Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic Religious and Linguistic Minorities. Both prohibit discrimination on the grounds of race, religion, sex, political beliefs, social origin, and nationality. In 1995, Poland signed the Council of Europe's European Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, which guarantees that every member of a national minority has the right to freely determine his or her nationality by learning the mother tongue and in the mother tongue, and to freely use it in private and public life.

The assimilation processes that reinforce totalitarianism were replaced by legal solutions aiming at the integration of minority groups with the dominant group. Integration as a form of relationship at the intersection of cultural groups within one state raises many concerns. Interesting from the point of view of anthropology of communication is Todd Endelman's indication of integration as one of the elements of assimilation. According to the author, integration results in the opening up of minority groups to the dominant society. However, T. Endelman sees that this opening up is only one-sided, and therefore combines this process with acculturation and assimilation (Endelman). The transition from totalitarianism to democracy has changed the flow of information; interpersonal communication is now bi-directional and this applies as well to the relationships between the dominant and minority populations.

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<sup>8</sup> Law of 6 January 2005 on national and ethnic minorities and on the regional language. Journal of Laws of 2005. No. 17, item 141, No. 62, item 550; Journal of Laws of 2009, No. 31, item 206, No. 157, item 1241.

Anthony Giddens drew attention to the possibilities of such a partnership agreement within integration (Giddens). The model of the relationship proposed by him suggests replacing one-way assimilation with two-way integration. The author sees integration as a way to organize the various elements that make up the society. This order refers to the cultural convention and the axiological system and includes relations between individuals and social groups (Piekut).

In the case of integration, the relationship between the dominant society and the minority should result from the inclusion of culturally distinct elements in existing social systems in such a way that they do not interfere with the harmonious and effective functioning of these systems and do not eliminate their identity components. Successful integration is a complex, two-way, long-lasting, and multidimensional process.

The most frequently cited indications of successful integration of culturally distinct communities are as follows:

- the attainment by members of such communities of appropriate language competence,
- finding employment in occupations corresponding to the qualifications of members of the ethnic community,
- reaching proper economic status,
- their participation in political life,
- no conflicts with the law.

None of the above signals includes the determinants that a culturally diverse society should include:

- a long-lasting sense of one's own cultural distinctness,
- skilful functioning at the intersection of cultures.

From the perspective of communication, the integration process cannot be considered successful without the two last factors as it does not envisage the protection of identity.

This is moreover confirmed by the fact that the enthusiasts of this form of inter-community relations consider as integrated such a social system in which the goals set by a given culture are fully accepted by all individuals and achieved through socially acceptable means. When the term „given culture” applies to the dominant culture, it means that we have to deal with a complete assimilation process rather than with integration. Therefore, the aim of the legal solutions currently in place in Poland should be to introduce multicultural relations.



Multiculturalism has developed its own patterns of intercultural relations management. These relationships are based on respect for all possible differences in culture, origin, religion, or customs, and help to create open state communities, in which culturally distinct national communities coexist (Stefańska). Proponents of multiculturalism believe that members of minority groups should maintain their linguistic and cultural distinctiveness, as this does not endanger any other national identity. According to them, the identity of one's own cultural distinctness enhances tolerance for different lifestyles. Not only does the policy of multiculturalism grant equal rights to minorities without the requirement to renounce other cultural affiliations, but it also invests them with special rights, conditional on ethnicity.

The legal solutions introduced in Poland after 1989, offering special rights to minorities, gave rise to multiculturalism, but have had little influence on the social attitudes of modern Poles towards minorities. This means that legitimate and sufficient legal provisions have not been reflected in private and public interpersonal relationships. Many Poles find it difficult to accept the fact that they are diverse as a nation and have different values systems established in their first languages, developed over the centuries, also through the type of intercultural contacts. Hence, in the social debate we can often hear terms such as: „a real Pole,” „a true patriot,” „a universal value system,” and semantic and axiological modifications of concepts of „patriotism” and „nationalism,” while the my / other category is seen as the friend / foe opposition.

The myth that all Poles have been invariably tolerant and therefore have never committed racist crimes, did not participate in the extermination of the Jews or have not discriminated against the Roma, is a manifestation of post-communist conformism and opportunism. Debunking this myth provokes a violent defensive reaction and consequently strengthens social attitudes that do not accept ethnic differences.

A lack of widespread knowledge about minorities generates fear, which in turn triggers aggression and is a source of negative stereotypes. Core school curricula, though already modernized, fail to provide knowledge about minority cultures present in Poland, do not inform students on their influence on the development of the dominant culture, nor do they prepare for intercultural communication. The Polish school creates national attitudes and educates the future

citizens of a monocultural nation-state. National minorities contribute to this, too; after the assimilation efforts of the totalitarian state, they are very slow to transform into open communities, oriented not only to intra-community communication, but also to communication outside a given group. Studies on intercultural communication have confirmed that the most common barriers to communication at the intersection of cultures are as follows:

- no widespread knowledge of minority cultures,
- no knowledge of minority languages and their legacy,
- the national / monocultural character of Polish education,
- lack of motivation to increase knowledge about minorities,
- the need to settle old scores, resulting from tainted intercultural relationships in the past,
- a sense of guilt due to the Holocaust and discrimination.

The above barriers delay the introduction of integration and multicultural solutions.

#### 4. Polish social attitudes towards the Other

A departure from the national state towards integration and multiculturalism requires, above all, modifications of the social attitudes adopted by citizens vis-à-vis clearly distinct sections of Polish society in diverse communication situations, including unofficial ones. The most disruptive social attitude is a pattern of behaviour, accepted by some as non-aggressive, consisting in the passive rejection of everything that is different. It consists in disregarding differences and being ignorant of others, the different ones, assuming that they do not exist in the shared space. Such an alienating attitude towards culturally diverse members of the community is not conducive to building meaningful relations, jeopardizes social stability and in the case of too strong affiliation of differences by a minority can lead to uncontrolled aggression.

Some pupils in Polish schools pretend that all of their classmates are the same, which does not require their adopting a specific social attitude towards otherness. My research conducted in the Polish-Romani classes has showed that even with distinctly different cultural signs (dress code, language), teachers and students accepted that there were no differences between them, which was easier. As a consequence, no specific socio-educational needs resulting from the cul-

tural difference of the minority group were realized.<sup>9</sup> A similar pattern of behaviour imposes social taboos on religious and ethnic discourse. The taboos surrounding the other / foreign cultural identities result in the closure of a minority group, which generates its isolation. This attitude of withdrawal is not negated, because it is difficult to see; passivity does not require verbal and non-verbal self-definition and does not send signals that need assessment.

It is easier to neutralize intolerance behaviours that have specific verbal and non-verbal identifiers. Expressing a view allows you to engage in a debate, using argumentation and scientific evidence as well as emotional persuasion, to resist such an attitude. Defining your views opens up opportunities for building relationships, no matter if this sometimes proves difficult. A thoughtful discourse coupled with rational interaction reduces the level of aggression and dislike. My studies conducted among high school students confirm that the most common source of intolerance is the fear of the unknown, of otherness, falling prey to negative stereotypes, i.e. ignorance or insufficient knowledge, unverified and uninformed about a given culture.

In theory, every attempt to expand this knowledge generates questions, initiates discussion, motivates people to modify their attitudes, and triggers a desire to know. In practice, as the most recent months have shown, the effectiveness of such actions is conditioned by the prevailing social atmosphere. A public consent to glorify nation-oriented and nationalist attitudes makes it no longer a shame to verbally and physically combat all cultural differences, and the discussion on this subject only exacerbates the situation as the friend or foe category begins to include also those who think differently.

It is a common belief that a tolerance-based attitude is enough to build a correct relationship at the intersection of cultures. The research I have conducted, however, has shown that tolerance is often accompanied by a lack of acceptance, which in some situations can lead to aggressive behaviour. The Others can be different as long as they do not inflate their difference and do not affiliate it. This greatly limits relationships and concentrates them on everyday living prob-

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<sup>9</sup> See the results of the studies carried out within the project „*Education for Integration*” – program of upgrading the level of language education of Roma children and young people financed by the European Union from the European Social Fund (PO KL 01.03.01-00-179/09): (Grzelak, Grzelak-Piaskowska).

lems. This attitude is reflected in unidirectional legal solutions and intercultural actions in Poland.

In a multicultural society, the most successful attitude is based on acceptance. This attitude is characterized not only by a tolerance for otherness, but also by the satisfaction with its existence, enhanced by an interest in it and the desire to know. Such a relation to otherness enables the building of meaningful relations, based on the exchange of cultural information, which shapes the bi-directionality of these relationships. In this way, knowledge is a factor binding the multicultural community.

## Summary

A belief that only through assimilation can members of ethnic minorities become full-fledged citizens of a given country has been proved wrong. This process, because of its unidirectional character, i.e. members of ethnic minorities take over the language, norms and behaviour of the dominant society, without a corresponding adaptation on the part of that society, violates the principle of equality before the law of all nationals.

An integration policy, which, unlike assimilation, assumed that the process of mutual adjustment of the ethnic minority and the dominant society was bilateral, where both groups not only accepted the shared culture but also made their own contribution to it, albeit socially fair, intensifies interference and obliterates cultural differences, which can result in a loss of the cultural identity of the members of both the ethnic minority and the dominant society.

The idea of multiculturalism is not perfect, either. The assumption that people from different ethnic backgrounds benefit and learn from their different cultures while preserving a sense of their own cultural diversity and the awareness of their cultural heritage, is not a state-foundation assumption; it discriminates against ethnic minorities as it results in limiting their access to economic, social and educational goods developed by the state.

Bearing in mind the basic problems that impede intercultural communication in Poland:

- no widespread knowledge of minority cultures,
- no knowledge of minority languages and their legacy,

– the national / monocultural character of Polish education,  
– lack of motivation to increase knowledge about minorities,  
– a sense of guilt and grief generated by historical memory,  
which result in the rise of conflict at the intersection of cultures, I propose a concept that helps to adopt a legal and social system combining the aforementioned solutions.

Assimilation processes should address the minimum requirements necessary to improve the functioning of ethnically diverse groups in the dominant society. Integration processes can help in cross-cultural education, enable communication technologies to be developed on the cultural frontiers and eliminate the “one’s own / other” category, understood as the friend / foe opposition. Multiculturalism is, however, indispensable in the consolidation of the ethnic distinctiveness of groups that make up multicultural societies. Multiculturalism cannot, however, be understood as a mixture of ethnically diverse characters without the ability to identify them, and so multicultural societies should perceive their ethnic differences, know their origins and be able to semiotically interpret their messages. The requirement of providing education in this area rests with the state; therefore, modular school programs should take into account the cultural diversity of the students (Grzelak, Grzelak-Piaskowska). Proper education will modify the notion of a national community, emphasizing its cultural diversity as an added value, and will neutralize the behaviour conditioned by post-totalitarian memory. This is particularly important in the situation of growing cultural identity in Poland, observable for the past several months, generated by growing nationalist attitudes, which are increasingly broadly accepted.

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