THE IMPACT OF ECOLOGICAL IDEAS ON STATE POLITICS. THE CASE OF POLAND

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to illustrate the thesis that ecological ideas have a strong impact on state politics. Examples confirming this thesis include three very well-known cases of change of a decision by politicians as a result of protest campaigns carried on by ecologists. The first example is the suspension of the felling of trees in the Białowieska Forest, the second one refers to the change of the route of the Augustów ring road, and the third one is the suspension of construction of the road because of the hermit beetle. Conclusions of the paper are general in nature: unconventional initiatives of ecological activists attract the government's attention to their activity and, at the same time, induce them to change their earlier decisions.

Key words: *environmentalism, ecologism, Polish ecological movements, Augustów ring-road, Rospuda Valley, felling of trees in the Białowieska Forest, Natura 2000*

Nature made man happy and good while society made him miserable and depraved.

Jean Jeacques Rousseau

The universal nature of ecological ideas

Among many contemporary currents and ideas, it seems that the most important impact on politics is exerted by concepts with an ecological provenance. The key example of this phenomenon is the introduction of restrictions concerning the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions by the European Union, which have a decisive impact on the competitiveness of European commodities towards those produced, for example, in China. The essential aim of these reflections is to show the impact of ecological ideas on Polish politics. It concerns, in the first place, the determination of main ecological ideas of universal nature and then the illustration of their impact on state activity, particularly on changes of decisions taken.

The first important conclusion is that ecological ideas are universal rather than local in nature, because they refer to the protection of Earth as a whole, not only of its individual fragments (even though it is certainly necessary to take special care of some of its parts). This is why the description of ecological ideas is general in nature. It should be treated as the starting point, because thought determines action. In the further part of these considerations, specific cases of the impact of ecological principles on Polish politics will be discussed. The last part is devoted to conclusions and contains a few remarks on ecologists' thoughts and activities.

The ideological foundation of ecologism

The modern civilised world is characterised by the formation of specific ecological culture. This culture is based on concrete eco-philosophy. The foundation of this eco-philosophy is biocentrism, which is defined more specifically as anthropobiocentrism. It is 'the subordination of thought and action to the most important goal and interests of people, i.e., ensuring of the context of life of individuals and the human species in natural, social and spiritual dimensions that would ensure, to an optimum extent, the possibility of existence on Earth here and in the future, i.e., the possibility of living to the current generation and the opportunity to survive to future generations' [1]. Eco-philosophy assumes the nature of the so-called environmentalism [2]. This concept is based on five

fundamental ideas: The first principle is the isomorphism of the world – it assumes that nature as a whole and all of its elements are equally important, so each living creature should have the same chances to live and survive. The second principle – biocentrism – is based on the belief that life is the highest value, so it is necessary to protect life and to function on Earth so as to ensure conditions of living *hic et nunc* and in the future. The third reflection is the observation that the method of structural determination, i.e., a whole through parts and parts through a whole, prevails where one of the elements is the human being. The fourth principle assumes that social development does not have to result from the collision of opposites. There is a chance that this development will be introduced by looking for unity in the form of various compromises. Antagonisms are generated by people in the form of various ideologies that in turn lead to wars or revolutions. The fifth idea refers to the observation that attitudes of alienation, aggression and hostility are formed in the course of an increase in population density (demographic factor) and condensation of the spacetime of life (technical factor referring to transport and communication), although opposite tendencies, such as integration, approaching and uniting, can also be seen. The aim is to bring about the dominance of these tendencies and to fulfil main interests for the benefit of the entire humankind thanks to synergy, i.e., mutual support. However, in order to achieve this, it is necessary to adhere to the tolerance and pluralism of cultural traditions [3].

The history of Polish ecological movements

Before presenting the impact of Polish ecological movements on state politics, it is worth writing a few words about their history. The roots of Polish green movements date back to the 19th century, when the first concepts of nature protection appeared in Poland [4]. In the historical situation of the lack of independence and the division of Polish lands between three partitioning powers: Russia, Germany and Austria-Hungary, Polish initiatives aimed at nature protection appeared. They were difficult because of the lack of a unified state organism and because of occupants' dislike for any forms of organisations established by Poles. The nature protection movement was possible only in the Austrian partition, where Polish lands gained relative autonomy. The Tatra Mountains and the Carpathians, whose fauna and flora natural scientists wanted to protect, were located in this area. In 1873, the Tatra Association – one of the oldest mountaineering organisations in the world – was established.

In 1928, the Nature Protection League – the oldest Polish pro-ecological organisation – was established thanks to the efforts of the State Council for Nature Conservation. Its tasks included, among others, caring about the preservation of the homeland in a manner not altering its original and historical picture, with particular regard to the maintenance of the beauty of the local landscape. For these purposes, periodicals, literature and research were used, funds were collected, land was purchased, and forestry, fishing, tourist and other associations were established.

The inter-war period (1918-1939) in Poland, but also in the entire Europe, saw a clear development of nature protection. Generally speaking, three stages of development of the nature protection concept are distinguished. The first one – the conservation stage – encompasses the years 1900-1925 in Poland and Europe, when attempts were made to preserve remains of original nature. At that time, particular care was taken of the protection of endangered species of plants and animals, and reserves and national park were established. The second (biocentotical) stage is the one when ecosystems of high natural value are protected. During the third (planning) stage, the protection of the entire natural environment being impacted by human business activity is taken into consideration [5]. When analysing this period, it is important to note that legal nature protection was original towards the appearance of social movements in this field.

In the People's Republic of Poland, the ideas of nature protection were favourable for decision-makers in the field of nature, because they made it possible to distract attention from national ideas. The problems of nature did not arouse as much controversy as political problems did during this period. In the 1940s and 1950s, the problem of environment protection did not emerge, because

negative consequences of industrialisation (visible since the 1970s) had not emerged yet. In 1958, the social Nature Protection Guard was established by natural & recreational associations. In the 1960s, the first independent pro-ecological environments were being shaped. In the 1970s, independent ecological groups and organisations consisting mainly of scientists and journalists were active (mainly in Kraków and Jelenia Góra). It is necessary to remember that the possibilities of independence and freedom of activity of such initiatives in Poland were limited during that period. Certainly, this was not the period when we could already observe ecological movement in its literal sense.

The 1980s were the period of particular flourishing of independent pro-ecological organisations and groups. Paradoxically, this was a result of the suspension of official activity of the Solidarity Trade Union [6]. The activity of these pro-ecological grass roots initiatives could be noticed immediately. As a result of them, among others, the branch of the aluminium smelting plant in Skawina that was environmentally most harmful was shut down; the thesis concerning environment protection that had been passed at the Convention in Gdańsk-Oliwa was included in the Program of the Solidarity Trade Union; the Polish Ecological Club was registered in 1981.

The breakthrough moment in the formation of Polish ecological awareness was the disaster of the nuclear power plant in Chernobyl on 26 April 1986. The overheating of the reactor led to the explosion of hydrogen, fire and the disastrous dissemination of radioactive substances. This biggest industrial catastrophe in the history of nuclear power engineering in the 20th century contributed to the radioactive contamination of the area of 146,000 km2 (mainly from the territory of Belarus, Ukraine and Russia). However, the radioactive cloud spread throughout Europe. This accident contributed to the need to communicate information about the condition of the environment, which in turn led to an increase of ecological awareness.

The second half of the 1980s was characterised by the visible liberalisation of the political system in Poland. The occurring "thaw" helped to form social initiatives of various movements, including ecological movements. Some scientists (for example, Piotr Gliński) tend to interpret this phenomenon as the beginnings of Polish civil society.

At the end of the 1980s, concepts of transformation of ecological movements into political parties emerged. This initiative was connected with the aforementioned liberalisation of the political system and the emergence of political activity opportunities. Attempts to create political parties took place after strikes in the summer of 1988. They resulted in the formation of the Polish Green Party on 10 December 1988, but this party played no political role in the election held on 4 June 1989. This year is a symbol in Polish history that marks the beginning of the new democratic Poland referred to as the Third Polish Republic.

The 1990s abounded in ecological initiatives that involved also political ambitions. This became possible thanks to the democratisation of the Polish political system. There were even ideas of introducing ecology-related provisions in the draft Constitution of the Republic of Poland. Backed up by the Institute for Eco-Development, a project entitled *The New Constitution of the Republic of Poland vs. Environment Protection* came into being, in which proposals of constitutional solutions were included. From 1994, it was also possible to submit draft Constitutions supported by at least 500,000 citizens; this opportunity was used by Polish ecological movements. The Social Committee 'Ecology in the Constitution' carried on this kind of activity in those days.

The ongoing democratisation of the political system was accompanied by the awareness of environment protection among Polish citizens, which was certainly helped by the formation of civil society. The end of the 20th century and the 21st century until now are a period of intense activity of supporters and members of ecological movements. It is worth mentioning the Zieloni 2004 (Green 2004) project, whose authors wanted to expand the scope of problems and go beyond ecological issues by including contents relating to feminism and human rights. In 2003, the *Green Manifesto* – a policy paper adopted at the founding convention – came into being. It covered, among others, women's rights, rights of sexual minorities, the philosophy of sustainable social, ecological and

economic growth, objection against war and recourse to violence in the solving of conflicts and participatory democracy [7].

Below I will describe more thoroughly some of the numerous modern initiatives of ecological movements that illustrate the thesis concerning the impact of ecological ideas on state politics to the fullest extent.

Felling of trees in the Białowieska Forest

The first excellent example of the strong impact of ecological movements on politics is the felling of a fragment of the forest stand of the Białowieska Forest – an issue that has recently shaken the Polish public opinion. Referring shortly to the history of this issue, it is important to note that, after the change following the election of 25 October 2015, the new Minister for Environment Jan Szyszko (who had already held this function in the years 1997-1999) suspended the decision on the felling of trees in the Białowieska Forest under the huge pressure of the public opinion inspired by the activity of ecological movements. On 14 March 2016, he announced the "stocktaking" of trees aimed at providing the final answer concerning the felling of trees. It was difficult to explain the minister's position that one third of the Forest would not become the subject-matter of "ecological engineering", because it was not clear which area he meant and what he meant by the concept of this engineering. At the end of February and the beginning of March 2016, the Regional Directorate for Environment Protection in Białystok accepted an annex amending the Forest Management Plan. Changes concerned the triple increase of the felling of trees. However, as a result of the large-scale campaign of ecologists against plans of Minister Szyszko, the politician suspended his decision on the felling of trees. The issue involves huge forces on both sides of the barricade. On the one hand, there are activities of Polish green movements as well as international organisation such as Greenpeace and citizens. Ecologists warn that this has been the biggest threat of deforestation in Poland since the People's Republic of Poland. On the other hand, there are political decision-makers who submit new draft laws for the purpose of making personal changes in authorities, for example, in the State Council for Nature Conservation and who appoint new bodies such as the Scientific Council for Forestry – and everything in order to support the felling of trees in the Forest. It is worth mentioning that this party is also supported by citizens (those who are interested in felling of the forest).

However, the fact is obvious: the minister suspended his decision. Certainly one of the reasons was the intention not to arouse the dislike for the ruling Law and Justice (PiS) party in Polish society. This is what we can attribute the success of activities of ecological organisations to. Also, it cannot be ruled out that the suspension of felling was caused by fears of sanctions on the part of the European Commission. It can renew the currently suspended proceedings against Poland concerning the breach of EU directives regarding the protection of areas covered by the Natura 2000 program.

The supranational character of ecological ideas is mentioned above. This thesis is also confirmed by the fact that the Polish issue attracted the attention of United Nations, which monitors the Białowieska Forest. In this case, however, Poland is not endangered by penal or financial sanctions – only its image is threatened. We might lose the status of UNESCO World Heritage, which has fatal diplomatic consequences. We would lose our international credibility [8].

"Ecological war" in the Rospuda Valley

The second very well-known case of ecologists' protest against politicians' decisions in Poland refers to the construction of the Augustów ring-road. The dispute concerned two issues that are difficult to reconcile. The first issue was that the city needed a ring road, because a transit road to Baltic countries went through its centre. The traffic of heavy goods vehicles (HGVs) and other vehicles made it impossible for inhabitants to live normally and posed a huge threat. The inhabitants of Augustów protested many times by blocking traffic on that route. The second issue: the ring-road of

the city was to go through the valley of the Rospuda river – an extremely valuable natural site protected by the Natura 2000 project. In 2007, the construction of the ring-road even began there. However, this caused massive protests of ecologists, who tied themselves to the trees that were to be cut for the construction of the motorway. These actions led to an intervention of the European Commission, which applied to the Court of Justice of the European Union for issuing an urgent prohibition to perform construction works. In order to solve the conflict, a local referendum was held for the purpose of determining the route of the ring-road, but its results were not binding, because only 21.56% of persons entitled to vote took part in it (the attendance level would have to exceed 30%). In 2009, a new route of the ring-road was announced – this time it was to go through Raczki [9]. At the end of 2014, the ring-road was put to use.

The example of the effective campaign of ecologists for the Rospuda Valley perfectly illustrates the causative power of ecologists' protests, which are supported by supranational institutions and international law. Thus, it confirms the thesis concerning the impact of ecological activists on state politics that is stated in the introduction.

Construction of a road suspended by a beetle

The reconstruction of the route from Grudziądz to Rypin has been planned in Poland for many years. The construction of the road began in 2008, covering a route of around 50 km. The contractors had all necessary documents, including the environmental decision. Until this year, a majority of trees has already been cut, and works were even finished in some areas. At that moment, however, ecological organisations intervened after discovering the presence of the protected hermit beetle in lime-trees to be cut. This insect grows up to almost 3 cm, inhabits hollows of old trees and feeds on rotten wood. The hermit beetle is covered by strict protection, which means that trees where its habitats are located must not be cut. The hermit beetle is also protected by the project 'The protection of habitats of the hermit beetle in the middle Warta valley', which is a part of the European LIFE Nature 2000 program. As a result of ecologists' protests, the construction of the road was suspended. Here we can see again the impact that ecological activists can have on political decision-makers, who are forced to revise their decisions as a consequence of undertaken actions. The investor was informed about procedures concerning protected species.

After ecologists raised the awareness of the problem of the hermit beetle, it turned out that the European Union attaches special importance to the preservation of habitats of this insect. Road construction works could not be continued, because if they resulted in the destruction of the population of the hermit beetle, then the European Union might withdraw its subsidy for the construction of the road. The EU subsidy amounts to 43.7 million PLN, whereas the cost of the entire investment is 51.4 million PLN. Thus, it can be clearly seen that the investment would fail without these subsidies.

An expert from the Jan Kazimierz University invited to co-operate confirmed the presence of habitats of the beetle in a section of around 20 km of the planned route between Grudziądz and Wąbrzeźno. Two solutions to this problem were proposed. The first solution is the transfer of larvae of the insect to other trees located in a safe place. The second solution: the placement of beetles in special breeding sites that they would leave after reaching maturity. However, costs of these treatments were not specified, because it is not known in how many trees these insects live. It is, however, true that the construction of the road may be resumed only after the transfer of the hermit beetle [10]. This cannot be done in winter or between March and August, because it is the breeding season for birds; felling of trees on which birds build nests is prohibited during this period [11].

Unfortunately, the discovery and activities of ecologists met with unfriendly reactions. It is commonly known that such reactions occur very often, but the impact of ecological activists on decisions taken remains unquestionably visible.

The practical dimension of ecologism in Poland – the impact of the idea on politics. Conclusions

In conclusion, it is worth seeing that the direct impact of ecological movements on the politics of the Polish state became visible already at the initial stage of formation of these movements in Poland. The first such initiative was the aforementioned shutdown of the most toxic branch of the aluminium smelting plant in Skawina.

The aforementioned three examples of changes of decisions of Polish authorities resulting from ecologists' activities illustrate the clear impact of ecological ideas on state politics. What are these ideas? Generally speaking – environmentalism, and more specifically, the rules of isomorphism of the world, biocentrism and synergy.

On that occasion, it is worth presenting the conduct of supporters of ecological movements. At first they use formal instruments of pressure on authorities, and only when this proves ineffective, do they refer to supranational structures (in our case: EU authorities) and undertake unconventional actions to draw the attention of the broader public opinion to the problem. Naturally, this type of conduct often meets with lack of understanding, sometimes even with aggression. As could be seen on the example of the Augustów ring-road, there are often two parties to a conflict, each of which has its own arguments. This means that we should appreciate even more the courage of ecological activists and their deliberate exposure to the risk of insults, infringement of personal interests, or sometimes even bodily injuries. The ecologists' conduct reveals the lack of thinking concentrated on personal interest; instead, it is replaced with long-term and forward thinking focused on everyone's good (life).

The analysis makes us aware of the fact that until ecological movements undertake a dialogue within communication channels created by liberal democracy, they are often ignored, their proposals are not taken seriously, and decisions that were made under their impact are not changed. Only after resorting to unconventional methods, such as climbing the roof of the ministry or tying themselves up to a tree, i.e. actions not included in the system, do activists of ecological movements manage to draw the attention of authorities to problems raised by them. This can be associated with a postulate made by Slavoj Žižek, who extrapolates what he read in Lenin's works and what he observed in the situation before the October Revolution in Russia to contemporary times. He saw that this pre-revolution situation was similar to the one that is currently experienced by social movements that are not adequately represented in the system. Žižek would like to bring about the situation when forces representing official authorities are forced to make compromises. However, in order to achieve this, social movements have to break the logic of political game established by the parliamentary order; if they stuck to political rules, they would not force authorities to compromise: 'Thus, it is necessary to revive Lenin's heritage, i.e., the politics of truth. Both liberal-political democracy and totalitarianism exclude the politics of truth. Obviously, democracy is a government of sophists: there are only opinions, and each reference of a political subject to any truth is revealed as "totalitarian". On the other hand, totalitarianism also imposes only pretences of truth: arbitrary Thinking, the function of which boils down to the legitimisation of pragmatic decisions of Rulers [12]. We should also note that Žižek represents the leftist view, as in the case of ecological movements, so this remark seems to be reasonable.

It is also worth reflecting upon the increasingly apparent relationship between the increase of ecological awareness and the stronger exertion of impact on rulers. We can risk the conclusion that a stronger civil society involves a larger impact on politicians with regard to the modification of their previous decisions that are unfavourable to nature. The examples described above are an excellent illustration of this.

To sum up, we can say that there are no governments that could protect themselves against ideology. Either they use it by themselves to justify their decisions, or they yield to it by modifying their action plans.

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