

How to develop civic society in Eastern Europe? From an academic institute to a civic think tank. The example of activity of the Polish Gdańsk Institute for Market Economics.

By Stefan Widomski

Contemporary media use many communication channels: press, television, internet portals. The myriad of messages makes us think we know everything that is happening in the world. This is just an illusion. The media distort information, reducing their message only to events, in most cases sensational ones. The knowledge about other countries and problems their inhabitants face is often completely inadequate to the issues that matter to a given society.

The limitations often result from media representatives or correspondents not being able to get to places where something really important is happening or to meet people who make important contributions to a given society's development.

As conscious consumers of media transmissions, we can look beyond the media message, add information, and create an image (though only a very limited one) of what is going on around us, but the image becomes very rapidly blurred and inadequate the further we are from the place, event or person about which we receive information.

An example of activities about which one can hardly hear in the media and which, according to this writer, are a considerable contribution to mobilizing broad circles of the public to determine the desired and possible model of their own society and state is the Gdańsk Institute for Market Economics, operating in Poland, which Institute has only its registered office in the city of Gdańsk, while its operations cover the whole country.

For 20 years now, this unconventional civic think tank has been mobilizing people with different ideological and political beliefs and with different views on the direction for Poland's economy to participate in its activities. The forum for exchanging ideas is the seminars and congresses GIFME organizes and its publications.

Although the main goal of the institute's activity is the matters pervading the Polish society, the very participation in its activities is an excellent lesson showing how a civil society can function.

In the 20 years of its existence, the Gdańsk Institute for Market Economics has gone a very interesting path of development, which reflects not only Poland's changing economic and social situation, but also changing perception of current issues and development problems.

The institute was created in Gdańsk, by people actively involved in opposition, and its roots can be traced back to the University of Gdańsk, "Solidarity" movement in the 1980s and the circle of Gdańsk liberals. The direct initiative to establish the Institute (which was formed as a foundation in December 1989) came from the current President of the Institute, Jan Szomburg, Ph. D., and from Janusz Lewandowski, the current EU commissioner for budgets. Originally, the Institute was meant to be a non-public, independent academic and research institute. As its history showed, the assumptions concerning the scope and subjects in which the Institute operated were constantly adjusted.

At the beginning, the Institute looked for answers to the question how to determine the strategy of ownership transformations in economies termed as socialist ones. As Jan Szomburg later described, it was a search for an answer to an anecdotal question formulated later: "How to make eggs from scrambled eggs?" This led to a search for answers to the following questions: what socio-economic system and what regulatory framework will best serve Poland, how to privatize the economy so that dynamic business actors appear and a real market with real prices emerges? At that time, the Institute presented the opinion that the crucial thing was a system based on private ownership and the market, that it would be a kind of engine driving the whole development.

In later activities of the Institute, the understanding of what was the most important thing for Poland at the given time changed radically. Greater weight started to be attached to issues of steering, that is, issues of current public and economic policy, social policy and budget policy. This field of interest remains valid until now.

The experiences of nearly twenty years of transformations and modernization changes were the grounds for reflections that the

system alone, that is, the rules of the game, and the current socio-economic policy are unable to effectively stimulate complex processes of modernization and development. A completely new field of interest appeared: the cultural foundations of development. The basis for the new direction in thinking was the conviction that institutions and regulations do not hang in the air, but in a certain cultural environment, and depending on that environment their operation can have positive just as well as negative results. Indiscriminate transfers of institutions and regulations from one cultural environment to another might result in their distorted and unintended functioning.

A further step on the path of development of the Institute's activities was the new idea that scientific knowledge and experts' opinions, however useful and necessary, are not sufficient for correct formulation of diagnoses and conclusions concerning socio-economic policies. An idea appeared that one should also consider the opinions, interests and preferences of various actors from the sphere of public policy. For the Institute this meant going beyond quantitatively measurable results of surveys, various kinds of statistics and reports. It also meant the need to organize channels for multilateral communication and flow of information and opinions from various circles.

Upon initiative of GIFME, in cooperation with economists, academics and outstanding individuals interested in raising the quality of public life in Poland, the Polish Civic Forum was formed.

This is a long-term civic project formed, because of its open character, for all those interested in development of civic initiatives. The basic goals of the project include: 1/ stimulating *modernization and development reflections*, with the aim of jointly shaping the future of Poland; 2/ fostering Poles' *community spirit* and *enhancing social capital* in Poland; 3/ improving the quality of the market of ideas, emotions and visions and of the conception of public debate, information exchange beyond the limits of debate between experts or politicians

As mentioned above, GIFMR started as a non-public academic and research institute to develop, in the subsequent years of its existence, a vision of a think tank based on the knowledge of experts and addressing its "products" to policymakers, i.e. those responsible for Poland's socio-economic policy.

According to the Institute's representatives themselves, as well as their collaborators, the Institute has become a multi-function organization whose activities combine academic research, recommendations concerning socio-economic policy and organization of public debates. The President calls the Institute headed by him simply a "civic think-tank".

In its activities, the Institute strives to create bonds through the meetings, discussions, seminars and congresses it organizes, so that they are used more often to look for what brings together and unites in action various actors of the socio-political and economic scenes. This is also about building a Polish collective "self", which itself will signify the existence of a civic society.

Stefan Widomski

Honorary Consul of the Republic of Poland in Espoo/Finland

*Chairman
Forum Polonia Association*

*Former Senior Vice President /
International Business Affairs
Nokia Corporation*

Finland

