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The socio-economic determinants of development of the Uścimów Commune in Poland

Abstract: *Social and economic transformations in Poland had as one of the consequences the fact that rural areas faced a number of difficulties and challenges. In connection with the political system transformation and Poland's accession to the European Union, problems appeared, concerning mainly the issues of employment and the population's income sources. The issues become yet more significant in the areas of agricultural and farming traditions, i.e. in Lublin Province (Voivodship), where the percentages of rural population and of population employed in agriculture are high and exceed 50%. The backwardness of this region calls for profound reforms, in which well-educated inhabitants, aid funds or local leaders may become the stimulating factors.*

The paper presents the current condition and the directions of development of the key industry of the commune (gmina) of Uścimów. The paper deals with a number of problems which, in particular, include a difficult demographic situation, investments in agriculture and new aspects of management. The presented conclusions were drawn on the basis of the material from the field research of the authors. The questionnaires, which were the basic form of gathering information, concerned: the incomes of households, the access to various institutions (health care, schools, town or city), the features of an agricultural household, plans and investments for the next 10 years, the way of obtaining financial means for investments (loans for agricultural production, UE aid forms for agriculture), as well as the opinions of the population on the chances and threats resulting from entering the EU.

Key words: *Lublin voivodship, rural areas, accession to the European Union*

Introduction

The analysed material was collected during field study in 2004. There were 375 questionnaires applied in all the councils of villages situated within the area of the analysed administrative unit, i.e. Drozdówka, Głębokie, Kosów, Krasne,

Maśluchy, Nowa Jedlanka, Nowy Uścimów, Orzechów-Kolonia, Rudka Starościańska, Ryczka, Stara Jedlanka, Stary Uścimów and Uścimów Kolonia (fig. 1).

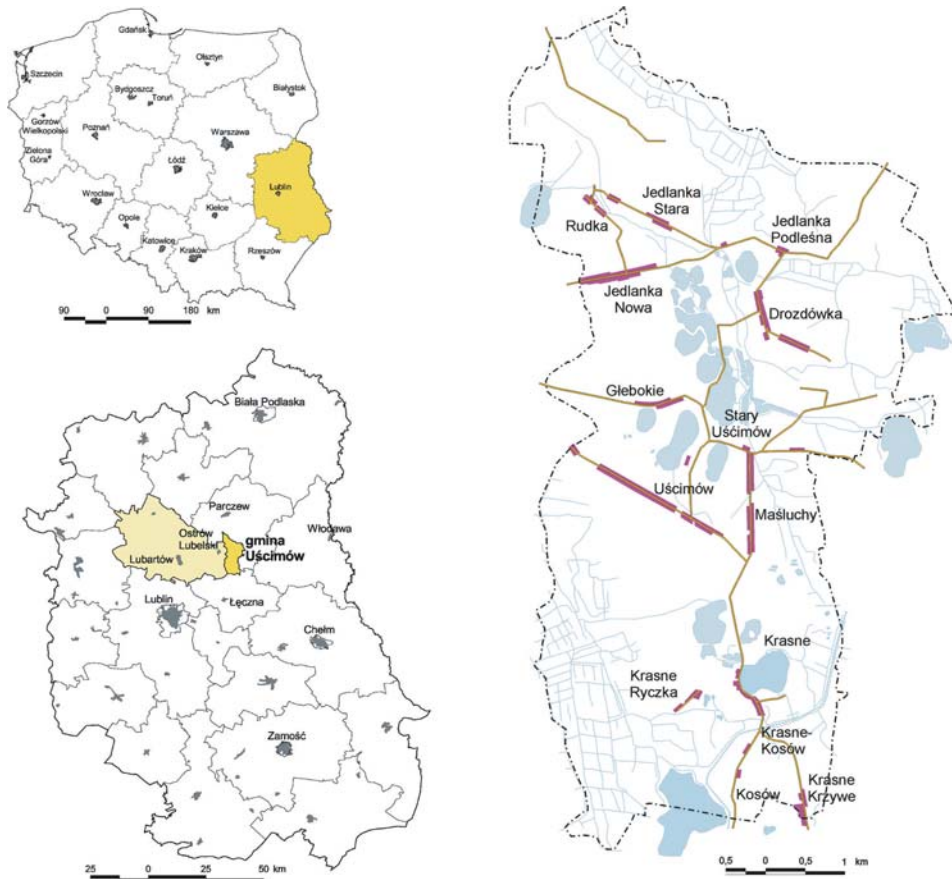


Fig. 1 Location of the research area
Source: authors' study

Questions of the instrument were divided into two groups. The first one referred to the background of the phenomena being of key interest (sources of income of a household, selected elements of demography, employment, characteristics of the residential house, access to social infrastructure, as well as some characteristics of the agricultural household). The other group of questions concerned mainly the owner's assessment of the holding, the use of outside sources of financing, investment planning, development perspectives and threats as resulting from the accession to the European Union.

Location of the commune

The rural commune (gmina) of Uścimów is situated in the province of Lublin, in the county of Lubartów. As for its physical-geographical location it is situated in

the north-eastern part of Łęczyńsko-Włodawskie Lake District (fig. 1). Within the area of the commune there are nine natural water reservoirs, with their adjacent complexes of fish ponds and a network of drainage canals (in particular: a fragment of the Polish longest canal, called Wieprz-Krzna Canal). There also two rivers flowing through the gmina: Tyśmienica and Bobrówka.

Population and its standard of living

The population number of the gmina of Uścimów is 3400 (BDR 2004). The commune belongs among those with progressing depopulation, like the majority of rural communes of the Lublin voivodship (Flaga 2002). The decrease in the population number is due both to the natural loss (−15 persons in 2004) and to the migration balance (−12 persons in 2004).

The economic bases for the functioning of agricultural households are a starting point for determining the current level of the development of the agricultural economy of the gmina of Uścimów. This type of information makes it possible to draw more profound conclusions about the chances and threats of the development of the agricultural holdings of the gmina, as seen from the perspective of farmers. The main sources of income of the respondents were the financial means resulting from agricultural activity (45%), and pensions and various kinds of social benefits (33%). A significant number of households gained income from the non-agricultural branches of economy (10%). A part of the households (12%) belonged to the so-called part-time farmers, receiving income from mixed sources (e.g. agricultural and non-agricultural ones). Such a structure does not contribute to the development of the commune. The greatest problem is a significant percentage of pensioners (25%). The population belonging to this group is usually exhausted by work or “knowledgeable” about taking advantage of the system of social benefits. Both in the former and the latter case people like those only minimally contribute to the increase of GDP created in the gmina or remain in the “twilight zone.”

Special attention should be paid to part-time farmers. It is not possible to assess their presence within the employment structure unambiguously. On the one hand they are the proof of the fragmentation of households and of poor profitability of agricultural production (as a result they seek employment outside agriculture); on the other hand this group has the potential which – under favourable conditions – can be used in the form of the dynamic development of the gmina.

Construction industry is, to a large extent, a determinant of the wealth and prosperity of any community and a motor boosting economic circulation. Construction of a new house is connected with the need to fit and maintain it in a proper condition. Appearance of new houses is symptomatic of the attractiveness of the surrounding area. As a result of the above, housing development should be treated as a synthetic index of the condition of the community living in a particular area. The average age of a house in the gmina of Uścimów is

35 years. It results from the fact that the inhabitants of the gmina are focused on the use of the buildings already existing (mainly due to the lack of financial means for new buildings). The number for rooms varies from 1 to 15 with their average being 4, whereas the average usable floor space is over 90m².

To explain in detail the standard of living of the rural community it is important to specify the description of households in terms of their equipment with technological infrastructure (fig. 2).

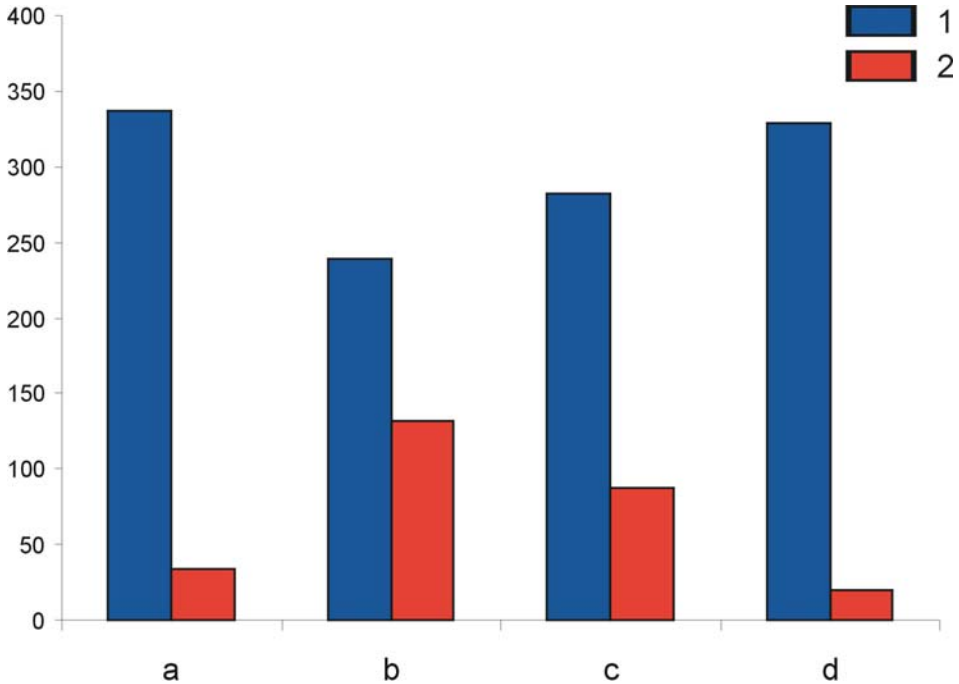


Fig. 2 Equipment of houses with installations; a – water supply system, b – central heating, c – bathroom, d – gas, 1 – yes, 2 – no

Source: on the basis of the conducted questionnaire

Over 91% of households are connected to the water system, 64% have central heating and more than 76% have a bathroom. The sewage system, whose length is only 8 km, requires quick development. In 2002 construction of the water treatment plant in Uścimów was finished. It serves parts of Maśluchy and Stary Uścimów villages. Efforts are being made to obtain SAPARD funds to build a section (around 10 km) of the sewage system in the village of Nowy Uścimów. It is also necessary to develop the gas supply system because the village is not gasified (94% of the questioned households use gas in cylinders). The difficult situation in terms of sewage and gas systems concerns a large area of Poland (Gałązka 2003). It results from the relatively high costs of the installation of these connections in terms of incomes of rural population.

In the contemporary world it is difficult to imagine a high standard of living without access to technological (as discussed above) and social infrastructure,

i.e. schools, health care, administration and other facilities and services provided in towns (fig. 3). In the opinion of a significant majority of the population of the analysed unit, access to these facilities is easy (59% – health care, 76% – schools). In the case of schools, such opinion results most probably from having considered mainly the level of primary and lower-secondary schools. The worst opinion concerning accessibility was expressed by the respondents with reference to health care because in the opinion of as many as 12% it is very difficult to access and reach this type of institutions. The cause is the progressing ageing of the gmina's population. Elderly people do not think about education (unless in the context of their children and grandchildren). They are also not so active as younger people in the field of gmina's administration and they are not interested in entertainment as much (therefore, the city is not of such great importance).

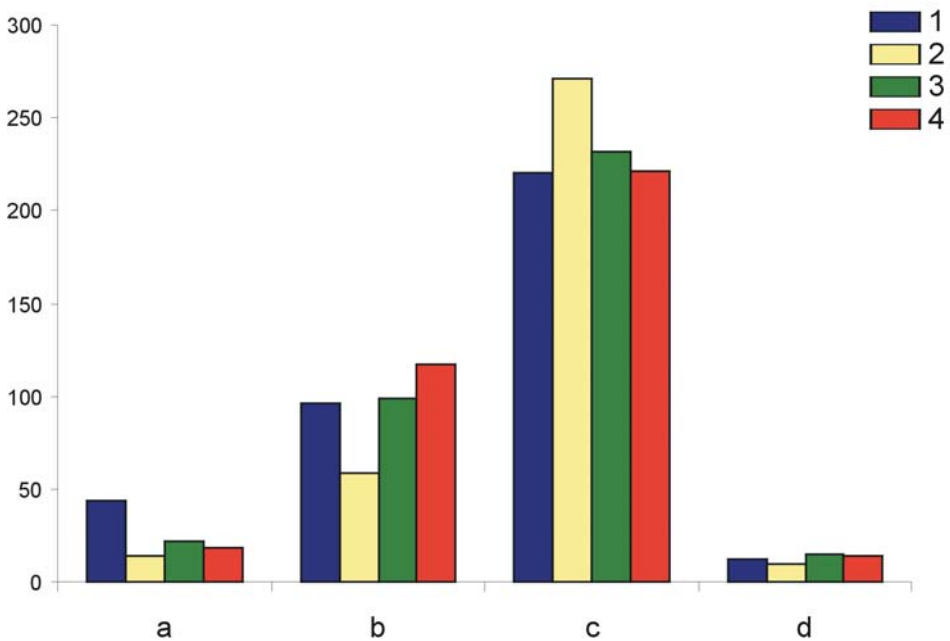


Fig. 3 Accessibility of social infrastructure to the population; 1 – health care, 2 – schools, 3 – gmina's authorities, 4 – closest city; a – very difficult; b – difficult; c – easy; d – very easy
Source: on the basis of the conducted research

Agricultural activity

In the last decade significant transformations took place in the agriculture of the commune. There were two noticeable tendencies. One of them was the decrease in the area of the farmland belonging to individual households. Simultaneously, one could observe the increase in the percentage of fallow and uncultivated land (as much as 7.2% of farmland is not cultivated). Within land use structure agricultural land dominates (table 1), and within it – arable land.

Tab.1 Land use structure in individual agricultural households of the gmina of Uścimów

Specification	Area shares (in %)	
	1996	2002
Farm land in total	91.1	88.1
– arable land	69.9	71.9
– orchards	0.2	1.9
– meadows and pastures	29.9	26.2
Forests and wood land	3.9	4.1
Other land	5.0	7.8

Source: National Census 2002, National Agricultural Census, 1996

An average agricultural household in the gmina of Uscimów owns 8 hectares of land. Only every fifth farm has more than 10 hectares. In comparison with the averages for the Lublin voivodship as a whole (5.9 ha), the agrarian structure of the commune in question is more favourable. Like in the majority of communes of Lublin voivodship, also here there exists a strong fragmentation of land. An average farm consists of 5.2 pieces of field land; 43 farmers from among 332 ones who answered this particular question had their land in one piece. The record breaker had as many as 43 pieces of farm land at his disposal. High degree of land fragmentation means longer and farther driving to the fields. The farthest land plots in the gmina of Uscimów are situated 3.7 km away from the farmyard.

The future dynamics of the development of the area is determined mainly by the basis of this territorial unit (among others: demographic characteristics of the population, houses inhabited by the population, social infrastructure), but also by the future plans of inhabitants, especially owners of farms (fig. 4).

As many as 55.7% of respondents answered that they did not want to change anything in terms of the size of their farm and land. This is not a favourable situation. In the light of approaching changes that the rural households of the Lublin area are going to face, farmers should in bigger numbers declare the wish to enlarge the size of the farmland currently owned by them. Only almost 5% of farmers admitted that they wanted to sell the whole or a part of their land. It reflects the fact that Polish farmers are attached to their land. It is hard to assess the situation in positive or negative categories. From the point of view of an agrarian structure, a moderate number of people deciding to stop production and get rid of land is advisable. Comparing, however, the group of people who want to sell at least a part of their land to the ones who want to buy extra land, it seems obvious that these two groups are not complementary. This becomes even more obvious if you take into consideration the fact that it is farmers owning small farms that should be expected to sell land whereas the purchase of land should be expected to be made by wealthier farmers. The inadequacy of the levels of supply and demand for land leads to the insufficiency of land, which in turn reflected in price increase. It is difficult to estimate the effects of this phe-

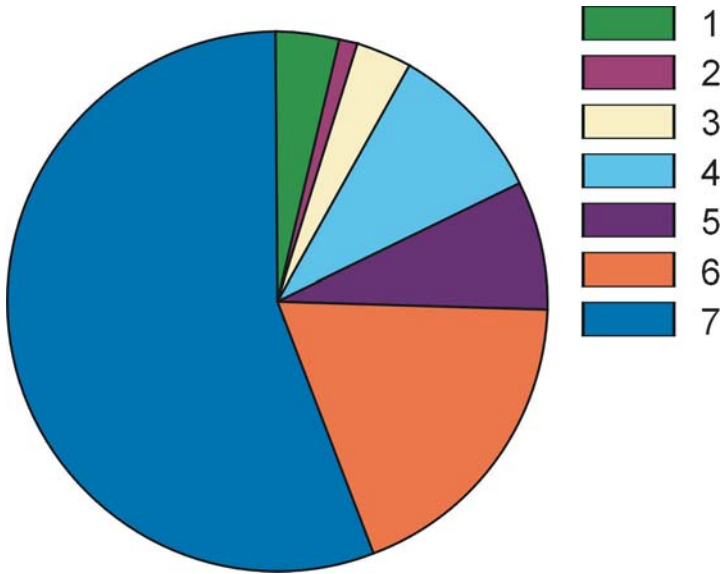


Fig. 4 Plans of farm owners with respect to land; The farmer intends to: 1 – sell a part; 2 – sell the whole; 3 – divide; 4 – buy extra land; 5 – enlarge the lease area; 6 – hand over the whole to an heir; 7 – did not want to change anything
Source: on the basis of the conducted questionnaire

nomenon. One thing, however, is certain. As a result of that it is hoped that every piece of land will be used more effectively and efficiently.

People declaring to lease land constitute the symptom of changes which occurred in the countryside. The number of subjects leasing others' property in a short period of time and with no significant property changes increases. This fact results in turn in the improvement of the agrarian structure, better utilization of the farm land in possession of the community within the area of gmina. It also makes production more flexible. The least desired group is the one of those who want to divide their land. This type of behaviour from the past led to significant fragmentation of plots of land, so that the cultivation conditions worsened. As this phenomenon continues, the group of farms of less than 2 hectares is increasing.

When asked about the plans concerning the land owned, 18.7% respondents answered that they wanted to hand it over to their heirs. Elderly owners of farms who have heirs are a positive prospect for a gmina of rural character.

The quality of rural agricultural space – as one of the unquestionable determinants of the development of rural areas – can be estimated on the basis of production from a given area. In the case of the gmina of Uścimów it is clearly noticeable that the quality of land is not high. Most of the surveyed persons said they sowed their land with oats, triticale and rye as well as planted potatoes, which suggests the dominance of light and poor soils. Wheat is only in the fifth place. Among intensively cultivated crops, except for potatoes, only strawberries are quoted. All that

suggests the farmers of the gmina of Uscimów aim at extensification of crop production, except for small, backyard vegetable gardens.

In reference to the commune of Uścimów animal production is not specified because, like in the majority of the Lublin Voivodship, this production is of universal character. Farmers raise cows only for milk. Pigs are not raised intensively, and mostly for self-supply. The same concerns poultry. Horses are used not for recreational purposes but for field-work. This does not provide an evidence for a high level of development of the commune. On the other hand, however, the deeply-rooted tradition of keeping these animals may be of advantage in the future while organizing agro-tourist farms.

Only 5% of households have cattle (milk cows, butcher cows and/or bulls). Raising ducks and geese is connected with the existence of large areas of still waters in the area. Other species raised by farmers are of little importance, except for two cases of breeding carp (fish ponds), whose presence, like in the case of ducks and geese, is connected with the number of lakes located within the area of study.

The change of the political system, the appearance of limitless free market game/rules and the change of the very character of the market from the producer-dominated one into the consumer-dominated one several years ago made farmers – one of the most conservative groups of the society – look for new ways to sell their products. The assessment the habitual behaviours as assimilated by the owners of individual aricultural households during the period of dynamic transformations can be a perfect starting point for predicting the future image of the commune. The way of selling the production is thus a symptomatic feature. The modern institutions, such as commodity exchange are almost unknown to the farmers of the gmina of Uścimów. This is so because in order to take advantage of this type of trade it is crucial to have a product of high quality and in large quantities. However, these conditions are fulfilled by only few farmers. Hence, the stock market for the few ones, who make use of it, is only an additional way of selling their products (fig. 5). Only a slight majority of farmers, who declared to sell their products at the marketplace, do it through other forms of trade. Others use the marketplace as the only way to sell their produce. Next to the stock market, the marketplace belongs to one of the few active forms of looking for a customer. Therefore, it is justified that most of the farmers sell their produce at the marketplace.

The share of farmers having agreements with regular consumers can be perceived as an index of the quality of a product, and as a result, also as a factor influencing the development of an area. The existence of this type of agreements suggests the same quality of products offered for processing. On the other hand it introduces greater certainty of the market for producers.

The greatest number of farm owners sell their produce by means of sale-and-purchase centres. A much better form is direct supplying the consumer with the

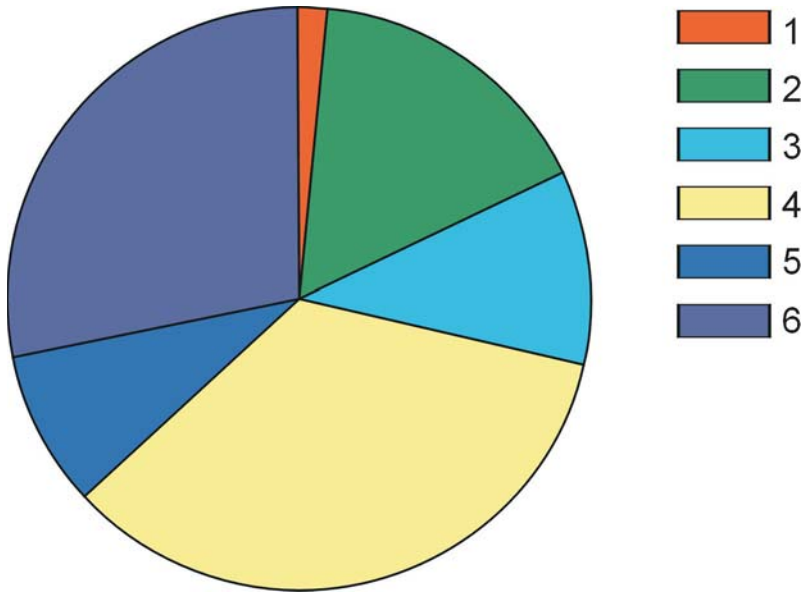


Fig. 5 Forms of selling produce by farmers; 1 – stock market; 2 – marketplace; 3 – regular consumers; 4 – sale-and-purchase centres 5 – processing plants; 6 – other forms
Source: on the basis of the conducted questionnaire

produce. In this way the agent is omitted and a higher price for a product is fetched. Due to the significant agrarian fragmentation and lack of distinct specialization, a large number of farmers cannot stand on a par with the processing plants. A desirable tendency within the sales structure would be the increase in the number of farmers cooperating with stock markets and the processing sector (however, without agents) as well as the decline in the share of sale-and-purchase centres.

The last category – other forms (120 responses) comprises mainly the so called self-supply with grocery products. The group turns out products thanks to which it fulfills its self-demand – meaning lack of surplus to be sold at the market. From among all the enumerated forms of product sale, self-supply is of the least advantage to the community as a whole. Hence, its prompt marginalization is of prime importance to the development of the gmina. It is not only the objective and measurable factors that decide about the predicted increase in prosperity. On the micro-scale such as a gmina, the general attitude of the society is of the greatest significance. The situation in which the respondents in 50% of the cases consider their household as a stabilized one in economic sense cannot be satisfactory, especially when 32% of farmers describe their farms as non-developmental and only 13% as developmental ones. In such a social atmosphere a rapid dynamics of the increase in prosperity is not possible.

In the opinion of the owners, 77% of the households have an heir, the others do not. A significant number of farms without heirs do not constitute a problem, mainly because most of those farms are small. The tendency of this type may

lead to the improvement of the agrarian structure if the owners of individual agricultural households buy out or lease the land from the state agencies.

So, more than a half of the surveyed farmers have used loans. Most of them were used to buy fertilizers. Other loan-takers, in turn, bought farm animals, built farm buildings or renovated the house. It will be difficult to eliminate their reluctance towards loans, which developed during the period of high inflation in the 1990s. Without the change of the farmers' attitude towards loans, transformations in the village will take place at an unsatisfactory rate. The other respondents, who have not used loans, produce only to satisfy their own demand.

In reply to the question about investment plans, as many as 68% of farmers admitted lack of them. In this way a very unfavourable picture of the future of the study area is drawn. However, there are certain circumstances which alleviate this picture. Some farmers declare the wish of introducing some improvements to their households (41 – construction and renovation of farm buildings, 23 – purchase of machines, 10 – additional purchase of land, 3 – increase in the number of farm animals, 3 – other, 6 – declaration to invest without determining a specific undertaking).

The pre-accession aid of the EU for agriculture was used by less than 8% of farmers. It is a scale, which proves to the great conservatism and mistrust of the owners of individual farms. The more publicized a matter becomes, the greater response on the part of rural community is. The applications for direct subsidies were submitted by 80% of farmers. The change in the attitude of farmers results mainly from the fact that, although it is difficult for them to adjust to a particular situation, practically each of their neighbours applied for direct subsidies. This shows slow adaptation to the variable factors of the environment.

Since 1st May 2004 a lot has changed in the surroundings of the gmina of Uścimów. The external impulses following Poland's accession to the European Community can revolutionize the whole country (see Ireland) or be used to temporarily improve the consumption level (see Greece). The success or failure depends on the attitude of the population and their willingness to introduce changes. The results of the conducted survey are not optimistic due to general pessimism or lack of interest in the current situation of the gmina following entering the EU (cf. Kluba, Rudnicki 2005): 20% of the respondents do not see any chances resulting from Poland's participation within the structures of the European Community (which is probably partly due to the very nature of an open question and difficulty of logically compiling the facts ad hoc). Then, 23% responded that they had no opinion on the issue. Generally speaking, the attitudes of both groups are quite close. They may result from the same motives although of different character. Except for various responses characterized by indifference (lack of life opportunities, nothing has changed, no opinion, too early to draw conclusions – in total almost 49% of all the answers to the question about the chances created through entering the EU), there were also those

which did not conceal the farmers' reluctance towards the new structures – about 4% of all the responses.

Almost half of farmers noted the following chances: new markets, improvement of the general economic situation of Poland, EU subsidies, better future for young people, jobs abroad (especially for young people), higher selling prices of farm produce, more dynamic development of a particular farm, stabilization of the economic situation, easier foreign travel, more domestic jobs, export of Polish healthy food, higher and earlier pensions – e.g. structural ones, lower prices of some products. A more objective opinion on the chances of and threats to agriculture of a particular area in the context of integration processes with the European Union was presented by Michałowski (2001).

Among the obtained answers, a significant percentage is constituted by those of passivity and doubt. How else can you name farmers' looking forward to subsidies, to chances for a better future in a higher and earlier pensions, to jobs not for themselves but for future generations. The negative attitude of some of the surveyed is directed at officials, authorities, government or their decisions, e.g. concerning the introduction of 19% tax, as factors stimulating beneficial or negative changes. It is clearly noticeable that the population of the gmina of Uścimów do not feel that their prosperity and well-being depend on themselves. On the basis of the abovementioned claims, the core of the development of the gmina can be estimated at 33% – a group of farmers constituting the avant-garde of changes.

Again, the divide between the younger and the older farmers as well as the owners of larger and smaller households is confirmed. It seems typical of the majority of the world regions. In the answers to the questions about the chances and threats resulting from the accession to the EU, the spectrum of threats is definitely more extended. The greatest threats were seen in the input price increase, competition, decline of small farms, inflow of western products, uncertainty as to agricultural product prices development, sale problems, increase in unemployment, land buy-out, loss of independence and sovereignty, poverty, godless western culture, withdrawal of pensions, increase of costs, inflow of foreigners, and yet other ones, like emigration of young people, lower wages, higher taxes, decline of steel industry, higher state expenditure on the EU than payments received from it, bans on and closing down of dairies.

Non-agricultural activity

As results from the research conducted by a number of authors, in particular – by Wesołowska (2005), currently the gminas of the highest economic activity are those of numerous natural amenities facilitating the development of tourism. Most of the area of the gmina of Uścimów is situated in the area of Landscape Park “Łęczyńskie Lake District” and in its protective zone. It provides perfect conditions for the development of tourism. The best developed tourist infra-

structure can be found at Krasne and Gumienko Lakes in Jedlanka Stara. Within the area of the commune there are around 2000 holiday-like type of plots, at least five average-size holiday camp centres (four at Krasne Lake and one in Nowa Jedlanka) and some catering industry represented by a roadside inn and a number of bars.

Due to its location the gmina of Uścimów is of interest to investors from the provincial capital, Lublin. The observed development of entrepreneurship concerns mainly non-agricultural forms of economic activity. It is reflected in the spheres of services (e.g. design and maintenance of green areas), production (e.g. production of brooms), construction and recreation (cf. Antoszek, Sobczyk 2004). The typically agricultural character of the gmina is reflected in the form of initiatives strongly connected to this particular branch of economy – the purchase and sale of farm animals, two fish farms, a veterinary doctor, a sawmill, and an agricultural and trade cooperative. The economic activity of the population is reflected in a large number, as for a rural gmina, of small businesses – 147 entities (BDR 2004), i.e. 43 businesses per 1000 inhabitants. Most of the registered businesses and firms operate in the sector of services, in wholesale and retail trade (grocery, household goods and department-like stores, two bakeries and a drugstore), in communal, postal and building construction services. Most of this economic activity is concentrated in the centre of the commune and in the villages visited by tourists.

Non-market services significantly raising the standard of living are represented by the local library, lower secondary school (“gymnasium”), two primary schools, two free-will fire brigades, a social welfare centre, police station and others.

Conclusions

As results from the analysis of economic activity in the commune of Uścimów, the unit has undergone significant structural and spatial changes in recent years. From the point of view of further development of the commune, the positive conditions facilitating its development are: clean environment facilitating the development of ecological farming, quite a good structure of farms (as compared to the voivodship’s average) and landscape values, stimulating the development of tourism and recreation. The budget policy of the local authorities, who prefer quite low local taxes, is of great importance to potential investors.

The primary constraints and weaknesses of the gmina of Uścimów are mainly the unsatisfactory infrastructure – poor sewage system and lack of gas supply system. Another problem is remote location from the average and larger towns (market).

The picture arising from the information about the perception of chances and threats following Poland’s accession to the European Union is unfavourable. To a large extent it results from the nature of the Polish society and the 45-year long habit of obeying orders of and expressing opposition against the authorities

capable of, e.g., taking back land. Being used to orders brought about a general indirect lack of independence in terms of economic planning. The permanent opposition against authorities currently results in thinking in terms of a particular household and not of the entire community. A lot has to change before the farmers of the gmina of Uścimów are ready to build a civic society.

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