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Response to Memon

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Response

Małgorzata Rzepka

Since the environment is constantly being reshaped, flexibility should be our permanent strategy. Circumstances and people are in constant change, causing a headache for those who would like to catch them and freeze the situation at one particular moment in time. Unfortunately, that would make us weaker in dealing with environmental concerns, as any solution seems to work only at a particular time, in a particular place, and, most important, for only a particular issue. However, as they are among the few possibilities we have, we should use those faulty solutions, being aware of their shortcomings.

It would be interesting to find out to what extent Dr. Memon's reflections on the condition of the environment in New Zealand, especially the government's role in dealing with the problems, would work in Central and Eastern European countries. For example, according to Dr. Memon, the scale and character of recent changes in New Zealand is similar to the transformation of Eastern Europe, particularly where their economies are concerned.

Dr. Memon suggests that sustainable resource management in New Zealand might lead to environmental problems, thus stronger government is necessary to prevent them. But I believe such a solution would be disastrous for countries with a political past similar to Poland's and, therefore, that those countries should find a different way to deal with their environmental issues. Strong governmental action in Poland is bound to be associated with the past and is thus unlikely to succeed.

This is why I believe our interaction with the environment should be discussed in terms of freedom. What can the state impose on me as a member of society in terms of my interaction with the environment? Should other people be able to influence my behavior, stop me from doing some things and force me to do others? And finally, what can international institutions impose on a country in this global era? We use common resources: my behavior toward the environment has an immediate and direct impact on your quality of life. But how far can you go in shaping my behavior without limiting my freedom?

I appreciate Dr. Memon's work for the great volume of information about New Zealand. He offers us a New Zealand different from the usual images. For him, global environmental problems are not unknown in New Zealand, despite its portrait as "an ideal place to

live: a land of great beauty, blessed with pristine environments and diverse landscapes, and having an egalitarian society." The background materials, including historical data, make his essay comprehensive and accessible. I think, however, the thesis of the essay should be presented more clearly, although one should take into account that as a journalist I expect the expression of one's thoughts to be straightforward, which is not always the case with academics.

I would also appreciate a clearer vision of New Zealand's environment in the future than the one provided by Dr. Memon. I think an assessment of what is currently happening and what the environment will probably be like in the next few years would make the essay even more interesting.

I. Poland's Experience

A. Overview

There is no area of human activity in Eastern and Central Europe that has not been affected by the fall of communism: politics, the economy, and culture are the obvious ones. But there are many other factors that affect people's everyday lives and work, their mentality, the choices they have to make, and opportunities they are offered.

The pressure of making decisions—which they neither had to consider nor struggle with before—is enormous. Here, our priority list may seem less impressive than others might wish it to be. And unfortunately, resource protection and other environmental issues are not high on Poland's priority list.

Poland currently concentrates on its economic necessities. Efficient reforms in the early 1990s led to fast GDP growth, strengthening of the currency, and a falling inflation rate, which earned Poland the title of "Europe's Tiger." Nonetheless, average people's lives are often seriously challenged rather than helped by the new system.

According to Dr. Memon, "a significant proportion of the population in advanced countries now appears to be less materialistic than in the recent past." But in countries like Poland, people have only now discovered the concept of consuming just for pleasure or, if you prefer, overconsuming. For example, Poland ranked eighth among European countries last year in terms of new cars purchased. This is a key element in the enormous increase in its air pollution. The rapid growth in the amount of consumer packaging such as plastics, and an increased

supply of garbage-creating products (bananas, citrus fruits, small portions of food in disposable packages, etc.) are leading to a fast accumulation of waste.

B. Environment

Poland is a country of environmental contrasts. Like New Zealand, it offers outstanding natural resources in unspoiled areas. National parks offer nature that has been relatively untransformed in the northeast, called the “green lungs of Poland.” In the northwest are the shores of the Baltic Sea, and the Bieszczady Mountains are found in the southeast. The unregulated middle section of the Vistula River is the pearl of Polish nature in spite of the pollution of its waters. Recent heavy floods, mishandled by the authorities, spoiled the picture of Poland as a country rarely confronted with natural catastrophes; still the moderate climate and four seasons—along with the fact that earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, tornadoes, and hurricanes are unknown in the area—make it a desirable place to live.

Poland, however, is also home to the most degraded areas in Europe: Upper Silesia, the Legnicko-Głogowski District, and the Karkonosze and Izery Mountains (including Karkonoski National Park, whose forest is dying of acid rain). There are twenty-seven areas officially regarded as ecologically endangered, where some environmental pollution indicators exceed the norms acceptable for natural well-being and human health.¹

The communists’ centrally planned economy’s goal was to increase production with minimal attention to ecological consequences. Environmental degradation, being a very inconvenient subject for the communist authorities, was handled very sensitively or even totally avoided by the media, and therefore public environmental awareness was minimal.

Environmental problems began finding their way into Polish newspapers’ front pages in the late 1980s. This also marked the beginning of the long path to teaching Poles how to respect and care for the environment. However, as in New Zealand, environmental issues are still of far less importance to the average Pole than economic issues.

C. Major Concerns

The list of basic environmental problems in Poland includes excessive air pollution, contamination of water by industrial chemicals and fertilizers, and the loss of forests and wildlife habitats, which has resulted in a decline in the biodiversity of many species and ecosystems. This is particularly the case in urban zones and industrial areas. Although official statistics register that the total amount of industrial waste in Poland is about 2 billion tons, local estimates suggest that figure to be too low. The gravity of these effects is not visible in a number of regions, especially Upper Silesia.

The forests in Poland are constantly being degraded, with pine and spruce trees in constant danger. Apart from the threat of industrial waste, there are also hazards resulting from the lack of a system for gathering and neutralizing toxic wastes and other dangerous materials produced by industry and agriculture. Other reasons for the bad shape of Polish forests are a lack of procedures for disposing of contagious waste produced in medical facilities and an absence of information about the location and quantity of waste accumulated in the country and the degree of threat it poses.

Significant amounts of toxic substances have drifted from Poland's territory to the Baltic Sea, especially from the Oder and Vistula Rivers, influencing the ecosystem of the sea. The most visible symptom of this condition is in the Gulf of Gdansk and Szczecin Bay.

It is estimated that 25 percent of available water resources in Poland is contaminated, especially in Silesia, Warsaw, Gdansk, and Łódź. This is worrisome when groundwater is used on a very large scale, especially in smaller towns. Also, groundwater forms a reserve of good drinking water (in the short term, water for direct consumption) for future generations. Further, many cities use groundwater for drinking because of the growing decline in the quality of surface water. Finally, there is evidence that the amount of groundwater is shrinking.²

D. Ways of Handling Environmental Issues

Funding pro-ecological projects is particularly difficult in a country like Poland, which faces immediate needs for heavy investment in industry, medical care, education, and culture. However, since 1989, one of the most important of Poland's goals in terms of foreign policy has been entering the European Union (EU). Because Polish laws need

to meet the standards of the EU in order for Poland to be accepted, pro-ecological projects are finding their way into the political agenda. This is contributing significantly to an increase in environmental protection spending, which, however, is still meager — \$1.5 million per year compared to the \$10 billion investment needed by the year 2000. In any case, among the new initiatives are investments in plants and equipment to desulfurize petroleum and to reduce emissions of industrial particles, nitrogen oxides, and other toxic substances.

Factories and power plants built within the past few years incorporate the new environmentally safe technologies. Most of the old, ineffective factories, in which much energy was wasted, are being closed at a rapid pace and many others are being modernized and equipped with the newest energy-saving devices. In recent years, at the local level, energy-saving initiatives have been undertaken in the municipal sector.

E. Progress Achieved

I believe the most difficult part of changing Poland's attitude toward the environment has already been accomplished: no serious politician avoids the subject now; the people's awareness is growing, and environmental protection is no longer a non-issue. According to the International Monetary Fund, Poland's adoption of the 1991 National Environmental Plan and its commitment to bringing its standards up to those of the EU have already made a difference, although these improvements are relative to the poor pretransition starting point.³ For instance, the sulfur dioxide and dust emissions in 1995 were approximately 40 and 50 percent lower, respectively, than in 1989. These accomplishments are indicative of the air pollution reduction goals for the year 2000. The hope is that by the year 2010, the emission of carbon dioxide in Poland will be 20 to 25 percent lower than in 1989 and remain constant. The use of Freon gases has been almost entirely eliminated according to the Convention on Ozone Protection (which Poland ratified), although there is still no process for eliminating Freon from old, ineffective cooling equipment when it is repaired or replaced. Moreover, unleaded gasoline is becoming more and more popular.

II. Conclusion

Despite the preceding accomplishments, environmental issues will be of relatively low priority for governments, companies, and individuals as long as they are not associated with strong financial performance and as long as environmental protection does not become a lucrative business in itself in the short term. Nowadays, most efforts to make private business out of the environment, such as setting up recycling companies (although I acknowledge their moderate strength), are enjoying little financial success.

Dr. Memon acknowledges that a government's interests can be different from environmental needs and may focus on economic development or social issues; I strongly agree. Therefore, I think it's unrealistic to expect a central government to carry the full responsibility for all issues that concern the environment. Currently, Poland's Ministry of Environmental Protection, Natural Resources, and Forestry, supported by the National Fund for Environmental Protection and Water Management, is the key institution in handling environmental issues. The ministry is responsible for major environmental projects, including fundraising and granting loans to companies that want to take part in them. In addition, there is a system of encouraging steps toward greater environmental care, such as a successful low-interest-rate loan project financed by the government in cooperation with a number of commercial banks.

But an important role in the protection of the environment is also played by individuals and local governments. The stimulation of further consciousness about the environment through education is already visible. In recent years, there have been many examples bearing out the relationships between environmental education and increased public awareness. Although it might sound trite, it's true that education is the key to success here—by creating needs for certain products through means such as advertising campaigns, by designing fashions that would influence lifestyles, setting up new standards for what is considered proper behavior,⁴ and by informing and convincing. In this sense, education can make market forces work for instead of against environmental care—with the right to choose, customers might refuse to buy certain products, pressuring corporations to change their policies; in the same way, their demand for certain items might create an industry for environmentally friendly products, which we already see in some highly developed countries.

Poland's 1989 entrance into the market economy facilitated many mechanisms that are beneficial to environmental protection, which the centrally planned economy (despite its strong subsidies to different segments of the economy) would never have implemented. Earlier, priorities were strongly defined in terms of political and economic goals, and the government spent no time or funds on environmental issues.

Many of the necessary changes in Poland's attitude toward use of its energy and resources have already been achieved, but there is a long road ahead. One has to be careful in implementing any goals in a country with a totalitarian past, like Poland, where excessive state interference in private property might be misconstrued as a rebuilding of state control over most aspects of people's lives, limiting their freedom and violating their rights. This is why landowners, for instance, who had difficulties protecting their property,⁵ exercise their full rights now to make land utilization decisions largely free of state interference. Any government involvement is usually treated suspiciously, as it reminds one of earlier practices.

Unlike Dr. Memon, I believe in moderate sustainable management, at least as far as Eastern and Central Europe are concerned. I believe his point that the state ought to take an active role in pressing for fulfilling environmental objectives is justified only insofar as education is concerned. Otherwise, I hold that for the most part, corporations and the free market economy should be left alone to manage the problems. In Poland, such a policy has already resulted in better use of the country's resources. As naïve as it might sound, the market is a strong and positive power that can be used successfully in the struggle for environmental protection.

Notes

1. Sources of Poland's Ministry of Environment available on the Internet. See: Ministry of Environmental Protection, Natural Resources and Forestry, <http://eco-web.com/register/00365.html> (copyright 1994–1998, Warsaw, Poland).

2. Ibid.

3. International Monetary Fund, "Republic of Poland: Recent Economic Developments" (Washington, D.C. 1997), 18.

4. In Germany, the idea of common responsibility for the environment even resulted in some people checking their neighbors' dustbins to see if their recycling was properly sorted.

5. Land was never fully nationalized in Poland; but in the early 1950s, there were strong efforts to make farmers voluntarily offer their land for common use and common benefits, an idea to which a large number of them strongly objected.