

## **Poland: Slow and Unsure**

### **The government could ease the strain on its budget by easing the integration of the disabled into the workplace.**

*Note: The following article is one in a series commissioned and published by Transitions Online (TOL) and the Mental Disability Advocacy Project (MDAP), a part of the Open Society Institute's Public Health Programs. Each article addresses the situation in an individual country or region in Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, focusing on emerging trends in alternative services and ongoing challenges for the social inclusion of people with mental disabilities.*

By Inessa Kim

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More than one in every eight Poles suffers from some form of physical, mental, or intellectual disability, a census found in 2002. It would, then, be natural to expect a system well-gearred towards integrating these five million people into society.

But that would be a mistaken assumption. "There is no state policy" on the disabled in Poland, activist Krystyna Mrugalska claims. Nor is there even much notion of the real nature and scale of disabilities in the country. Census-takers did not collect any information on the specific types of disability that Poles have; they simply wrote down whether the affliction was severe, moderate, or mild.

"Differentiation discriminates against people," argues Marcin Lukaszewicz, spokesman for the Central Statistical Office, the institution responsible for the census. Poles tend to "react negatively to any type of difference," he says, and would not want to disclose their problems to a census-taker.

But lumping all disabled people together also denies the state, private sector, and civic organizations the kind of data needed to form policies.

This leaves Poland in a contradictory position. It has signed on to a raft of European Union (EU) and UN legislation and resolutions. It has promised to improve the lives of people with disabilities; safeguard their rights to equal opportunities in education and employment; and better integrate them into society. Yet it does not even know the scale of the problems it faces. Nor does the Polish government know what it wants to do, argues Mrugalska. In her words, the state has "no defined goal and no will... to achieve any goal."

The government is also in a squeeze. Poland faces heavier obligations when it enters the EU in May 2004. But its budget deficit is rising. Cuts are expected in many areas, from coal mining to medical care. Programs for people with disabilities may be reduced—or possibly even stopped.

People with disabilities are worried. Already relatively meager services could be cut back, and their chances of finding work reduced. On 25 November, disabled Poles from around the country—the blind, the deaf, and those with physical and intellectual disabilities—converged on Warsaw to protest in front of the Sejm, Poland's parliament.

#### **From New Thinking to New Laws**

Krystyna Mrugalska spent four decades pushing for greater integration of people with intellectual disabilities. Financial cuts would be the latest in a long series of challenges she has faced.

In 1963, she and other parents of children with intellectual disabilities asked the authorities' permission to form a self-help organization. However, she recalls, the prevailing belief at the time was that "it would be a shame for communism" to allow open discussion of disabled people's interests.

"Before the 1980s, people with intellectual disabilities in Poland did not just live on the margins of society, they simply did not register on society's consciousness," Mrugalska says. Most people with more pronounced disabilities lived with their families. "It was not a Polish custom to place mentally disabled members of the family in special

institutions,” recalls Mrugalska. Those who found themselves in closed institutions isolated from society were usually there because of “truly tragic situations in their families.”

But family solidarity with the disabled did not translate into social solidarity. “If there was an understanding ... for blind or deaf, for example, or war invalids, there was no understanding for people with intellectual disabilities,” Mrugalska continues. “Mental handicaps were seen as the parents’ fault,” the result of venereal disease, or alcoholism.

For children suffering from intellectual disabilities such as autism, the state provided “no rehabilitation, no schools or recreation,” says Mrugalska. “Families did not have any help.”

Parents kept pushing, though. Eventually, after several years, they won approval from the state to work under the umbrella of a children’s organization. The parents began organizing camps and other activities. “For the first time, children started to get out of the house,” Mrugalska says.

By the 1980s, the notion that people with disabilities should be isolated in institutions was slowly giving way to a new view that saw better care as a human right.

But after 1989, Poland’s people with disabilities found the gap between themselves and the rest of society widening again. For the first few years after the end of the old regime, “there were very important political issues” to address, Mrugalska recalls. “There was no time for people with disabilities.”

Today, Mrugalska spends much time in parliament, lobbying on behalf of the Association for Persons with Mental Handicaps, a group she and other parent-activists founded in 1991.

But while legislation “is getting better,” its implementation is slow. For existing law to become fully effective, she maintains, “there is a need for a social policy—and that does not exist.”

Thanks to Mrugalska’s association, everyone with intellectual disabilities now has a right to study under a special-education scheme. Helping them find work is proving harder.

### **To Cut or Not to Cut?**

It may soon become harder still. In October 2003, the government announced that it would cut its spending on social programs. Some of the cash needed to fund long-term social programs, and to provide adequate job training for those with disabilities, looks certain to be lost.

Even before the government accepted the plan, a commissioner in the Office for Disabled People, Jolanta Banach, resigned in protest. She charged that the cuts would hit the most-deprived members of society hardest.

Banach said she held out no hope that her departure would change policy, but argued that “even if it is to be just a demonstration, you may see that it has some effect: We may finally start talking about social policy at a professional level... We have been talking about the economy for so long, but social policy? No.”

Mrugalska the advocate and Banach the commissioner agree, it seems. An adequate policy is lacking.

In the end, Banach's protest proved to be “just a demonstration.” Prime Minister Leszek Miller did not accept her resignation. The debate continues on where cuts should be made.

### **A Leaner, Better System?**

Cuts may well be made to the State Fund for Rehabilitation of Disabled People (PFRON), the main artery through which the government pumps support to people with disabilities living in the community.

The PFRON is essentially a redistribution agency. Polish firms are obliged to meet a quota of one disabled person for every 15 employees. Those who fall short, pay a levy into the fund. In effect, the PFRON collects money from those

who do not employ people with disabilities and gives it to those companies that do. Similar schemes operate in many European countries.

A lot of money is at stake: in 1999, the fund had revenues of 1.6 billion zlotys (now US\$410 million), two-thirds of it from levies paid by enterprises.

Some of the money goes to over 3,000 "protected-employment enterprises" across the country. These employ some 300,000 disabled people, the World Bank calculates. To qualify as a protected enterprise (and be entitled to substantial tax cuts), a company must, among other requirements, give at least 40 percent of its jobs to people with disabilities.

Some are highly innovative—one, in Krakow, is a hotel that employs schizophrenics. The overwhelming majority of opportunities are for the physically disabled and the mentally ill. Unfortunately, according to Adam Gwiazdowicz, the director of the Government Commissioner's Office for Disabled People, only about a dozen protected enterprises specialize in employing people with intellectual disabilities.

With the level of state funding likely to fall, even more of the onus to help people with disabilities will pass to the private and nonprofit sectors.

Marzena Sadowska of *Otwarte Drzwi* (Open Doors), an NGO that trains people with intellectual disabilities and helps to find them work, is convinced that even people with severe disabilities can find work, even in a country where 20 percent of the workforce is unemployed. Most people with intellectual disabilities who find employment do simple manual labor, such as assembling crates and packing boxes. The pay is minimal and (unlike union members, pregnant women, and soldiers) they lack special protection against dismissal.

But could the state itself do more to help for less? Could people with disabilities play a role in cutting the social costs of supporting those with disabilities, Gwiazdowicz wonders?

An answer comes from Mrugalska. "If the state tells us that it is poor... we respond: that's fine, give [people with intellectual disabilities] a chance to work."

She said she is convinced that with more disabled people at work, the social costs currently borne by the state would fall.

For both Gwiazdowicz and Mrugalska, the challenge is to lower the barriers to integration. "The obligation of a democratic state is to remove those barriers," Mrugalska asserts.

Gwiazdowicz agrees it is society that needs to change: "The greater the problem in the environment, the greater the degree of disability," Gwiazdowicz said.

"I dream about what exists in the West," he continues, pointing to regular craft fairs in some countries, at which the work of disabled craftspeople and artists are sold.

He also dreams of changing Polish attitudes toward people with disabilities by targeting the young. Properly designed educational programs could teach schoolchildren about the lives of people with disabilities--and the children would, he is convinced, pass on their knowledge to their parents at home.

As Gwiazdowicz acknowledges, all this will take not just good will and money, but time.

"It is impossible to do this in one or two years. This is a task for at least two generations."

*Inessa Kim is a TOL correspondent.*

**About Transitions Online (TOL):**

TOL is a nonprofit Internet magazine and media development organization dedicated to using Internet technologies to help strengthen the professionalism, independence, and impact of the media in post-communist Central and

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**About MDAP:**

The Mental Disability Advocacy Program (MDAP) is a part of the Open Society Institute's Public Health Programs. MDAP supports projects that seek to address the massive over-institutionalization, lack of community-based services, and general exclusion from society of people with mental disabilities throughout Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. Since 1995, MDAP has been supporting the development of community-based alternative services to facilitate the reintegration of people with mental disabilities into the community, as well as supporting the development of services to prevent institutionalization in the first place.