

Book review

Gra o jutro usług publicznych w Polsce (The Game for the Future of Public Services in Poland), Kozek, W. (red.). Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego: 2011: 265: ISBN 9788323506683

In the context of the highly politicised public debate in Poland on the rationale, scope and effectiveness of the liberalisation and (possibly) privatisation of public services, there is an urgent need for ‘cold’ academic analysis of the relationship between the restructuring of the public sector and the quality of the public services. There is also a widespread tendency in the mainstream liberal mass media to ‘explain’ an inadequate quality of services by the ‘Polish’ or ‘post-socialist’ conditions, too little competition and privatisation and employees’ lack of commitment. Based on shaky beliefs in self-regulating market mechanisms, the marketisation of the public services is often presented as a panacea to all problems encountered by their users. In order to avoid the shortcomings of the existing discussions and to grasp more universal institutional and organisational factors that contribute to the overall quality of the public services., cross-country comparative research on changing employment and labour relations in the public sector is needed.

The book ‘*A Game on the Future of Public Services in Poland*’, edited by Wiesława Kozek and published in 2011 by University of Warsaw Publishing House, comes exactly on time to deliver up-to-date comparative information about the public sector restructuring in Europe and its impact on the quality of the public services. The editor and the authors of nine chapters (Wiesława Kozek, Agnieszka Maciuk-Grochowska, Beata Radzka, Julia Kubisa, Damian Podawca, Piotr Ostrowski, Joerg Flecker, Christoph Hermann) draw from the results of three-year project PIQUE (Privatisation of Public Services and the Impact on Quality, Employment and Productivity), as well as research of the Sociology of Work and Organisation Unit of

the Institute of Sociology, University of Warsaw. The PIQUE project was carried out in the years 2006–2009 and founded by the European Commission 6th Framework Programme. Based on the project's results, the book covers four sectors, electricity, postal services, local public transport and health services/hospitals in six European countries (Austria, Belgium, Germany, Poland, Sweden and the UK). The sectors were chosen to reflect the differentiated levels of liberalisation and privatisation and the variety of regulatory solutions. Obviously, the main focus of the book is on Poland, but the authors pay particular attention to the international contextualisation of their sectoral and company cases.

The book consists of four parts. The first part describes the main developments related to liberalisation and privatisation of public services. The second and the third parts concern the changes in employment and labour relations in the wake of restructuring. The fourth part explores the consumers' opinions about the quality of the public services and the public sector restructuring. Each part consists of well-elaborated theoretical discussion and illustrative case studies from the research. The main argument of the book, summarised in policy-recommendations on p. 244, is that 'the provision of public services in Europe cannot be left to market forces. There is the need to adequate regulations regarding various aspects of services provision to secure both their real availability to all citizens and a comprehensive improvement of their quality. However, these regulations should protect not only consumers, but also the employees of the public sector, whose working conditions often deteriorated and workplaces became insecure'. The authors make use of a rich set of methods and techniques to substantiate this thesis, including discourse analysis, semi-structured interviews with relevant stakeholders and a large representative quantitative survey of consumers covering 57 841 interviewees in 6 countries (including 4514 in Poland). In the substantive chapters, they also refer to a range of theoretical backgrounds, including institutional economics, sociology, gender studies and comparative labour relations.

The first part of the book starts from the Wiesława Kozek's chapter. Drawing from institutional approaches in economics, Kozek suggests that both the liberalisation of public services (involving the increase in the number of competing companies providing public services) and the privatisation of public services are unlikely to achieve their goals without an adequate government's regulation (p. 32). Thus, government's legislative intervention is necessary to create and sustain a competitive market of affordable and good quality public services. As suggested by the metaphor of the 'game', other stakeholders are also involved in the liberalisation and privatisation processes. They include trade unions, employer organisations, new private companies,

public and local authorities, professional interests groups and consumers. Inspired by the works of Claus Offe, two types of stakeholders are distinguished: 'the hostages to politics', including those who are created and sustained by the state, and 'class organisations', whose power depends on their market position¹. Kozek applies this theoretical framework to a systematic analysis of the restructuring processes in health care/hospitals sector, local public transport, energy supply and postal services in Poland and (comparatively) in other 5 countries studied. The research suggests that liberalisation and privatisation in Poland is the most advanced in energy supply companies, even though this sector in Poland is still less privatised than in other European countries. The scope liberalisation and privatisation is lesser in the case of local transport and hospitals and the least advanced in the postal services. The first part of the book is completed by a chapter by Agnieszka Maciuk-Grochowska, who presents a case study of the privatisation of an energy supply company (called Gama Poland SA). Maciuk-Grochowska suggests that a consensual model of privatisation of Gama Poland, involving the transmission of employee-friendly corporate culture of a multinational company, made it possible to avoid social conflicts (despite layoffs) and secured both high profits and good working conditions.

The second part of the book discusses the employment-related changes triggered by privatisation and liberalisation. The analysis in the first chapter (written by Wiesława Kozek and Beata Radzka) suggests that the main strategy adopted by the restructured public sector companies was based on attempts to reduce employment costs by both technological improvements and job cuts, outsourcing, outplacement and the introduction of the new types of contracts (e.g. self-employment, short-term and freelance contracts) and new types of workers (e.g. migrants). The authors note that several new feature of the employment in companies providing public services: (1) work intensification; (2) increased control over employees; (3) growing divisions between 'core' employees in relatively secure jobs and 'peripheral' employees, whose jobs are increasingly insecure. This is an excellent analysis as compared to some earlier research (e.g. 'Three Polands: strategies of social behaviour' by Mirosława Marody, *Polish Sociological Review* 2000: 1: 3–16) that claimed that employment security is the main feature of the public sector employment. The remaining chapters in the second part include two fascinating case

¹ It is assumed that the majority of stakeholders, in particular trade unions and employer organisations, are initially the hostages to politics, because their claims can only be directed to policy-makers. It is only with the progress of liberalisation and privatisation that they might be transformed into class organisations.

studies of flexible employment practices in a local transport company (the chapter by Wiesława Kozek and Julia Kubisa) and the self-employment of postal couriers who are forced to start their own single-person companies by large multinational courier service providers (the chapter by Damian Podawca).

The part three of the book discusses the changes in labour relations in the studied sectors in the wake of their liberalisation and privatisation. In the opening chapter, Julia Kubisa and Wiesława Kozek explore to which extent labour relation system is capable of reducing the competition based on lowering wages. Based on comparative research, they propose an interesting typology of labour relations (p. 161). They suggest that the only model which can constrain competition based on lowering wages is the model of 'sectoral continuity' based on the persistence of binding sectoral collective agreements in liberalised market which are respected and accepted by trade unions and employers. While this model is dominating in Sweden, it is only present in Poland in the energy supply sector. Two other types of labour relations include the 'new dualistic model' and the model of 'dispersed labour relations'. The former is based on the persistence of company-level collective agreements in ex-monopolist companies (guarantying higher wages and employment security) and the lack of collective bargaining, lower wages and limited employment security in their new competitors in the private sector; the example in Poland is the postal sector. The model of dispersed labour relations denotes the situation of the radical decentralisation of collective bargaining, with no supra-company collective agreements (the case of local transport and hospitals in Poland) and the dominance of company-by-company pay deals between employers and trade unions (or disorganised workers). In the second chapter, Julia Kubisa explores the case of militant protests of the middle-ranked medical personnel in Poland led by the Nationwide Trade Union of Nurses and Midwives in the hospital sector (as an example of dispersed labour relations model). Drawing from the economics of care literature and gender studies, Kubisa enriches the understanding of nurses and midwives' actions (e.g. the occupations of hospitals and the Polish Ministry of Health) and presents them as a struggle for high quality care services rather than 'pure and simple' pay protests.

The fourth (and the last) part of the book includes the chapters by Piotr Ostrowski and by Joerg Flecker, Christoph Hermann, Wiesława Kozek and Beata Radzka. Based on the representative quantitative survey of the public services' users (N=4514) within the PIQUE project and selected opinion polls by the Public Opinion Research Centre (CBOS), Ostrowski suggests that the Poles expect 'good quality of public services, available to all and offered on a competitive market which is efficiently controlled by public agencies' (p. 241). While an overall satisfaction of the quality of public

services in Poland is lower than in Western Europe, the Poles are also aware of the improvements of these services in the last 5 years. Similarly to other Europeans, they are against the privatisation of the public service provision whilst supporting their liberalisation (internal competition among service providers). However, as noted by Kozek in her conclusions to the book (p. 257), the actual involvement of consumers as stakeholders in the restructuring of the public sector is still very limited. In their policy-recommendations chapter, Flecker, Hermann, Kozek and Radzka suggest that liberalisation did not directly lead to high competition between new service providers (except for the case of electricity supply companies in Poland and in the UK and local public transport in the UK and in Sweden). Instead, the liberalisation and privatisation have contributed to the increasing role of private sector providers of the public services and a relative decrease in the quality of working lives of employees in the restructured companies. In order to counteract these tendencies, the authors recommend the improvements of regulatory mechanisms at the European Union and national levels. The regulation of the public services markets should aim at better availability of good quality public services and the greater participation of all relevant stakeholders, trade unions and consumers including, in the regulatory process. As suggested by the authors, 'the provision of high-quality public services requires high quality work' (p. 244), which is impossible to achieve in the context of current 'race-to-the-bottom' regarding working conditions in the public services provider companies in many countries.

The book *'A Game on the Future of Public Services in Poland'* is a landmark publication not only for the public sector researchers and experts, but also for policy-makers and stakeholders involved in the debates on the future of public services in Poland and Europe. The authors' major achievement is the development and systematic application of a solid, multidisciplinary approach to the analysis of the public sector restructuring and its impact on the quality of employees' working lives and the quality of services. Nevertheless, two shortcomings of the book can be noted. The first one refers to the language used to describe the stakeholders of liberalisation and privatisation. The category of 'hostages to politics' (as opposed to 'class organisations') seems to imply that the state and the EU institutions should cease to be the main addressee of claims for better quality public services. Even if it explicitly opposes authors' conclusions, it echoes a 'transitology' discourse with its condemnation for any claims towards the state. Similarly, I would personally prefer to see the notion of the public sector 'users' instead of 'consumers' as the latter implicitly refers to the marketisation of public services. Second shortcoming is a limited attention paid by the authors to the effects of austerity measures in the public

sector adopted in the European Union as a result of global economic recession from 2007 onwards. To which extent these recent developments intensified employment and labour relations changes in the public sector? What were their outcomes for public services employees and consumers? The excellent book edited by Wiesława Kozek, published in the middle of global economic downturn, came too early to address these questions. However, it has certainly set very high standards for all further research on the public sector in Poland which could help us to answer them.

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