
A Limited Free Market Experiment in a Centrally Planned Economy: The Case of Polish Plant ZBM "Ter-Zet"

Submitted 17/09/21, 1st revision 07/10/21, 2nd revision 25/10/21, accepted 20/11/21

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Abstract:

Purpose: The purpose of the considerations in the article is an attempt to capture the place of economic initiatives taken by a social organisation in a centrally planned economy in the situation of a malfunctioning real economic account.

Design/Methodology/Approach: The method of critical analysis of the literature on the subject and the observational method using arguments for generalised statements drawn from own experience. Archival materials collected mainly in Polish state archives are the basis for the presented theses. The arguments were based on the example of an analysis of the functioning of Construction and Assembly Plant "Ter-Zet" (Polish abbreviation: ZBM "Ter-Zet") as an entity specialising in the structures of Society for the Development of Western Territories (Polish abbreviation: TRZZ) operating in Poland. A kind of borderland between state and private economy was in this case a field for both economic, social and political analyses.

Conclusions: The example presented here confirms that centralisation of economic management suppresses the freedom of economic activity. It is reasonable to assume that this phenomenon intensifies as authoritarian tendencies in the actions of policy makers are strengthened.

Practical implications: Practical implications for economic policy makers and researchers recognising the relationship between the economic model and the social system.

Originality/value: The issues presented are very rarely addressed in research. Existing studies have been very general and not very detailed.

Keywords: centrally controlled economy, free market, Society for the Development of Western Territories, Szczecin

JEL Classification: B240, N940, P210.

Paper type: Case study.

Acknowledgement: The project is financed within the framework of the program of the Minister of Science and Higher Education under the name "Regional Excellence Initiative" in the years 2019 - 2022; project number 001/RID/2018/19.

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1. Introduction

Economic policy is a form of state public activity understood as a conscious impact of state authorities on economic phenomena with the use of specific tools aimed at achieving the assumed objectives, in strictly defined conditions and time (Nasiłowski, 2000; Economic policy, 2005). Given the fact that the focus of economic policy comes down to the choice of methods and tools to shape the desired course of economic processes, the main task of the authorities conducting this policy is primarily to seek a way to maximise the use of limited economic resources, leading to an optimal supply of goods and services to the society. Theoretically, the solution of these problems can be entrusted to:

- market mechanism,
- political and economic influence of state authorities,
- method that assumes the simultaneous use of the activities of the market and state authorities.

A clear tendency in the modern world economy is a retreat from economic liberalism. This is understandable and, in a way, rational in view of the global crises of the last dozen or so years, the effects of which almost all states are trying to mitigate by various forms of interventionism. However, among these actions we can observe extreme, strongly politically motivated behaviour, which brings the market-oriented economies alarmingly close to the forms known from the former authoritarian socialist states, i.e. to solutions based on central planning (Berend, 2016). In the formally and ideologically oriented market economy of the European Union, such tendencies can be seen above all in Poland and Hungary, where under almost authoritarian governments an intensively progressive renationalisation of the economy (Bulfone, 2020) and an evident reduction in the role of local government can be observed. The public perception of these measures is mitigated by the governments in question with rhetoric exposing the immediate need and temporary nature of various anti-market and centralist decisions.

Using the example of a selected historical case study, the authors attempt to confirm that in a centrally controlled economy all manifestations of a free market are suppressed. Whereas direct involvement of the state in economic activity has negative consequences, especially concerning the danger of combining political and economic power, which promotes the distortion of the principles of economically justified pure competition. The imposition of dependence on the Soviet Union on the countries of Central and Eastern Europe after World War II was connected with the implementation of a number of new systemic solutions in these countries. Among them, the economic system occupied a prominent place. The initially tolerated hybrid of a centrally planned command-and-control economy with free-market forms was replaced by absolute domination of the state sector in the early 1950s.

The aim was to liquidate individual ownership of citizens, and the few surviving forms of cooperative and private capital were subordinated to state control through a system of distribution of goods, administratively imposed rigid prices and a restrictive tax policy. This was accompanied by administrative pressure and violence by the political police.

2. The Polish Realities of a Centrally Planned Economy

The 6-year plan of economic development and building the foundations of socialism (Journal of Laws, 1950), implemented in Poland between 1950 and 1955, led to the minimisation of the presence of non-state property in Polish economic life. In the construction sector, which is crucial for the arguments presented in this text, the market share of non-socialized entities fell from around 15% to around 3% in the same period. Between 1950 and 1954 the number of private industrial enterprises fell by 83%, the number of craft enterprises by 43%, and employment in the private sector by 85% (Statistical Yearbook, 1956). The effect of these measures quickly became a drastic deterioration of the economic situation in Poland, including the living standards of the population (Zawistowski, 2017).

Some improvement in this area came with the political breakthrough that took place in Poland in 1956. The new ruling team again admitted the private sector to economic activity. In 1957 the number of private industrial plants more than doubled (to 8,000), the number of craft enterprises increased by nearly 40% (to over 130,000), and their share in the construction market again reached a level of around 14% (Statistical Yearbook, 1958).

These changes were superimposed on corrections in social policy, including the admission to economic activity of social organisations, quite numerous in the period of liberalisation of state policy. One of the most interesting and numerous turned out to be the Society for the Development of the Western Territories (TRZZ), established in May 1957. It was a mass organisation, with over 150,000 members, aiming at social and economic activation of the areas incorporated into Poland after World War II (Makowski, 2019).

TRZZ tried to raise funds for the development of hitherto neglected districts of the country, and one of the forms adopted was to run its own production and service enterprises. One of the most important initiatives in this respect was undertaken in Szczecin. The situation in the city was complex in that after 1945 there was an almost complete replacement of the population, and the vast majority of inhabitants lived in uncertainty as to the permanence of the Polish presence in West Pomerania (Makowski, 2006).

The interest in starting own economic activity among the founders of TRZZ in Szczecin appeared at a very early stage of its activities. Already during the founding congress in October 1957, a discussion began on similar experiences of another

association - PAX, supported by the communist party. Being a community of Catholics, PAX (Sikorski, 2021), as one of the few social entities in Poland, was allowed to set up its own enterprises - "Inco" and "Veritas" companies (Busse, 2014; Micewski 1978; PAX Association, 1985). In Szczecin, the possibility of establishing a joint economic initiative with PAX at the local level was even considered. This idea was not realised despite the favour of the state authorities (PZPR, 1957). Eventually, it was decided to create its own company, helped by the good experiences of the TRZZ organisation in Opole (TRZZ 7, 1958; TRZZ 107a, 1959).

Initially, the Society's central authorities were quite cautious about local initiatives. It seems that the main reason for this was the fear that the profile of TRZZ would evolve into an economic organisation, mainly concerned with finding income for its activists. This temporary state of affairs lasted for almost the whole of 1958, and the impetus for organisational action was only provided by government decisions on the economic activities of social organisations, which authorised them to set up their own enterprises (Resolution No. 446/58, 1958).

After longer preparations, in October 1959 the Presidium of the General Council of the Society for the Development of Western Territories decided to set up the enterprise - Industrial and Service Plant "Ter-Zet" (Polish abbreviation of the name: ZPU "Ter-Zet"), and the main purpose of its operation was to supply the Society's budget (TRZZ 107b, 1959). According to the statute of ZPU "Ter-Zet", all emerging branches were to be subordinated to the directorate in Warsaw. Any connection between them and local TRZZ structures was thus abandoned.

Initially, the central and local authorities were sympathetic to the idea of TRZZ. This seems to have been due to the concentration of production activity by companies subordinate to TRZZ on an important economic niche, namely, construction. The political authorities were keen to raise the living standards of Poles, and among the most important needs that could not be fully satisfied was precisely construction, mainly housing. In 1957 alone, construction and assembly production by non-socialised entities increased by over 40% as compared to the previous year, and by the end of the decade by another nearly 50%. In 1958, construction work carried out by cooperative entities, using the economic and private system, accounted for 1/3 of the total. Only in the following years did state production again dominate the construction market more strongly (Statistical Yearbook, 1966). It is no coincidence that on the same day on which the rules for the registration of companies operating within the structures of societies were regulated, the government adopted a resolution on the supply of construction materials to the market (Polish Monitor, 1958).

3. Casus Szczecin

In the autumn of 1959, the TRZZ authorities sent an appropriate letter to the Ministry of Finance and received the formal consent of the latter to launch Construction and Assembly Plant "Ter-Zet" (Polish abbreviation: ZBM "Ter-Zet") in Szczecin the same

year. Steps were also taken to register a second unit, Wood and Chemical Plant "Ter-Zet" (Polish abbreviation: ZD-Ch "Ter-Zet"). Approval for this was given early the following year (TRZZ 108a, 1960). Without waiting for it, at the beginning of 1960, the organisation of two enterprises in Szczecin (TRZZ 1618, 1959).

In the plans of the Warsaw headquarters, both Szczecin companies were assigned a minor role. The former was to concentrate on the construction and assembly of industrial installations and boilers and chimneys with an annual output of approximately PLN 7 million (USD 1.75 million at the current exchange rate), while the latter was to specialise in handling small orders for the production of plastic packaging and the repair of wooden barrels and crates, as well as the manufacture of steel castings and insulation masses with a total value of approximately PLN (Polish currency) 4.5 million (USD 1.13 million at the current exchange rate) (TRZZ 108b, 1960).

Enthusiasts of launching the TRZZ economic initiative quickly decided to take advantage of the formal framework that had been created. At the beginning of 1960, the District Board entered into talks with the Presidium of the Voivodeship National Council in Szczecin about possible contracts from the public purse. These negotiations were successful: plant ZD-Ch "Ter-Zet" soon won its first orders from the state fishing companies - "Arka", "Gryf" and "Odra", as well as announcements of further orders, also for the latter company.

The fate of both plants was different. ZD-Ch "Ter-Zet", despite winning valuable orders at the very beginning of its operations, did not develop its activities on a large scale. In practice, from the very beginning, the enterprise was making losses. Already in the first quarter of 1960, the Warsaw headquarters wondered about the sense of running the plant (TRZZ 108b, 1960). For the time being, a repair programme was adopted for it, covering the deficit with funds obtained from the operations of other, profitable enterprises and a special subsidy from the Ministry of Finance. This was influenced by the conviction that withdrawal from the plant's activity would necessitate the termination of concluded contracts and would result in losses greater than the temporary - as it was believed - financing of the deficits (TRZZ 108c, 1960). These decisions did not bring the expected results, nor did the change of management of the plant. After many months of discussions, however, in the spring of 1962 it was finally decided to liquidate the company. The balance of the company's operations closed with a loss of PLN 194 000, which the Society was still paying off in 1964 (ZP-Ua, 1962).

Initially a bit slower, but as a result, the second of the Szczecin-based TRZZ companies developed much better. The first few months can be called the company's founding period. It did not have its own base yet, but used buildings and equipment of Szczecin Industrial Construction Enterprise. In addition, some equipment and tools were even brought by the workers themselves (ZP-U, 1961). The plant obtained small, ad hoc orders, and probably employed its first permanent staff only in the second half

of 1960. They dealt with simple jobs, such as assembling packages and small wooden structures, transport services and painting work. On the basis of partially preserved payrolls, it must be concluded that the company stabilised and then grew quite strongly from the end of 1960. This can be attributed to the fact that the position of director was taken over by a person with extensive personal contacts in Szczecin's economic environment.

The first significant contracts were obtained in Szczecin. The most important ones included long-term contracts for the Szczecin Shipyard, major renovation work at the brickyard and at the yeast factory. These were still supplemented by the aforementioned minor orders, including those for the Szczecin police, Szczecin University of Technology, Office of Waterways and Operetta.

Construction works were also soon commenced outside of Szczecin: in Stargard on the renovation of a hotel of Municipal Construction Work Company, Cooperative "Społem", a meat processing plant, a water tower and gasworks, in Gryfino at Dry Wood Distillation Factory and in Nowogard on the renovation of a petrol station. At this stage of the company's development, the contract signed at the beginning of 1961 with a meat processing plant and a milk powdering plant in Krotoszyn, Wielkopolska, comes as a surprise. Despite the considerable distance from Szczecin, a brigade of 20-30 employees performed their tasks there until the end of 1962. The contracts with both companies were rated as the most profitable in the entire history of the Szczecin plant. Small orders were also carried out in Barlinek and in Mierzyn near Szczecin.

Contracts for construction works in Ciborz in the Świebodziński powiat, 200 km away, and in Poznań proved to be a significant impulse for the company's development. For the Szczecin-based company, this meant assigning a large workforce, and thus a significant increase in employment. It was the largest order that the company from Szczecin managed to obtain in its entire period of existence. At its peak, about 100 "Ter-Zet" workers were employed on the construction site.

The most profitable contract, although shorter in duration than the one in Ciborz, was the order for construction works in Poznań. Executed from the autumn of 1961 to the autumn of 1962 by a brigade of about 100 people, it was the highest valued item in the order portfolio and at the same time brought the highest income to the workers.

Each contract signed by the company resulted in an increase in employment. Individual tasks were carried out by teams of a dozen or so people on average, which meant that, from the spring of 1961, the staff numbered between 100 and 160. The analysis of the employment status shows significant fluctuations in its size. While in the summer months of 1961 the plant's workforce already numbered 200, in the last quarter of the year its size exceeded 400. In the following several months this number relatively stabilised in the range of 200-300 people, and at the end of 1962 it started to decrease due to the crisis in the company's operations (ZP-U, 1963).

4. Assessment of Economic Efficiency

Significant fluctuations in employment were not unusual in the construction market. The problems of lack of professionals, poor work discipline and frequent abandonment of work were faced by all major industrial plants, especially in the construction industry. In the case of ZBM it was certainly not the size of the production tasks that was the deciding factor, although, of course, there is a general correlation between the level of employment and the order book. On the contrary, it was the ability to complete the workforce that conditioned the acquisition of new contracts. Both the management of the plant and the workforce were aware of the threats posed by the liquidity of the workforce. As early as in January 1961, the management of the trade union active at ZBM "Ter-Zet" saw this as one of the main obstacles to the systematic implementation of production plans, and thus to the obtaining of bonuses by employees. A second obstacle was the general shortage of skilled workers in the region.

Both reasons, in addition to the shortage of construction materials, were explained by the management as problems with the timely execution of plans and the losses the plant was making. Attempts to rectify the situation were made, on the one hand, to recruit new workers and, on the other, to increase work discipline. The fact that the latter was at a relatively low level can be concluded from the quite numerous conflicts between middle-level staff and workers, frequent penalties imposed on the latter and the checks ordered to ensure that sick leave was taken correctly (ZP-U, 1963).

Although the functioning of the enterprise subordinate to TRZZ was based on the regulations formulated for the economic activity of social organisations, the organisational and legal solutions applied, as well as the production reality, brought ZBM "Ter-Zet" very close to the shape of a state-owned enterprise. Like other construction companies in the Szczecin market, ZBM "Ter-Zet" faced constant problems with the supply of construction materials, was dependent on public procurement, was obliged to carry out work competition, and undertook social activities associated with public holidays. Its tasks also went beyond the sphere of production. The extensive position of trade unions (more than 90% of the company's employees were members of trade unions) allowed them to co-decide on personnel matters and the distribution of the wage and social fund. The obligations imposed on the company certainly made daily operations difficult. Like state-owned enterprises, ZBM "Ter-Zet" also fulfilled tasks which went beyond the scope of production organisation (ZP-U, 1961).

The offer of higher culture also draws attention. At the peak of the company's development, joint outings to the opera, operetta, theatre and cinema were organised almost every month, with several dozen employees participating each time. Preserved lists of participants in some of the events allow the conclusion that access to the most attractive events was guaranteed mainly to managerial staff (ZP-Ub, 1962).

The aforementioned benefits did not change the fact that for a large part of the crew, ZBM "Ter-Zet" was not an attractive place of work. In conditions of labour shortage, they could relatively easily obtain offers from other employers guaranteeing higher salaries and more stable employment with similar social standards. Analysis of payrolls indicates that the salaries offered by ZBM "Ter-Zet" could only be considered attractive by the management. In 1962 in Poland, the average total wage in the socialised economy was PLN 1 736, and in the construction industry it was 20% higher (PLN 2 092). In Szczecin voivodeship the same variables were 10% lower and amounted respectively to 1670 and PLN 2 012 (Statistical Yearbook, 1964; Statistical Yearbook, 1965).

Meanwhile, those employed at ZBM "Ter-Zet" on average could count on salaries reaching PLN 1 560 - 1 610, and only in the case of managers these amounts were clearly above the national average. In the best documented month - September 1961 - the earnings of 25 people exceeded PLN 4 000, and 8 people earned even more than PLN 6 000 (ZP-U, 1963). Interestingly, this situation was not dependent on the profitability of individual contracts. Persons servicing the highly profitable Krotoszyn construction site and the Szczecin Shipyard repairs were slightly below the company average, while in the case of the loss-making Krotoszyn site they were among the best paid.

Relatively low wages were the main cost item in the balance sheet of the company subordinate to TRZZ. Scarce resources were allocated to investments, and there was a constant lack of working capital. The only attempt to strengthen the company was the purchase of buildings and equipment worth 400 000 PLN (TRZZ 112, 1962). The management of the association did not decide to extend any credit support, but it is difficult to predict whether the state authorities would have allowed the company to develop in this way.

In the initial months, the company was in arrears with payments to employees and with compulsory social security contributions, and it was not until the second half of 1961 that these liabilities were settled (TRZZ 111, 1961). It is therefore not surprising that both Szczecin companies were in deficit for almost the entire period of their existence, or at best their profit and loss account was balanced. Interestingly, it was in the first, founding period that the plant recorded a positive financial result. In 1960 it fulfilled its plan and the balance sheet closed with a profit. In subsequent years it was not possible to repeat this result, despite a substantial increase in turnover to the level of at least a dozen million PLN a year. Although in the middle of 1961 the Szczecin plant was still considered to be one of the most promising in Poland, the following months brought a fundamental verification of these evaluations (TRZZ 110, 1961).

5. Politics Over Economics

However, it was political rather than economic reasons that led to the crisis and the subsequent liquidation of Szczecin's enterprises subordinated to the TRZZ. Their fate

reflects the conditions under which economic initiatives of social organisations operated in the early 1960s and, more broadly, during the entire period of real socialism in Poland. In reality, they were an unwanted concession by the authorities to social activity, intensified in 1956.

In the spring of 1961 the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party ordered a review of the situation in mass organisations. The conclusions of the assessments of the activities of the Society for the Development of Western Territories in both cases aimed at involving the organisation more strongly in the implementation of the political tasks set by the party, while at the same time limiting the scope of its own projects. In the latter category, of course, independent economic initiatives were seen.

This was followed by a drastic reduction in government subsidies and stronger oversight of enterprises, and ultimately pressure for their liquidation (TRZZ 23, 1963; TRZZ 265, 1964). A package of legal regulations aimed at increasing state supervision over the financial management of social organisations was to serve this purpose. In 1961-1963, state subsidies for TRZZ were halved, and subsequent inspections commissioned by the Ministry of Finance indicated the need to eliminate alleged mismanagement in its enterprises. It was also unambiguous that the association's leaders began to understand that the space for freedom was running out and that the authorities were considering its liquidation (KC PZPR, 1964). In this situation, from 1961, in the Economic Council of the TRZZ, and later in the General Council, voices were heard more and more clearly on the necessity to limit the scope of activity, and even to close down ZPU "Ter-Zet" (TRZZ 113, 1962; TRZZ 113, 1962).

The condition of ZPU "Ter-Zet" was one of the main points of discussion during almost all of the meetings of the General Council in the years 1961-1964. Analysis of their proceedings indicates that the consciousness of the organisation's leadership was increasingly clear that under the prevailing political conditions, even a modest attempt at independent economic activity must be doomed to failure. The clearly perceptible deterioration of the political climate surrounding social organisations, repeated financial inspections by services subordinate to the government, as well as increasingly critical statements coming from government and party circles, led the Presidium of the General Council to limit, and then liquidate, its own enterprises. The final decision was accelerated by the position of the Ministry of Finance ordering the liquidation of "Ter-Zet" as of 1 December 1962 (TRZZ 114, 1962).

The authorities of the Society decided that in order to defend the existence of the Society for the Development of Western Territories it would be unjustified to challenge the ministerial decision. As a result, in 1963, the activity of ZPU "Ter-Zet" began to be extinguished, including its Szczecin branch. No new orders were accepted, only those previously undertaken were completed. The actual dissolution of the company took place at the end of the year, and all existing employee liabilities were transferred to the TRZZ authorities.

6. Conclusion

The described circumstances of the establishment and development of the enterprise founded and run by the Society for the Development of Western Territories clearly indicate that the practice of economic activity conducted by social organisations in the conditions of the communist regime to a small extent corresponded to the rules of the free market. The reality of the system meant that - despite the formally different form of ownership - the enterprise generally fulfilled the characteristics of a state-owned company. The supervision of state financial services, the necessity to be subordinated to the state system of distribution of means of production, as well as the internal work organisation limited the freedom of economic activity.

In such a situation it was difficult to manage a company using classical measures of economic efficiency. In fact, just as social organisations were a part of the socio-political system in Poland, so the enterprises they ran were implementing the economic policy adopted by the state authorities. Strictness, implemented following the model developed in the Soviet Union, did not allow for any manifestation of economic freedom even in the period of liberalisation of the system.

From the historical perspective, the regularity emerges that a solution assuming that economic processes would be shaped solely by decisions of state authorities would require a complete and perfect control of all actions of households and economic units, through the application of detailed regulations and orders. Such a total command economy turned out to be practically unrealisable, as it would require:

- having full and up-to-date information on all economic processes;
- using a powerful central computing (analytical) apparatus, usually bureaucratic and inefficient.

The example of the company ZPU "Ter-Zet" analysed in the text confirms that:

- excessive state interventionism violates the logic of market functioning, causing contradictions in regulatory mechanisms;
- unjustified state interventionism reduces the degree of market efficiency;
- state interventionism weakens the motivation of market actors to act actively and efficiently;
- state interventionism is usually a delayed reaction, as it concerns a market situation which has already changed;
- direct involvement of the state in economic activity has negative consequences, especially concerning the danger of combining political and economic power, which promotes the distortion of the principles of economically justified pure competition.

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