

Sighence rather than science

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On 24 June 2015, the 'Debate on the future of higher education and science in Poland' was held in the main hall of the Warsaw School of Economics. The debate brought together over 400 representatives of various universities and institutes, including many rectors, as well as senators and members of parliament. The Minister of Science and Higher Education and the two undersecretaries of state also showed up to the debate. Surprisingly, the Minister did not flee immediately after delivering her speech, but remained almost until the lunch break, before she headed to the meeting of the Council of Ministers.

In her introductory speech, the Minister was full of optimism, announcing yet another amendment to the amendment to the amendment to the Act on academic degrees and the title. Contrary to the title of the debate, the Minister, otherwise a full professor, was talking about *sighence* rather than science, which the audience picked up enthusiastically.

Contrary to its English-language equivalent, where *sighence* is a contamination of science and a long, deep, audible exhalation expressing sadness, relief or tiredness, in the original Polish it is an unintended contamination of science and a nightstick, which aptly captures the spirit of the policy of the Ministry, even though intentionally it is merely a hyper-correct Latin pronunciation of a purely Slavic word.

After returning from the meeting of the Council of Ministers, the Minister announced the good, though - as it turned out - too optimistic message that the Prime

Minister will soon meet representatives of the scientific community, apparently as a part of the electoral campaign, which was not added simply because everybody still present in the hall understood as much instantly.

The essential level of the panels was differentiated - partly wordy since panelists were incited to summarise their views several times. The moderator of the first session did not know one of her panellist's name, even though it was visible on a great business card in front of its owner. Discussants from the floor were allowed to speak rather sparingly so those who managed to cram into the microphone tried to speak for a long time.

As a neighbour of mine aptly noticed, the sequence of science and higher education in the title of the debate was opposite to that in the name of the Ministry, a fact which some participants tried to draw conclusions from. One can, however, say that since - for reasons of courtesy - there is no indication of a change in the Ministry's name to the Ministry of the Destruction of Science and Higher Education, it might be changed to the Ministry of Sighence and Ever Lower Education, to give name to the Ministry's current policy.

A bold idea appeared in the discussion to replace the subsequent amendments to one's that are ever longer and more detailed, even though ever less logically consistent and clearly deviating from the needs of the era, the *Law on science* replaced with quite a new law altogether.

The observation was welcomed with applause that the approbation of mass unethical phenomena in Polish *sighence* shows that its system is deeply rooted in communism. The difference between communist and post-communist Poland, however, is that the communist rulers had respect for scholars simply because the former had deep complexes towards the latter, while the contemporary rulers are arrogant because they are convinced of their grandeur and competence, the more so that they are granted their full professorships for their political functions rather than their scientific achievements. This assessment was welcomed with thunderous applause by the audience. To conclude this thread, it was said imprecisely that science exists in Poland merely because others also have it, and Poland is, as Juliusz Słowacki ob-

served in 1839, a nations' peacock and parrot. Imprecisely, because others have science while we have *sighence*.

Generally, the audience or, rather, those who were allowed to speak or invited as panellists, were able to talk but whether or not anything will come of this, time will show. A determining factor would be the general election of 25 October 2015. I think I doubt, as a popular character of feuilletons used to say.

To the amusement of those interested, in the first decade of the same October, i.e. less than three weeks before the general election, the Ministry e-mailed the document, dated for September of the same year, 'The programme of the development of higher education and science for 2015-2030' (Program..., 2015). The amusement of the audience resulted from four facts, i.e. that (1) it was decided to draw up a preliminary strategy of the development of science after eight years of being in power; (2) it was decided to consult the scientific community after six years of the top-down reform of science; (3) it was decided to publish the document less than a month before the election; (4) the government losing their power either optimistically assumed that they will regain it in the next 15 years or they tossed the cuckoo's egg to their successors.

Meanwhile, the scientific community spoke with opposition parties in the hope that their statements change the hopeless state of Polish science. Most of the opposition parties, similar to those in power, willingly promised pie in the sky but are unlikely to meet their promises. In view of the enormous scale of the pre-election promises of the winning party, the funding of science will be found where it traditionally resides: at the end of the queue. As Marcin Król (2015) states, perhaps we shall get 8% more or 8% less but we shall not outrun Albania anyway. To implement such an ambitious plan, an increase in the funding of science from the state budget by 200% during the year rather than the decade would be required (*ibidem*).

Observing the actions and omissions of politicians, resulting in ever more numerous eminent scientists leaving Polish science for financial reasons in recent years, one can come to the conclusion that Poland is a very rich country since she can afford such great waste of human talent and knowledge (Król 2015). Nobody who wins elections 'will change the financing of science and legislation on higher education, if

he will not start to think about Poland in the 5 to 10 years' perspective. And he will not because he does not know how' (ibidem). This results from the nature of the management based on the maximisation of the current level of support in the polls rather than on strategic objectives. As a consequence, fewer and fewer young people from outside large cities go to universities as it seems to be a waste of money. 'Citizens assess the situation much more accurately than politicians. If science does not do anything, then what the hell do we learn for?' (ibidem). In this way, the expanding middle class becomes a mediocre class, 'devoid of intellectual ambition and a respect for knowledge' (Król 2015).

Poland lacks long-term strategic thinking when it comes to appreciating the role of knowledge and science. The recent great education work suited to the needs of the epoch had been done in Poland in 1773 by the Commission of National Education. 'Then no one. What is the chance that any government will support a similar initiative? None' (Król 2015).

Despite the tragicomical situation described above, our journal *Przestrzeń Społeczna (Social Space)* will continue to deal with practicing and promoting science, although we will also have to discuss *sighence*.

References

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