

THE LEASE AND SALE OF AGRICULTURAL REAL ESTATE IN POLAND — — LEGAL AND ECONOMIC ASPECTS

NÁJOM A PREDAJ POĽNOHOSPODÁRSKÝCH NEHNUTEĽNOSTÍ V POĽSKU — — PRÁVNE A EKONOMICKÉ ASPEKTY

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Aneta SUCHOŇ *

I. Introduction

The ownership of agricultural lands is the main title to manage and enlarge both family farms and large-scale farms in Poland. Other common forms of possessing agricultural real estate are lease and perpetual usufruct. The lawmakers considered the above-mentioned forms of possessing land during creation of a definition of an individual farmer. The definition may refer not only to an owner of an agricultural real estate but also to a lessee or a holder of perpetual usufruct. The main legal act regulating the principles of transferring the ownership and perpetual usufruct of agricultural property is the Act of 11 April 2003 on the Formation of Agricultural System ⁽¹⁾. Its regulations govern only agricultural real estate as defined in the Civil Code, located within the areas intended in the area development planned for non-agricultural purposes.

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⁽¹⁾ Consolidated text: Journal of Laws of 2016, Item 2052, as amended, hereinafter referred to as the Act on Forming Agricultural System.

It was undoubtedly the activity of the Agricultural Property Agency (now National Support Centre for Agriculture) that has contributed to the rise in popularity of lease in agriculture. Since Poland's accession to the European Union, lease has become more and more common way to manage and run agricultural farms. On the one hand, the prices of agricultural land have been on a rise since 2004 and the lessees can run their agricultural production within the Common Agricultural Policy under the same rules as owners. Not all agricultural producers, on the other hand, meet the conditions to purchase agricultural real estate and, therefore, they use lease ⁽²⁾.

The provisions regulating the lease contract itself are included in the Polish Civil Code (from Article 693 to 709). They mainly refer to a so-called private lease. The so-called public lease ⁽³⁾ in turn, is subject also to some other legal acts,

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⁽²⁾ Suchoň (2006).

⁽³⁾ So-called "state" lease was connected with the lease of lands from

Abstract (EN)

Ownership and lease of agricultural real estate are the basic legal titles to run and organize agricultural farms in Poland. For some years now, the practical significance of lease in rural relations has been growing, which is primarily connected with the activities of the Agricultural Property Agency. Currently, lease is the basic form of management of agricultural lands of the State Treasury. The aim of the paper was to present the basic principles concerning the acquisition and lease of agricultural real estate in Poland and to assess whether the legal regulations favour the formation and expansion of agricultural farms in this country, especially family ones. It should be noted that according to the Article 23 of the Polish Constitution, the basis of the agricultural system is the family farm. The family farm, in turn, is run by an individual farmer. The paper covers also the issue of acquisition and lease of agricultural real estate by foreigners.

Keywords (EN)

lease, sale of agriculture real estate, family holdings, individual farmer

Abstrakt (SK)

Vlastníctvo a prenájom poľnohospodárskych nehnuteľností sú základnými právnymi titulmi pri prevádzkovaní poľnohospodárskych fariem v Poľsku. V priebehu posledných rokov, praktický význam nájomnej zmluvy vo vidieckych oblastiach rastie, čo súvisí predovšetkým s činnosťou Agentúry poľnohospodárskeho vlastníctva. V súčasnosti je prenájom základnou formou správy poľnohospodárskej pôdy Štátnou pokladnicou. Cieľom príspevku bolo predstaviť základné princípy nadobúdania a prenájmu poľnohospodárskych nehnuteľností v Poľsku a posúdiť, či právne predpisy uprednostňujú tvorbu a rozširovanie poľnohospodárskych fariem v tejto krajine, predovšetkým rodinných. Treba poznamenať, že podľa článku 23 poľskej ústavy je základom poľnohospodárskeho systému rodinná farma. Rodinná farma je zasa riadená individuálnym poľnohospodárom. Práca sa zaoberá aj otázkou nadobúdania a prenájmu poľnohospodárskych nehnuteľností cudzincami.

Kľúčové slová (SK)

prenájom, predaj poľnohospodárskych nehnuteľností, rodinné podniky, samostatný farmár

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* Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań

namely the Act of 19 October 1991 on Managing Real Estate from the State Treasury and its implementing provisions⁽⁴⁾. The lease of agricultural lands from the local government units is regulated, except for the Civil Code, in the Act of 21 August 1997 on Real Estate Management⁽⁵⁾. The applicable regulations on the lease of agricultural lands are, therefore, versatile and diversified.

The paper aims at discussing main rules for purchasing and leasing agricultural real estate in Poland and assessing whether the legal regulations contribute to creating and enlarging agricultural farms, especially family ones, in Poland.

II. General remarks

Political changes in Poland, which started at the beginning of the 1990s, resulted in substantial changes in legal regulations⁽⁶⁾. On 1 October 1990, specific rules of the Civil Code on real estate trading were repealed and until 16 July 2003 there were no restrictions on that matter. A new development in transferring the ownership of agricultural real estate was made by the Act of 11 April 2003 on Forming Agricultural System of the State. The act specifies the principles of forming state agricultural system by means of:

- 1) enhancing an area structure of agricultural farms;
- 2) preventing excessive consolidation of agricultural real estate;
- 3) making sure that agricultural activity is run on agricultural farms by people who have suitable qualifications.

The lawmakers decided then to form the system by civil-law instruments, mainly the right of pre-emption and the right of buyout⁽⁷⁾.

As for the state lands, the Act on Managing Agricultural Property of the State Treasury and on Changing Some Acts was passed on 19 October⁽⁸⁾. On 1 January 1992, under that act, the Agricultural Property Agency of the State Treasury (subsequently: Agricultural Property Agency⁽⁹⁾) started its ac-

National Land Fund and as of 1992 – from Agricultural Property Agency of the State Treasury, currently called National Support Centre for Agriculture.

⁽⁴⁾ E.g. Regulation of the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development from 1 August 2016 on setting lease rent in contracts of lease of real property from the Agricultural Property Stock of the State Treasury (Journal of Laws of 2016, Item 1186).

⁽⁵⁾ Consolidated text: Journal of Laws of 2015, Item 1774, as amended.

⁽⁶⁾ On political changes after 1989 see e.g. Czechowski, P., Mózdzień – Marcinkowski, M. 2002. Ewolucja własności rolniczej Skarbu Państwa. In *Studia Iuridica Agraria*, vol. 3, ed. T. Kurowskiej, S. Prutisa, p. 58-61.

⁽⁷⁾ Budzinowski, Suchoń (2017).

⁽⁸⁾ Initial text: Journal of Laws, No. 107, Item 464; Consolidated text: Journal of Laws of 2016, Item 1491 as amended see e.g. Zieliński, A. 1993. Niektóre problemy gospodarowania państwowymi nieruchomościami rolnymi. In *Zagadnienia prawa cywilnego, samorządowego i rolnego*. Pamięci Profesora W. Pańki, Katowice 1993, p. 54-60.

⁽⁹⁾ Under the Act of 11 April 2003 on Forming Agricultural System the name of the Agricultural Property Agency of the State Treas-

urty. Its main task was to take over all state agricultural real estate to the Agricultural Property Stock of the State Treasury and to manage it in compliance with the regulations⁽¹⁰⁾. On 1 September 2017, the responsibilities of the Agricultural Property Agency were taken over by the National Support Centre for Agriculture.

It needs to be pointed out that owing to their natural qualities and inevitable process of the depletion of their resources, agricultural lands constitute valuable national good⁽¹¹⁾. They cannot be replaced with any other production means and, therefore, they need to be prevented from being “worn out”⁽¹²⁾. Consequently, the Polish lawmakers strive to provide for instruments, which are to protect the real estate. Additionally, the Resolution of the European Parliament of 27 April 2017 on the state of play of farmland concentration in the EU: how to facilitate the access to land for farmers, emphasizes that whereas land is on the one hand property, on the other a public asset, and is subject to social obligations. The Resolution also points out that land is a finite, increasingly scarce resource, which is non-renewable, and is the basis of the human right to healthy and sufficient food, and of many ecosystem services vital to survival. Thus, the document rightly concludes that agricultural real property should not be treated as an ordinary item of merchandise⁽¹³⁾.

III. Main principles of purchasing agricultural real estate

Pursuant to the Act of 11 April 2003 on Forming Agricultural System, the agricultural real estate can be purchased only by an individual farmer, unless the act specifies otherwise. The act specified that the above-mentioned rule does not apply to, for example, next of kin⁽¹⁴⁾, territorial self-government units, State Treasury or the Agricultural Property Agency acting on its behalf, legal entities acting on the basis of provisions on the relationship between the State and the Catholic Church in the Republic of Poland, on the relationship between the State and other churches and religious associations and on guarantees of the freedom of conscience and religion, national parks (in the event of purchase of agricultural real property for purposes in connection with the protection of natural environment), as a result of succession and specific bequest.

ury was changed to the Agricultural State Agency. The ASA is a legal successor to the APAST.

⁽¹⁰⁾ Suchoń, Baum (2013).

⁽¹¹⁾ See: Stempka-Jaźwińska, C. 1979. Model współczesnej dzierżawy rolniczej, In *Studia Prawnicze*, vol. 2, p. 107.

⁽¹²⁾ Błażejczyk (1967). See also: Wróbel, A. 1984. *Prawna ochrona gruntów rolnych w procesie inwestycyjnym*, Wrocław-Warszawa-Kraków-Gdańsk-Łódź, Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, pp. 8-16.

⁽¹³⁾ <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+TA+P8-TA-2017-0197+0+DOC+XML+V0//PL>.

⁽¹⁴⁾ Under the Act on Forming the Agricultural System, next of kin refers to descendants, ascendants, brothers or sisters, children of brothers or sisters, spouse, adoptive parents and adopted children.

The limitations result from Article 23 of the Constitution stipulating that the basis of the agricultural system of the State is the family farm. A family farm, in turn, is a unit run by an individual farmer, that is a natural person who is an owner, holder of perpetual usufruct, autonomous possessor or lessee of agricultural real property, whose combined area of arable land does not exceed 300 hectares, who holds agricultural qualifications and has been residing for a period of at least 5 years in the commune in whose territory at least one of the agricultural real estate forming part of the family farm is located, and who has been running this farm personally throughout that period⁽¹⁵⁾. At the same time, the provisions provide for some exceptions allowing purchasing agricultural real estate based on permission issued by the National Support Centre for Agriculture upon the request of a seller or a buyer if the statutory conditions have been met. Statistical data indicates that in the majority of cases, the National Support Centre for Agriculture does issue such permissions for the transfer of ownership of agricultural real estate, especially in connection with the requests submitted by sellers.

Under the Act on Forming Agricultural System, if the National Support Centre for Agriculture rejects a written request of the seller (submitted within a month from the day on which the refusal to grant permission becomes final), such state legal person is obliged to submit a statement about purchasing agricultural real estate at its market price.

The main instruments influencing trading in agricultural real estate in Poland are still the right of pre-emption and the right of buyout, with the reservation that the scope of application of the latter has been extended since 30 April 2016. What is more, the lawmakers have adopted new instruments affecting the trade in agricultural real estate. The National Support Centre for Agriculture can scrutinize whether the purchaser of agricultural real estate meets the obligations laid down in the act. Pursuant to the act, the purchaser of the agricultural real estate is obliged to run the farm whose part is the purchased agricultural real estate for a period of at least 10 years from the purchase of that real estate, and in the case of natural persons - to run it personally. Throughout that period, the purchased real property may neither be disposed of nor given for possession to other entities. The court, upon the request of the purchaser of agricultural real estate, will grant permission for such transaction prior to the lapse of 10 years from the transfer of ownership of that real estate if it is necessary due to unforeseen circumstances beyond the control of the purchaser. Limitations, which relate to sale do not apply to next of kin and purchasers of agricultural real estate in the cases mentioned in Article 2a (3) (2) and (3) (as a result of succession and specific bequest).

Different rules apply to the sale of state real estate from the Agricultural Property Stock of the State Treasury. After Poland's accession to the European Union, the prices of agricultural real estate increased and there was much higher interest in purchasing them. The Agricultural Property Agency conducted more and more tenders for sale. The parliamentary elections in 2015 resulted in some changes in legal regu-

lations. Currently, it is lease that is the most common form of managing agricultural real estate of the State Treasury. Within 5 years after the Act of 14 April 2016 came into force, the sale of real estate or its parts included in the Agricultural Property Stock of the State Treasury was suspended. Under the Act, however, the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development upon the request of the President of the National Support Centre for Agriculture, can allow for the sale of real estate or its parts other than those mentioned in Article 1 (so for example, of a surface area of 2ha and more) if it is justified by social and economic aspects. Therefore, smaller agricultural real estate can be freely sold in compliance with the rules prescribed in the act, namely in the tender proceedings or to lessees under the right of pre-emption without a tender.

After Poland's accession to the European Union, the Act of 24 March 1920 on Acquisition of Real Estate by Foreigners⁽¹⁶⁾ was amended. The foreigners who were the EU citizens and who leased agricultural lands could after 3 or 7 years of lease, depending on the region, purchase agricultural lands without the permission. It was still necessary, however, to get permission from the Minister of Internal Affairs and Administration to purchase such lands. The obligation was abolished on 1 May 2016. According to the statistical data, over 200 permissions to purchase agricultural lands were granted yearly⁽¹⁷⁾. The citizens of the Netherlands, Germany or Ukraine, who were allowed to set up an agricultural farm in Poland, purchased the lands.

Currently, the citizens of Poland as well as of other EU countries have equal rights and obligations relating to the purchase, sale or lease of private lands as well as those coming from the local authorities or the Agricultural Property Stock of the State Treasury.

IV. So-called “private” lease of agricultural real estate

Lease has a very long tradition in Poland. It was popular during the Partitions and the interwar period. After the Second World War there was a lease of agricultural lands from the National Land Fund and so-called private agricultural lands. The new chapter in the development of lease started after the political transformation and establishment of the Agricultural Property Agency of the State Treasury. In Poland there are no separate regulations on agricultural lease. The regulations on a lease contract are included mainly in the Civil Code (Articles 693-709 of the Civil Code and Article 694 of the Civil Code prescribes that to the matters not regulated by the Civil Code the provisions of tenancy apply accordingly)

⁽¹⁶⁾ Journal of Laws of 2004, No. 167, Item 1758, as amended.

⁽¹⁷⁾ According to the report of 2014 on the implementation of the Act of 24 March 1920 on Purchasing Real Estate by Foreigners, the foreigners obtained 271 permissions to purchase agricultural real estate of a total surface area of over 1000 ha (a year ago there were 252 permissions for 697 ha). See the *Minister of Interior Affairs and Administration*, Report of 2014 on the implementation of the Act of 24 March 1920 on Purchasing Real Estate by Foreigners, <https://mswia.gov.pl/download/1/22336/Sprawozdanie2014.pdf> [20.05.2017].

⁽¹⁵⁾ See Bieluk, J. 2016. Komentarz do ustawy o kształtowaniu ustroju rolnego, Warszawa 2016, ISBN 9788325589561, p. 10 and next.

and they take into consideration the specific nature of lease of agricultural land only to a small extent.

Only three legal regulations apply directly to agricultural lands. They refer to the termination of a lease contract (Article 704 of the Civil Code); reimbursement for the sowing left behind at the end of lease (Article 706 of the Civil Code), application of lease regulations where a person taking agricultural real estate for use and collecting profits is not obliged to pay rent but only to incur the taxes and other charges related to ownership or possession of land (Article 708 of the Civil Code).

The Polish Civil Code leaves it to the parties to decide whether to make the agreement of lease of agricultural land for a short or indefinite period of time. Such leases are not stable, they do not incentivize lessees to incur expenditure, plan and conduct rational management, which obviously does not contribute to the stability of farming and production capabilities of the leased lands. Article 700 of the Civil Code, which allows the lessee to demand a reduction in the rent in case of the negative event, e.g. hurricane, hail, fire, flood or plant freezing, is in principle beneficial. Pursuant to that article, if due to the circumstances that the lessee is not liable for and that do not concern them, the usual revenue from the lease object has been subject to a substantial reduction, the lessee may demand the reduction in the rent due for a given economic period. This provision, however, causes interpretation doubts.

An essential factor to guarantee the stability of farming is the possibility to purchase leased agricultural lands. Therefore, high importance is given to the right of pre-emption vested in the lessee of the agricultural real estate. It has been regulated in the Act of 11 April 2003 on Forming Agricultural System. Pursuant to Article 3, in the event of the sale of agricultural real estate, the lessee is entitled to the pre-emption right, if:

- 1) the lease contract has been made in writing with a certain date and was performed for at least 3 years starting from that date and
- 2) the purchased agricultural real estate is part of the family farm of the purchaser.

V. Lease of agricultural real estate from the Agricultural Property Reserve of the State Treasury

The lease of the state agricultural real estate from the Agricultural Property Agency has been regulated in the Act of 19 October 1991 on Managing Agricultural Property of the State Treasury. Before 1992, the lease of agricultural lands was based mainly on extending the amount of leased lands in order to enlarge the surface of already existing agricultural farms. Then, the lease of agricultural lands became the main title to organize independent agricultural farms⁽¹⁸⁾. In the

⁽¹⁸⁾ See Lichorowicz, A. 2003. Pozycja prawna gospodarstw wielko-

first phase of privatization, at the beginning of the 1990s, it was necessary to pass the state property to private entities in order to ensure the continuity of production. The aforementioned state legal person, then, leased out large areas of agricultural lands. By the end of December 2010, the Agricultural Property Agency took over properties of a surface area amounting to over 4 740 424ha. For many years, lease was the main form of managing property. In 1995, more than 2 million 745 thousand ha was leased in Poland, in 1996 – 2 million 928 thousand ha, 1998 – 2 million 810, 5 thousand ha, 2002 – 2 million 407,5 thousand ha⁽¹⁹⁾. Towards the end of 2011, the Agricultural Property Reserve consisted of about 1,96 million ha and almost 1,47 million ha (75% of the surface area of the Reserve) was leased. Currently (as at 31 December 2016), there is more than 1 million of agricultural land from the Agricultural Property Stock of the State Treasury. In 2016, the Agency leased out 59,4 thousand ha real estates from the Stock under 8,7 thousand contracts⁽²⁰⁾.

Under Article 39 of the Act of 19 October 1991, the lease contract is made following the written or public oral tender. The National Support Centre for Agriculture can conduct the written tender for the sale of agricultural real estate which can be entered only by the entities, for instance, individual farmers, as defined by the regulations on forming agricultural system. Pursuant to the amended act, the criteria of selecting the best offer include, in particular:

- a) distance between the offeror's agricultural farm and the real estate from the Stock;
- b) surface area of agricultural real estate purchased or leased from the Stock;
- c) intensity of animal production on offeror's farm.

The contract of lease of agricultural real estate is made, in principle, for the period of 10 years. It needs to be stressed that under the act, the tender is not conducted if the existing lessee submitted the National Support Centre for Agriculture a declaration of intention to continue the lease of real estate in compliance with new conditions arranged with that institution, with the reservation that the lease rent cannot be lower than so far. If the National Support Centre for Agriculture does not provide the lessee with the conditions of further lease of that real property within a month from the day of submitting the declaration, the National Support Centre for Agriculture is deemed to give permission to continue the lease of the real property under the existing conditions for a year.

The lease rent is defined in the contract as a sum of money or the financial equivalent of a relevant amount of wheat. It is paid in arrears for a half calendar year. Detailed conditions of setting the amount of rent are laid down in the Regulation of the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development of 1 October 2016 on the method of setting the lease rent in contract of lease of real estate from the Agricultural Property Stock of

towarowych w polskim ustawodawstwie rolnym. Uwagi de lege lata, de lege ferenda. In *Kwartalnik Prawa Prywatnego*, vol. 3, p. 599.

⁽¹⁹⁾ Poczta, Nowak (2007).

⁽²⁰⁾ Agricultural Property Agency (2010).

the State Treasury.

Under Article 29 of the Act of 19 October 1991 on the Management of Agricultural Real Estate of the State Treasury, the lessee of the purchased real estate is entitled to the pre-emption right to purchase the real property from the Stock at the price set in the way prescribed in the act on condition that the lease has lasted for at least 3 years. As of 30 April 2016, the owner is not entitled to the pre-emption right to purchase but it is generally forbidden to sell agricultural real estate. The rule applies, however, only to the agricultural lands of a surface area not bigger than 2ha. The sale of lands bigger than 2ha requires the permission of the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development.

VI. Conclusions

Since the Polish Constitution of 1997 prescribes that the basis of the agricultural system of the State is a family farm, individual farmers who run such farms are privileged to purchase agricultural real estate. Article 2a of the Act on Forming Agricultural System specifies that it is only an individual farmer than can purchase agricultural real estate unless the act prescribes otherwise. At the same time, it is also possible for other entities to purchase such real estate provided the National Support Centre for Agriculture grants them permission. What needs to be emphasized is that a change to an area development plan (locating the agricultural real estate in the areas designed in the area development plan for non agricultural purposes) results in the fact that the agricultural real estate is not subject to the following rules: limitations in respect of purchasers of agricultural real estates; the National Support Centre for Agriculture is not entitled to the pre-emption right and buyout; the right of buy out does not relate to the inheritance under the last will and testament; shareholders can use such agricultural lands as a contribution in kind.

Since the Act of 14 April 2016 on Suspension of Sale of Property from the Agricultural Property Stock of the State Treasury and Amendments to Certain Acts came into force, the lease from the Property Stock of the State Treasury has been growing in importance. Since 30 April 2016, lease has been the main form of managing the property from that Stock. At the same time, there are also legal regulations, which may hinder the development of a so-called private lease of agricultural real estate. It refers to the obligation of running the agricultural farm, which included the purchased real estate in person for 10 years and, as for a natural person, running the farm in person. Leasing out such agricultural lands is possible only upon the permission granted by court in justified cases. Such a regulation aims at limiting the purchase of agricultural lands for speculative purposes. Agricultural lands can be freely leased out (irrespective of the date of obtaining the ownership) only by persons who purchased real estate from next of kin. Such limitations should be seen as positive ones.

To sum up, it needs to be stressed that Polish regulations are favourable mainly for setting up and enlarging family farms. At the same time, the law does not forbid running or enlarging other agricultural farms than family ones as the persons running such units are allowed to make contracts of

lease of agricultural lands or purchase lands with the permission of the National Support Centre for Agriculture. What is of importance is that foreigners from the EU countries who decide to run an agricultural farm in Poland and get the status of an individual farmer have the same rights as Polish farmers in respect of not only purchasing other agricultural lands but also direct payments, insurance in KRUS (Kasa Rolniczego Ubezpieczenia Społecznego – The Agricultural Social Insurance Fund) or other rights and obligations connected with running an agricultural activity in Poland. What is more, as a rule, all member states of the European Union implement more or less restrictive and complex instruments of protection and trade in agricultural real estate. Although there is no definition of a family farm in the EU law, this is the family farm that serves as a basis for the European model of agriculture.

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Contact address/ Kontaktná adresa

Dr hab. Aneta Suchoń, Assistant Professor,
Law and Administration Department, Adam Mickiewicz University in
Poznań, Poland,
email: suchon@amu.edu.pl