

REVERSING THE MYTHS ON WEAK POST-COMMUNIST CIVIL SOCIETIES

How can we understand the intersection between civil society research and social movement studies? How can this intersection be studied in the context of the post-socialist period, and in particular in Poland? What is the state of Polish civil society and how can we assess it in the light of increasing spontaneous and informal forms of activism among Poles? These were the questions addressed at the conference “The challenge of collective action: new perspectives on civil society and social activism in contemporary Poland” organized by Warsaw University and Södertörn University in Warsaw, October 18–19 of this year. The rationale of the conference was to question the conventional view of Polish civil society by highlighting the neglect of spontaneous and informal forms of activism in studies of post-socialist and Polish civil society.

The conference was opened by keynote speaker professor Grzegorz Ekiert, who is widely known for his work on Polish civil society before and after 1989, and for his development of protest event analysis in Poland.¹ Ekiert presented new data on the state of Polish civil society contradicting the widespread perception of it as weak and passive, paralyzed by the legacies of the socialist past.² Ekiert pointed out that, on the contrary, there has been dynamic growth of the non-governmental organizations in the country (both associations and foundations), and a slow increase of “street politics” – demonstrations and blockades in the decades after 1989 – along with the development of more radical political movements in Poland after the global economic crisis in 2008. Moreover, Poland is also exceptional in the European context (with the exception of the Nordic countries) with respect to the amount of charitable activity conducted there, and the high number of sporting activities and organizations active in the country. Ekiert described Polish civil society’s transformation as dependent on four important processes taking place in the country. First, he emphasized the steadily growing “third sector”, whose growth and consolidation over time has made it less likely to take part in protests. He also pointed out the ongoing de-corporatization manifest in the decline in size and influence of trade unions and other professional organizations. The professionalization of the field of civil society organizations, or non-governmental organizations (NGOs), has along with the political and economic stabilization in the country (according to Ekiert, Poland has been the most politically stable post-socialist country in the European Union since 2008) resulted in fewer protest events such as strikes, or those connected to elections.

PROFESSOR ANNA GIZA-POLESZCZUK commented on Ekiert’s lecture by characterizing the concept of Polish civil society as one involving activity both in theory and in everyday practice. Her objective was to understand the role that the concept is playing in post-communist societies and its specific meaning in the Polish

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public discourse, arguing that the concept is not only widely used in research, but also in the media, in politics, by important figures in civil society, and by ordinary citizens. She pointed out the connection in the perception of civil society between the socialist past and the state of civil society after 1989, where civil society is perceived as a remnant of the past, passive, spoiled in its form and in need of change.³ The common belief was that people, as part of civil society, should be encouraged to be active and take responsibility for matters in the public sphere. Giza-Poleszczuk argued, with support from some of her research,⁴ that this notion of civil society in Poland has been distorted and exceptionally persistent in the public consciousness. She called this distorted notion of civil society a “powerful stereotype”, one that has entered popular imagination since the system change and has been reproduced by the people themselves when describing their civil activity and attitudes. She concluded by asking what effects such a negative notion has for the society, when the activity in the society is constantly seen as poor and in need of change, despite the evidence that civil society organizations are continually increasing in number and influence, and becoming more professional. Giza-Poleszczuk also posed the question of why this negative notion has become so popular in Polish society. She sought the answers in the division of the “old” third sector active under communism, and the “new” third sector created after 1989, and the attitudes towards these, the actual activity of these two and the different level of trust that organizations of the two divisions are awarded among the population. The conclusion was that the Anglo-Saxon model of a “proper” civil society that was introduced after 1989 in relation to the “un-proper” form of civil society prevalent under communism has had far-reaching consequences for the negative notion of Polish civil society of today, resulting in the interpretation of civil society activity and those involved in such activity as unable to function well.

The myth of a poorly functioning Polish civil society was reversed in additional ways by other contribu-

tions presented at the conference. Among the presentations was research on activism in Poland (and most post-socialist countries) on understudied topics such as: LGBT-activism⁵, tenants’ and housing activism, animal-rights activism, mobilizations against ACTA⁶, motherhood and women’s issues, the development of the anarchist movement, activity among think-tanks, right-to-the-city mobilizations, but also activism connected to precarious living conditions, national and religious identity, or sports organizations. What was lacking was research on mobilizations relating to ecological issues, right-wing-oriented activism, and religious movements. However, some interesting points emerged during the conference, especially during the discussions. One of these was the exclusion of some forms and actors from the common conceptualization of civil society in Poland, affecting the interpretation of the state of social and political activism in the country. An important question that was posed by one of the organizers, Dr. Elżbieta Korolczuk, was why some people and groups in the sphere of Polish civil society are de-legitimized, not acknowledged. She argued that actions and claims coming from specific civil society groups are not seen as legitimate and thus not included in the definition of civil society. Moreover, this limited understanding of the activity of civil society is also constrained by the neglect of more informal and non-institutionalized forms of activism, and instead has a focus on the activity of non-governmental organizations. The normative concept of civil society was also discussed in relation to definitions of “civil” and “uncivil” and the more inclusive definition was recommended, in order to understand the depth and breadth of the activity undertaken by figures within Polish civil society.

ANOTHER IMPORTANT conclusion drawn during the conference was that what is called, in the social movement literature, the political opportunity structures (defined as the openness of the political system in a given society towards the activity and claims made by social movements), are highly relevant in Poland today. Also significant are the resources available to civil society actors and organizations, historical and cultural legacies including public discourses, the functioning of institutions and levels of institutional and social trust, and also the influences of collective actors outside Poland (be it in the form of economic support, in their capacity as organizational models, or simply as sources of inspiration). All these structures of opportunity and access to resources set the conditions under which parts of civil society operate and shape, in different ways, the content and scope of Polish activism.

Several of the conference contributors identified a common pattern of entrepreneurial and family-centered orientations in Polish civil society, which functioned as motivations for civic engagement and as an “expression of civiness” (Prof. Kerstin Jacobsson’s

term). This specificity of Polish civic activism was discussed at the conference and interpreted as a logic imported from the private sphere. This might not be surprising, given the picture drawn by Giza-Poleszczuk of the Polish discourse on civil society since the system change, which portrays it as deficient and in need of change. The logic of entrepreneurial individuals fits in well with the expectations placed on citizens to change their ways and act for a better world. Entrepreneurial logic and practices along with “familial orientation” (Elżbieta Korolczuk’s term) are not new in the Polish context; they were, as coping strategies, widespread under communism. They have, moreover, been refined in the new system of neo-liberalism, where the competition for resources (grant-based in the sphere of NGOs) among civil society organizations is high, and the successes (and failures) are ascribed to the efforts of individuals. Those who have not succeeded in adapting to the capitalist system are seen as losers lacking entrepreneurial spirit. This is precisely how socio-economically weaker groups are perceived, and their situation is explained with reference to the previous system having “spoiled” them. This has the effect of de-legitimizing their activism.

THE CHALLENGE FOR FUTURE research on civil society is to provide more general conclusions on collective action and the activity of civil society (broadly understood) actors in Poland and other post-socialist societies. Future research ought to include compari-



ACTA protest in Sosnowiec in south Poland.

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sons and cover the heretofore under-studied groups and mobilizations active in this sphere, including non-institutionalized, informal, spontaneous, and “uncivil” (as it is commonly defined characterized) forms of collective action. In the Polish context, there is a great need of interpretations of the steadily growing popularity of right-wing mobilizations, the role of religious groups and movements, and the activism of socio-economically weaker groups. ✕

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- 2 M. M. Howard, *The Weakness of Civil Society in Post-Communist Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); S. Kotkin, *Uncivil Society. 1989 and the Implosion of the Communist Establishment* (New York: The Modern Library, 2010).
- 3 Due to the phenomena ascribed to it during socialism such as “amoral familism”, lack of ability to cooperate, preference of inaction, and so on; see Piotr Sztompka, “The Trauma of Social Change: A Case of Postcommunist Societies,” in C.J. Alexander ed. *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); E. Sidorenko, “Which way to Poland? Re-emerging from Romantic unity”, in M. Myant & T. Cox, ed. *Economic and political transformation and evolving national identity* (New York: Routledge, 2008); P. Gliński, “How active are the social actors?,” *Polish Sociological Review*, 4: 148 (2004), 429-450; L. Kolarska-Bobińska, “Civil society and Social Anomy in Poland,” *Acta Sociologica*, 33:4 (1990), 277-288.
- 4 See for instance, A. Giza-Poleszczuk, M. Marody & A. Rychard, *Strategie i system: Polacy w obliczu zmiany społecznej* [Strategies and the system: Poles facing social change] (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo IPiS PAN, 2000); A. Giza-Poleszczuk, *Przedsiębiorczość studentów Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego: raport* [Entrepreneurship among Warsaw University students] (Warsaw: Uniwersytecki Ośrodek Transferu Technologii Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2006); A. Giza-Poleszczuk & M. Marody, eds., *Przemiany więzi społecznych: zarys teorii zmiany społecznej* [Changes in social ties: outline of a theory of social change] (Warsaw: Scholar, 2004).
- 5 Activism on lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender matters.
- 6 ACTA, or Anti-Counterfeiting Trade Agreement that was officially presented and signed by several countries in 2010, caused demonstrations around the globe in the following years. Activists claimed that the agreement served the interests of large corporations and not ordinary Internet-users. In Poland the demonstrators took to the streets and 100 thousand participants are estimated to have demonstrated against the ratification of the ACTA-agreement in the country in 2012.

Post-Soviet Europe and its “beyond”

Three Swedish research centers for Eastern European Studies – the Center for European Research at Lund University, the Uppsala Center for Russian Studies (UCRS), and the Center for Baltic and Eastern European Studies (CBEES) at Södertörn University – arranged a conference that took place October 2–4, 2013, in Lund entitled *Beyond Transition: New Directions in Eastern and Central European Studies*.

The theme of the conference, *Beyond Transition*, reflects a critical phase in current research on Eastern Europe. Today, 25 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, it is clear that the former “Second World” has already passed its projected post-Soviet transition period, often with rather disappointing results. There is no doubt that the former Soviet countries have developed “beyond”, but in which direction? Transition theory based on normalization could not predict the current situation we are in, nor could it explain it. Lectures by prominent international speakers were the conference’s *pièce de résistance*.

Five speakers helped identify the real key questions in the agenda of *beyond transition*. The world-famous German historian Karl Schlögel spoke about the political and geographic factors that have been neglected within transition studies, the social groups that were never figured into post-Soviet studies in their capacity as historical players. The French sociologist Georges Mink (ISP-CNRS in Paris and the College of Europe) spoke about current, active power games around collective memory on high political and bureaucratic levels within the EU and in the new EU member states. Memory has become an issue for a hyper-active lobbying industry. Jan Kubik from Rutgers University in the US described a similar situation when he considered the current politics of memory in former Eastern Europe through the lens of political science.

The British sociologist Alena Ledeneva (University College London), in her lecture, concentrated on corruption and power in Russia. One shouldn’t interpret corruption in Putin’s Russia as a failure of the system to be revealed

and rectified. Corruption is the system itself, within which power is exercised through a complex relationship between informal communication and the exchange of services within a circle with limitless but diffuse contacts. It is through the corrupt *sistema* that Russia, in its brutal manner and despite unending crises, actually “works” economically, politically, and internationally. But it is also the same *sistema* that locks Russia into the “trap of informality”. Politicians, entrepreneurs, and bureaucrats are hostage to their own shortsighted interests, while the system’s long-term consequences prevent modernization and the development of institutions in particular. ✕

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