

GRASSROOTS MOBILIZATIONS DO OCCUR IN POST-SOCIALIST CIVIL SOCIETY

Civil society in post-socialist countries, understood as the part of society that consists of organizations and individuals in the public space between the state and the family, has been described for two decades now as weak and incapable of mobilizing ordinary citizens. Several scientific studies have documented its development since the collapse of the socialist system, and usually depict it either as artificially created with the help of models and economic support imported from abroad, or as collective activity mostly limited to the familiar sphere of close friends and family. These weaknesses are often explained with reference to the socialist past, when the experience of organizing was associated with instructions and restrictions from above.

However, the picture these studies paint is not quite complete. First, the vast majority of these studies concentrate on very formal organizations (read: non-governmental organizations), and miss the more informal (or not yet formalized) kinds of collective activity. Second, models imported from studies in the Western democracies are often applied to the post-socialist societies, where they fail to capture the particularities of the post-socialist or national context. There is, for example, a tendency to assess the state of civil society by such indicators as membership-based organizations or the number of protest events. These tools are too blunt for the purpose, and miss important nuances of the activism that prevails in post-socialist settings.

IN MAY 2013, an international conference was held at Södertörn University and CBEEES on the topic of urban grassroots activism in Central and Eastern Europe. Interest in the conference among international scholars and activists was great, and the participants' contributions documented the widespread forms of activism in post-socialist spaces. The examples from countries such as Poland, Ukraine, Serbia, Croatia, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, and Lithuania all show the vibrant activity among self-organized citizens in these countries - activity that is not always

formal, and not dependent on the support of foreign organizational models or financing.

Poland is an interesting case, as its civil society is considered weak despite grand achievements with the emergence and successes of the Solidarity movement in overthrowing the socialist system at the end of the 1980s. Polish civil society is described in the literature as initially having had a boom in citizens' activities after the collapse of the old system, then taking an increasingly passive role up until today. I would like to argue that the description as "passive" does not reflect the full picture of what is going on in the field of collective action among the citizens of Poland, and especially among those organizing on housing, land use planning, and tenants' issues. Since the early 2000s, a number of local mobilizations have been created and been active in the field, becoming a source of inspiration to others, but also a source of opposition to land use practices, housing policies and urban planning in several Polish cities. Most activists start their activity with reference to the immediate locality in which their issues arise, such as their place of residence, and gradually extend their aims from the initial scope of their apartment, the building and the street they live in, or the square they visit daily, to influence housing and land use policy at the local and national levels, and issues of social justice and human rights in their country of residence. What makes such movements even more interesting to study is the grassroots character of their activity, which would not be expected to be prevalent in the post-socialist context of a weak and passive civil society.

In the case of the Polish tenants' movement, the sparks of collective mobilization are often to be found in the difficult situations of low-income households living in municipal or re-privatized housing. There are several acute problems in the field of housing in Poland, of which housing shortages and substandard conditions are the most severe. The privatization and insufficient new construction of municipal housing, combined with an aging population and



increasing socioeconomic polarization, add fuel to the problems of tenants in Poland. At the same time, the tough housing situation, the tenants' socioeconomic position, and their lack of resources for action are further reasons why tenants' mobilizations might not be expected to occur in Poland. But they do. The first organization dealing with tenants' issues was founded in 1989, and today there are about 40 such organizations in the country. The Polish tenants' movement is still quite small, partly due to the country's structure of low political opportunity, and partly due to the dominant negative discourse on tenants as "bums", "lazy", "pathological", and "to blame for their own situation". For these obvious reasons, tenants' activity in the field is limited to smaller groups. However, the tenants' movement in Poland has had some considerable successes during the past five years, and has been able, since the foundation of the first formal organization in 1989, not only to endure, but to broaden its activities. Other concrete examples of the activity of the tenants' movement come from Warsaw, where

tenants' organizations have initiated dialogue with city authorities and in 2012 established the "Tenants' Round Tables", a series of meetings where tenants can influence the city's decision-making processes on housing policy. Another example is to be found in Cracow, where the struggle for tenants' influence in decision-making resulted in the Housing Round Table organized in 2011 by the city council.

TENANTS' GROUPS in various Polish cities have also succeeded in forming short and long-term alliances with influential actors not only in the field of housing and urban planning, but also with other groups with similar ideological positions. Cooperation between some of these groups has resulted in pressure on local governments that has been difficult to ignore, and also in a widening of some of the movements' demands. The most recent success on the part of tenants in Poznań was the extraordinary support that a group of tenants of a re-privatized tenement house received from the city in a conflict with the new owners. The successful defense of ten-

ants' rights in this case was a result of recurrent media coverage, ranging over a year, and of support from other tenants, anarchists, squatters, and various other groups and organizations all over Poland.

Reaching out to government and working together with politicians has also become a strategy for some tenants' organizations, and indicates a re-framing of tenants' issues into broader demands. Some tenants' organizations work closely with political parties, although such initiatives are still quite rare in Poland. In April 2013, a bill to amend the law protecting the rights of tenants was presented during a press conference by a tenants' organization together with two members of the Polish parliament. Such collaboration attracts media attention and gives weaker partners access to some political and symbolic resources. These kinds of initiatives have changed the character of the tenants' movement by re-articulating and broadening both the means and the goals of tenant activism.

IN A DIFFICULT POLITICAL climate, and in a society in which trust is low and organizational activity is associated with compulsion, collective action may seem an intricate undertaking. The case of the Polish tenants' movement contradicts the conventional view of post-socialist societies as passive and dominated by socialist legacies. Despite the difficult climate, these types of activities have endured and broadened their scope. Neither the lack of resources nor the negative and stereotypical representations of tenants, which hinder the mobilization of large numbers of active members, have discouraged or deterred the activists. The struggle continues. ✕

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