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Polish citizens turn their back on NGOs and embrace community activism

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Urban and social art at the first edition of 'Neighbours' festival in Katowice, in 2014. Sebastian Pyłacz/Pobudka Koszutka, Author provided

Poland amazed the world last year when mass protests against tightening restrictions on abortion rights mushroomed across the country, forcing the government to change its position.

The **Black Protest** that spread within and outside the country demonstrated the vitality of grassroots activism in Poland. It also reflected social and political changes in the country and the way Polish civil society has evolved.

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Black Protest in Poland, Warsaw, October 2016. Michalkraw/Wikimedia, CC BY-NC

In spite of repeated claims that post-socialist civil societies are weak and still immature, this episode and many other recent domestic developments show otherwise. As a recent study demonstrated, urban movements are thriving in Poland.

The NGO backlash

During the Black Protest, organisations such as Gals to Gals (*Dziewuchy Dziewuchom*) and Save the Women (*Ratujmy Kobiety* which are informal initiatives, took to the streets together with citizens, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and political parties, demonstrating activism has changed in Poland in recent years.

Unlike other women-centred public events, the Black Protest was joined not just by pro-choice activist but also by women with a conservative worldview. The protesters were only unanimous about the need not to further restrict the current abortion law; they did not necessarily agree that it should be liberalised.

Since the 1990s, the NGO sector has been considered the most developed pillar of civil society in Poland. Yet Polish NGOs have recently come under pressure.

Division between NGOs has sprung up over access to funds and the perceived privilege of liberal NGOs over conservative ones. In an increasingly stratified society, this came as no surprise.

Many have been critical of what they considered to be an excessive “NGOisation” of Polish civil society. This turn against institutions should also be understood as a reaction to the individualism, of the NGO-sector; social activists admit they are involved in NGOs to achieve self-actualisation or

enhance their skills.

The “NGO-isation of resistance” and NGO activism in general have justifiably been criticised for neutering the citizenry’s own potential for grassroots engagement by channelling it into project-based, grant-reliant activities.

And NGOs themselves have started to voice their concern that they might have become part of the problems, including counteracting social inequalities, they were originally aiming to tackle.

Social activists now challenge the idea that you need to join NGOs in order to engage in public life, and researchers too are increasingly aware of the need to change their NGO-centred focus when studying civil society in the region.

Acting together for the community

As a reaction to the individualism characterising NGO activism and the political divide in the public sphere, we are seeing an emergence of informal movements, motivated by the wish to restore community feeling in Polish cities and towns.

Social activism in Poland used to be the domain of the intelligentsia and its long-standing positivist mission to serve the nation, especially during times of lack of state sovereignty.

However, the intelligentsia reinforced what sociologist Joanna Kurczewska has called the “elitist model of local civil society” in Poland. Unlike NGO activists, individuals involved in community building or civic engagement declare they do not aspire to lead or enlighten the nation.

Instead, they identify with, and work on behalf of, their local communities, or claim to be citizens of the world. They are inspired by humanitarian values and understand civic engagement as activism.

We carried out research into non-institutionalised initiatives in Poland between 2014 and 2015. One activist we interviewed told us:

Under various ideological slogans, we realise common social goals. Political orientation is not a criterion to exclude anyone from our community. We share a common goal, even if we explain those goals by our leftist views, while they justify it via their rightist views, but we do exactly the same things.

Acting together to make improvements at the local level seems to be the driving motivation of informal organising.

Informal activists’ focus on pragmatic, local issues could be seen as a short-term strategy that will bring about piecemeal change. But active citizens have proved to be concomitantly engaged in more than one type of grassroots organising.



A 'Save the Women' protest in Warsaw, October 2016. Konto na chwilę/Wikimedia, CC BY-NC

Their initiatives are diverse and include working to revitalise neighbourhoods and organising workshops for underprivileged children. Others practice hobbies related to their residential areas, like urban gardening, city biking, urban bee-hiving, running cashless exchanges, or non-commercial cafes.

There are also collectives that provide free assistance to homeless people or young people, feminist groups striving to change public opinion and groups striving to find alternatives to capitalism via food cooperatives or the de-growth initiative. History reenactors and art collectives also represent examples of informal organising.

Activities like these are the playground of democracy. They often lead to the identification of common goals and strengthen community bonds.



A 2016 historical reenactment of 'cursed soldiers' taking over the State Security prison in 1945. Wojtek Żołneczek, Author provided

It should be noted that these seemingly innocuous activities are not always devoid of an ideological stance. On the contrary, behind their pragmatic aims there is a strong conviction that citizens can have an impact on reality. This social change focuses on building common goals and a sense of community.

All forms of activism are represented in Polish civil society, and the variety and richness among them is inspiring.

Politics Poland citizens NGO Social movements Peace and Security