



SCIENTIFIC FINAL REPORT

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Project title: Challenging the myths of weak civil society in post-socialist settings:
"Unexpected" alliances and mobilizations in the field of housing activism in Poland

1. Purpose of the project

The objective of the research project has been twofold. Firstly, it examined the development of two grassroots movements (in the field of housing) in the understudied Polish setting, by focusing on their demands, action repertoires and the conditions under which they function. And secondly, it analyzed the role of different mechanisms for cooperation and cross-movement alliance formation in the light of these two movements'- the squatters' and tenants'- recent (and shared) successes. Specific research questions that the project was guided by were:

- How and why did the cooperation between the squatting movement and the tenants' movement emerge?
- What relations characterize the cooperation and what facilitated them?
- What specificities in the local context condition the activity and collaborative action of squatters' and tenants' movements?

The methodology used has been primarily of qualitative character and mainly based on interviews. The ambition of the project has been to make theoretical and empirical contributions to the field. Its objective was 1) to go against the conventional view of weak civil society and passivity of collective actors in present Poland by analyzing two different social movements created from the grassroots and actively cooperating with each other, and 2) to fill in the empirical gap on housing-related collective mobilizations in post-socialist context and give an updated view. The project also aims at 3) studying these mobilizations' dynamic in an empirically-close, qualitative and detailed way than offered in previous literature (usually the quantitative 'protest-event-analysis') and at 4) filling in the gaps on the more informal or un-typical forms of civic engagement and collective action, and by



doing so the ambition is to contribute to the theoretical discussion on the functioning/definition of the civil society and collective actors in post-socialist settings.

2. The three most important results of the project and what conclusions can be drawn from them

1) The presence of lively civil society- beyond the myths about post-socialist legacies and the importance of urban forms of organizing

Previous studies on the development and functioning of civil societies in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) have shared a quite conventional view on these civil societies as passive, weak and donor dependent. More recent research, including my own, has updated and challenged these assumptions, showing that post-socialist civil societies are no longer solely characterized by financial and organizational donor dependence, separated from the grassroots and struggling with passivity among their citizens (Jacobsson 2015; Polanska 2015; 2020; Polanska & Chimiak 2016). It might be true that the development of Polish civil society in the first decade following 1989 was characterized by donor dependence and professionalization. The development in the last 20 years has taken partly a different path, especially in urban areas. Civil society is thriving and so are different forms of urban activism, institutionalized and non-institutionalized. My research has shown that not only professional and donor-sponsored civil society organizations prevail in the field of collective action in the region, and not all of the initially donor-dependent organizations are detached from the grassroots and are thus artificial. Several of the studies produced within this project (Polanska, 2014; Polanska & Martínez, 2016; Polanska & Piotrowski, 2015) have demonstrated lively activity among urban grassroots.

2) Tendency among scholars to oversee informal forms of organizing therefore the need of a broad notion of civil society that is less normative

Previous research on civil society and social movements in post-socialist Europe has tended to focus mainly on institutionalized forms of collective action, ignoring non-institutionalized and informal forms of organizing. The urban dimension of Polish civil society, urban social movements, and urban activism was furthermore discovered late in scholarly work, and there are a few gaps in the research field on the topic that research done within this project has contributed in filling. I have argued that although urban activism has been present in the



country's past, there has been a clear intensification in the activity of urban social movements in Poland in the 2000s (see also Domaradzka & Wijkström, 2014; Jacobsson, 2015; Pluciński, 2013) with the prevalence of slogans of “the right to the city” and “urban revolution” in the 2000s and the efforts to organize and coordinate urban activism in Polish cities in the form of the annual Congress of Urban Movements or more institutionalized politics on a local level (Kowalewski, 2013, 2016; Polanska, 2015). Moreover, another important finding is therefore that there is a need to conceptualize the notion of civil society more broadly and less normatively, not focusing on its forms (conventionally narrowed to associations/NGOs or social movements), but more on the processes and practices that are characterizing it, and also by including its more informal expressions.

3) Informal forms of organizing not necessarily always leading to formalization

Only a few of the existing studies on civil society and social movements in post-socialist settings have devoted their full attention to initiatives that are more or less explicitly not willing to institutionalize and built around informal networks (Polanska, 2015; 2020; Polanska & Chimiak, 2016). Moreover, their urban expression, recognizing that they are emerging in the city and mobilize around urban issues, has not been studied in-depth until now. Because of its local and informal character, this form of activism has often been classified as an expression of NIMBY (not in my backyard) activism or an “infra-political” (Scott, 1990) stage in the relatively linear development toward institutionalization. Instead, I have in in the research produced within this project argued that this form of urban activism in Poland has developed as a reaction to professionalization and NGO-ization of (urban) social movements, openly defying the (until now) established forms of organizing collectively (Polanska 2015b; Polanska 2020; Polanska & Chimiak 2016). The argument put forward in these studies is that this kind of self-organized and noninstitutionalized activism is thriving in Polish cities and should be perceived as a distinct type of urban activism with its communitarian character. Theoretically, I conceptualized this kind of collective action as urban activism, different from the activity of social movements that tend to institutionalize their activity and strive for broader social change and from infra-politics that are undertaken by marginalized or powerless individuals and groups (Scott, 1990). This particular form of activism is, in the case of Poland, taking place outside of institutionalized politics, not necessarily seeking to impact the broader political system, but primarily the local level, and



aims less at controlling and gaining power over local resources and more at acting collectively to strengthen the local community and build solidarity.

3. The project's contribution to the international research frontline

International civil society research tends to be normative and include only what is perceived as “good” civic actors, excluding those falling outside of this classification or analyzing them as an instance of “uncivil society” (Kopecký 2003). This has, however, been contested in my and other colleagues’ studies (Jacobsson 2015; Jacobsson and Korolczuk 2017; Matysiak 2015; Polanska 2015) and the narrow perspective has been broadened, showing the variety, innovative character and extent of civil society activity in Poland. The research produced within this project has contributed to the international research twofold: 1) in filling in important empirical gaps on social movements, urban activism and civil society in a context that in international studies tends to be seen as deviant or simply invisible, and 2) in its theoretical contributions to the notions of urban activism, the definitions of civil society (especially post-socialist civil societies) and by combining social movement theory with radical political framework.

I would also like to mention that my and Galia Chimiak’s paper (2016) won the Highly Commended Award by the *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, which I see as a recognition of the importance of our research internationally.

4. New research questions that the project has led to

The most common question that researchers tend to pose when studying informal activist groups is on their potential for change and their plans for widening their scope of action through institutionalization. Institutionalized and formalized groups are commonly seen as those with most potential to bring about change. My argument has been that the “informalization” of civil society that Poland is going through at the moment is a reaction to the lack of change previously brought about by formalized and professionalized civil society organizations and the “unfulfillment” and disappointment associated with the functioning of non-governmental organizations in the country. Therefore, I think that a following research question should be reversed, asking where the activists see the potential for change, in this



case quite clearly by turning away from institutionalized politics, but not from political awareness and collective action on the level of grassroots. The fact that most of these informal initiatives are active in urban areas in Poland is related to what previous studies on NGOs in the country emphasized as the advantageous character of such a location (Regulska, 1999). Cities are the places of encounters and provide physical spaces where people can practice their citizenship collectively (Harvey, 2012). Future research should therefore focus on urban local contexts in which informal activism is emerging and the motivations that guide this kind of collective action, along with its broader goals.

Moreover, the research I have conducted within the framework of this project has, furthermore, directed me to do similar research in the Swedish context and in the future, when I am done studying squatting and tenants' mobilizations in Sweden in detail, to go on with comparative research, comparing the development of Polish and Swedish civil society and the particular movements revolving around housing issues in both countries, focusing on similarities and differences between these contexts and movements. What can the historical development of civil society in both contexts tell us about the present? What can the similarities and differences reveal?

5. The contribution of the research to the knowledge of the Baltic Sea Region and Eastern Europe

I see my main contribution to the knowledge of the Baltic Sea Region and Eastern Europe in the challenging of the powerful discourse on post-socialist civil societies by showing the thriving activity of the Polish civil society. My and some colleagues' studies have demonstrated that the assessment of passivity of civil society in CEE is outdated (Jacobsson & Saxonberg 2013; Jacobsson 2015; Jacobsson & Korolczuk 2017; Polanska 2015; 2020; Polanska & Chimiak 2016). My research findings have contested the myths of civil society in the area as weak (Howard 2003), dependent on "Western" models and support (McMahon 2002), of "uncivil" nature (Kotkin 2010), distrustful (Anheier & Siebel 1998) or solely built around family and friendship networks (Sztompka 2004). These negative and normative assessments have been discussed by researchers and myself as a form of neo-colonialism, interpreting civil societies in Central and Eastern Europe as weak and less developed in



comparison to their Western counterparts, thus re-confirming the supremacy of the West and the peripheral position of civil societies in the area (Buchowski 1996).

Moreover, another important contribution lies in the filling in of the empirical gaps on urban and housing mobilizations in Poland, but also in the area more broadly. Several of the works produced in the special issues organized by the project leader have covered these mobilizations in post-socialist countries, and not only Poland, inviting other researchers to contribute to knowledge production in this field of research (Polanska & Martinez 2016; Polanska et al 2017; 2018, forthcoming in 2021).

6. The contribution of research to multidisciplinary knowledge formation

The focus of the project on civil society, social movements and organizing is a fruitful arena for multidisciplinary collaboration and this has been evident in the cooperative work on several special issues produced within the project and the large number of co-authored texts, where apart from the project leader that is a sociologist, political scientists, geographers and media communication scholars have taken part. The knowledge produced within the project is multidisciplinary and cannot be claimed to belong to one academic discipline due to its social, organizational, and political character.

7. Dissemination of the results of the project within and outside the research community

The project has resulted in five special issues that all were preceded with conferences organized by the project leader (in cooperation with others) in the years 2015-2019. The conferences were attended by both academics and interested public and all five special issues have been published open access and disseminated to the participants of the conferences, but also to a broader public through the personal networks of the international contributors.

Apart from the special issues the project has resulted in 8 journal articles, 7 book chapters and 1 edited volume (in English and Polish). The project leader has also written popular science publications in English and Swedish to reach publics outside of academia (see the publication list below).



The project leader has held public lectures (in Malmö, Stockholm and Gothenburg, and for the organization *Ideell Arena*) and presentations during academic conferences about the findings of the research conducted within the project (the list of conference participation is not included due to lack of space in this report).

The research produced has also been disseminated through a personal website that the project leader has initiated and updated continually and where most of her research is freely downloadable.

Publication list:

Edited books:

Polanska, D.V., Martínez, M. & G. Piotrowski (2018). *Skloting w Europie Środkowej i Rosji*. Gdansk: European Solidarity Centre. Open access: <https://uu.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1196711/FULLTEXT01.pdf>

Special Issues:

- Polanska, D. V. & Martínez, M. (2016). Squatting in the East. Introduction. Exploring overlooked contexts, *Baltic Worlds*, Vol. IX, No. 1-2, pp. 31-33. Open access: <http://balticworlds.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/02/BW-1-2-2016-open-access.pdf>
- Valenzuela Fuentes K., Polanska, D.V., & A. Kaun (2017). The right to housing in theory and in practice: going beyond the West. *Interface: a journal for and about social movements*, 9, 1, pp. 359-367. Open access: <http://www.interfacejournal.net/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Interface-9-1-Special-section-editorial.pdf>
- Polanska, D. V., Valenzuela-Fuentes, K., & Kaun, A. (2019). Housing activism: overlooked forms, practices and implications. *Housing Studies*, 34(10): 1585-1587. Open access: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/02673037.2019.1658721>



- Martínez, M.A. & Polanska, D.V. (2020). Squatting and urban commons: Creating Alternatives to Neoliberalism. *Partecipazione e Conflitto*, 13(3): 1244-1251. Open access: <http://siba-ese.unisalento.it/index.php/paco/article/view/23044>
- Polanska, D.V., H. Rolf & S. Springfeldt (forthcoming) Tenants organizing-precarization and resistance, *Radical Housing Journal*, Open access.

Articles in peer-reviewed journals:

- Polanska, D.V. (2014). Cognitive dimension in cross-movement alliances: the case of squatting and tenants' movements in Warsaw. *Interface: a journal for and about social movements*, 6, 2: 328 – 356. Open access: http://www.interfacejournal.net/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/Issue-6_2-Polanska.pdf
- Polanska, D.V. & Piotrowski, G. (2015). The transformative power of cooperation between social movements: the case of squatting and tenants' movements in Poland. *City: Analysis of Urban Trends, Culture, Theory, Policy, Action*, 19, (2 –3): 208 –230. Open access: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13604813.2015.1015267>
- Polanska, D. V. & Piotrowski, G. (2016). Squatting in the East. Poland: local differences and the importance of cohesion, *Baltic Worlds*, Vol. IX, No.1-2, pp. 46-56. Open access: <http://balticworlds.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/02/BW-1-2-2016-open-access.pdf>
- Polanska, D. V. (2016). Organizing social and spatial boundaries: material practices and social relations in squatting. *Human Geography: the New Radical Journal*, 9, (1), pp. 30-45.
- Piotrowski, G. & Polanska D.V. (2016). Radical Urban Movements in Poland – the case of squatting. *Miscellanea Anthropologica et Sociologica*, 17 (1): 53–69. Open access: <http://uu.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:972554/FULLTEXT01.pdf>
- Polanska, D. V. & G. Chimiak. (2016). Organizing without organizations: on informal social activism in Poland. *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, Vol. 36 No. 9/10, pp. 662 – 679.
- Jezierska, K. & D.V. Polanska (2017). Social movements seen as radical political actors. The case of Polish tenants' movement. *Voluntas*, DOI 10.1007/s11266-017-9917-2. Open access: <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11266-017-9917-2>



- Polanska, D.V. (2020) Going against institutionalization: New forms of urban activism in Poland, *Journal of Urban Affairs*, 42:2, 176-187. Open access: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/07352166.2017.1422982>

Book chapters:

- Polanska, D.V. (2015a). Alliance-building and Brokerage in Contentious Politics: Polish tenants' movement as a case study. In: Jacobsson, K. (Ed.) *Urban Grassroots Movements in Central and Eastern Europe*. Farnham: Ashgate.
- Polanska, D.V. (2015b). Motywacje osób niezinstytucjonalizowanego sektora społecznego [Motivations of activists in the non-institutionalized social sector]. In: Iwinska, K. & Chimiak, G. (Eds) *Krajobraz spolecznosciowy Polska 2014 [Civic landscape Poland 2014]*. Warszawa: Centrum Wspierania Aktywności Lokalnej/CAL. Open access: <https://depot.ceon.pl/bitstream/handle/123456789/8285/Krajobraz%20spo%20eczn%20ociowy%20-%20Polska%202014.pdf?sequence=1>
- Polanska, D.V. (2016). Neoliberal Post-Socialist Urban Transformation and the Emergence of Urban Social Movements in Poland. In Mayer, M. et al. (Eds.) *Urban Uprisings: Challenging Neoliberal Urbanism in Europe*. Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 311-334.
- Polanska, D.V. (2017). Marginalizing discourses and activists' strategies in collective identity formation: The case of Polish tenants' movement. In Jacobsson, K. & Korolczuk, E. (Eds.) *Civil Society Revisited: Lessons from Poland*. New York: Berghahn Books, pp. 176-199.
- Polanska, D.V. & G. Piotrowski (2018). Rozwój skłotingu w Polsce: lokalne różnice oraz znaczenie spójności i trwałości. In: *Skłoting w Europie Środkowej i Rosji* edited by Polanska et al. (eds). Gdansk: European Solidarity Centre. Open access: <https://uu.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1196711/FULLTEXT01.pdf>
- Polanska, D.V., Martínez, M. & G. Piotrowski (2018). Wstęp. In: *Skłoting w Europie Środkowej i Rosji* edited by Polanska et al. (eds). Gdansk: European Solidarity Centre. Open access: <https://uu.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1196711/FULLTEXT01.pdf>
- Piotrowski G. & D.V. Polanska (2018). Zakończenie. In: *Skłoting w Europie Środkowej i Rosji* edited by Polanska et al. (eds). Gdansk: European Solidarity



Centre. Open access: <https://uu.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1196711/FULLTEXT01.pdf>

Popular science publications:

- Polanska, D.V. (2015). Polish civil society in bloom, *Baltic Rim Economies*, Vol. 5, pp. 42. <https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:885828/FULLTEXT01.pdf>
- Polanska, D.V. (2016). Going beyond the myths on post-socialist civil societies, *Baltic Worlds*, Vol. IX, No. 1. pp. 34-35. <http://balticworlds.com/reversing-the-myth/>
- Polanska, D.V., Schafeie, M. & S. Springfeldt (2016). Östeuropa i rörelse. *Brand*, Vol. 4, 4-7. <https://tidningenbrand.se/brand/nummer-4-2016-osteuropa-i-rorelse/osteuropa-i-rorelse/>
- Polanska, D.V. (2016). Informell organisering i skuggan av ett systemskifte. *Brand*, Vol 4, 8-11.
- Polanska, D. (2017). Polish citizens turn their back on NGOs and embrace community activism. *The Conversation*. <https://theconversation.com/polish-citizens-turn-their-back-on-ngos-and-embrace-community-activism-72537>

Conferences organized by the project:

- 2015: Squatting in the East
- 2016: Housing activism
- 2018: Squatting and urban commons
- 2019: Tenants organizing: precarization and resistance

Lectures related to the project:

- Ideell arena, Fenixprogrammet, "I spänningsfältet mellan aktivism och etablerad organisering", digital 2020.
- Ideell arena, Fenixprogrammet, "Otraditionella och okonventionella former av civilsamhälleligt deltagande" 2019, Stockholm 2019.
- Urban Studies at Malmö University, "Urban and housing activism in a neoliberal context: filling in some of the blind spots" Malmö 2016.
- Vetenskapsfestivalen, "Central- och Östeuropa: Helt europeiskt eller de europeiska Andra" Göteborg 2014.



- Östersjö-och Östeuropadagen “Teoretiska modeller från Väst tillämpade på Öst: exempel från studier om bostäder och urbanaktivism i Polen” Stockholm 2013.