

**Call for papers**

**International conference on**

# **The Challenge of Collective Action: New perspectives on civil society and social activism in contemporary Poland**

**Keynote speaker:** Professor **Grzegorz Ekiert**, Harvard University

Title: *Still Rebellious? Civil Society Transformation in Poland*

**Conference venue:** Warsaw University, Warsaw, Poland

**Dates:** 18-19 October 2013

Acting collectively for change is what social-movement and civic activism is about. Yet civil-society research and social-movement studies have often developed quite independently from each other. In contrast, this conference seeks to gather researchers working in the intersection of social-movement and civil-society research. The aim is to discuss, to explain and to theorize the various forms of collective action and civic activism that exist in contemporary Poland, including their origins and results.

In particular, we are interested in new ways of approaching and theorizing civil society in Poland, which also raises the question of the very definition of civil society. Issues related to the development of civil society – the methodological, theoretical and historical complexity of the phenomenon – are questions that we want to address during the conference, but with the specific context of Poland in focus.

It is often asserted that Poland has long traditions of civic activism, and it is often referred to as one of the few countries in the region in which the change of the regime was brought by ‘the struggle of society against the state’ (Arato 1981). Yet since 1989 the country has seemed to follow the pattern common for the whole region: after the installation of a democratic regime, people’s engagement began to weaken and the development of civil society began to slow. Existing studies show that the level of citizens’ political participation differs significantly between ‘old’ and ‘new’ EU member states, regarding electoral participation, party and protest activity, voluntarism and networking (e.g. Bernhagen and Marsh 2007, USAID 2010). People in former communist countries are less likely to participate in voluntary organizations, to contribute to various associations financially, or to trust fellow citizens. This pertains also to Poland, where, according to the Global Survey of the State of Civil Society, ‘a rather well-connected and well-structured organized civil society exists in the context of weak civic engagement’ (2007: 300).

There is a rich body of research concerning the state of civil society in Poland (e.g. Pietrzyk-Reeves 2004, Gawin and Gliński 2006, Kościański, and Misztal 2007, Nowak and Nowosielski 2006, Raciborski 2010). Notably, most of these researchers associate civil society with associations and foundations, and the act of joining organizations as members or volunteers is often interpreted as a litmus test for the civic engagement of Polish people (with some exceptions, e.g. Ekiert and Kubik 2001, Ost 2005). Other types of civic participation that are often studied include voting and philanthropy.

However, there is relatively little research on local spontaneous mobilizations, informal groups and networks, or activism by people who are marginalized due to their socio-economic status, gender, religious or ethnic identity or ideological outlook. Moreover, there are new initiatives and types of engagement that have not been sufficiently tapped in the body of existing scholarship. These include mass mobilization against ACTA, activism within the Congress of Women and the Polish Congress of Urban Movements, and religious or right-wing movements, all of which deserve more attention. We are also interested in local activism in rural settings, such as local mobilizations against the closure of schools.

The extent to which such mobilizations can be interpreted as a sign of the strength of civil society is one of the questions we want to address during the conference. We also want to ask if there are forms of collective action that escape the researchers’ lens – for theoretical, methodological or other reasons. What do these mobilizations tell us about Polish civil society? Do we have reason to challenge the conventional view of the weak civil society in this social context? How should we conceptualize social activism today?

We thus **invite contributions** that:

- focus on the types of activism and mobilizations that are still under-represented within the existing body of scholarship, e.g. local spontaneous mobilizations, informal groups and networks, activism of groups which are marginalized due to their socio-economic status, gender or ethnic identity, religious orientation or ideological outlook;

- look at the specificity of the local context, e.g. analyze the role of domestic opportunity structures and/or the construction of the private-public divide in Poland, but we welcome also contributions that place Poland in a comparative perspective;

- attempt to theorize the concept of civil society in the Polish context, given the post-state socialist past, the rise of neo-liberalism, retrenchment of welfare provisions, (re)privatization and rising economic inequalities, the renewal of nationalist ideologies and discourses, and other structural, political and social tensions.

We are interested in analyses based on empirical studies. However, we especially invite reflection on the question of whether established theories and concepts, especially the notion of civil society, are adequate and sufficient to deal with the specificities of the Polish context and, if not, what kind of theoretical innovations are needed.

### **Conference format and abstract submission**

We aim for a fairly small conference with a limited number of participants, to allow for a good intellectual atmosphere and fruitful exchanges around all papers presented. Thus, we aim for about 14 paper presentations. In addition, we invite people to listen to and discuss the papers presented. The conference will be held in English.

Paper-givers are expected to present a full (and developed) paper to be circulated to all participants ten days before the conference. All papers will have designated discussants and all participants should be expected to act as discussants of others' papers.

The conference is free of charge and lunches will be provided. The number of participants is limited in order to enable active participation. Paper-givers and other participants are expected to attend both days of the conference.

To propose a paper, please **submit an abstract** (maximum 400 words plus details concerning your current affiliation and ongoing research) no later than **May 31st 2013**. It should be sent to: [elzbieta.korolczuk@sh.se](mailto:elzbieta.korolczuk@sh.se). To participate without a paper, indicate your interest by the same date.

Abstracts will be selected based on academic quality and relevance for the conference topic.

### **Conference organizers:**

Professor Kerstin Jacobsson, Södertörn University and University of Gothenburg

Dr Elzbieta Korolczuk, Södertörn University and Warsaw University

Dr Slawomir Mandes, Warsaw University.