

Institutional constraints and creative solutions: Civil society in Poland in comparative perspective

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The project examines the conditions for civil society mobilization and collective action in Poland, but places Poland in perspective also by comparisons with some of its neighboring countries: the Czech Republic, Lithuania and Sweden. More specifically, the aim of the project is to study and compare the conditions for mobilization of civil society, collective action strategies and their outcomes, that is, their successes and failures, by conducting qualitative case studies of civil mobilizations and social movements. The forms of collective action are analyzed in relation to the surrounding society and the role played by prevalent economic, political, juridical, social and cultural conditions is examined. A common theme in the sub-projects is to see how the divide between public and private is negotiated in civil society and what implications the boundaries drawn have for the opportunities for collective action.

The project includes case-studies of urban movements and mobilizations around housing issues (Poland and Lithuania), mobilizations around parenthood (Poland and the Czech Republic), and environmental and animal rights activism (Poland). We have thus far carried out studies of tenants' movement in Warsaw (Polanska), neighbourhood organizations in Vilnius (Aidukaite), single-mothers mobilizations in Poland (Hryciuk, Korolczuk), social activism around in-vitro mobilizations in Poland (Korolczuk), fathers' movements in Poland and the Czech Republic (Hryciuk, Korolczuk, Saxonberg), and environmental and animal rights activism in Poland (Jacobsson, Piotrowski). A deviation from the application is the fact that we excluded the study of environmental activism in the Czech Republic and we narrowed down the study of environmental activism in Poland to focus mainly on the radical branches of environmentalism. This was in order to accommodate to a lower budget than applied for (but also to available staff). A scientific rationale is also that environmental NGOs in the Czech Republic and Poland are fairly well-researched already while radical environmentalism as well as animal rights activism in Poland is a blank spot.

We asked ourselves if there is reason to question or problematize the conventional view of the weak civil society in Poland and other post-communist societies. One of our points of departure was that civil society in this context partly works in a different manner than in Western Europe but our hypothesis was that it is more dynamic than previous research states. Thus far, we have found that there exists grassroots activism as well as mobilizations in less structured format and of temporary character that has tended to escape researchers attention, as the focus of research has often been on NGOs. One example is the new wave of urban grassroots activism that has developed in Poland, but also in other CEE countries, the past 5 years. We have also identified new forms of partnerships and collaboration with local authorities as well as new forms of civil society coalitions (such as the Congress of urban movements in Poland). Our studies of fathers' movements as well as social mobilizations around infertility also fill a gap in the existing literature.

In October 2013 we are co-organizing a conference on "The challenge of collective action: Civil society in Poland", at Warsaw University. In May 2013, we organized a conference on "Grassroots in the city: Urban movements and activism in Central and Eastern Europe" at Södertörn University. In spring 2014, we will co-organize a workshop on parental movements in Central and Eastern Europe, at Södertörn University. These international conferences aim to scan the field of existing research as well as debate the nature of civil society in the post-communist context. All three conferences will result in edited books.

Jacobsson's main task is to take a 'bird-view' of Polish civil society. Thus far theoretically, Jacobsson has elaborated the concepts of 'channeling' and 'enrollment' (as complement to co-optation) in order to capture the institutional shaping of civil society in Poland. Jacobsson has also developed the notion of 'collective action space' in order to capture the scope and pattern of collective agency, as well as argued for a splitting of the opportunity structure into political, legal, economic and cultural opportunity structure and to investigate the interplay between these. Jacobsson has also developed the notion of 'civic privatism' to conceptualise the self-understanding among Polish animal rights/welfare activists; the concept refers to a civil society engagement in individualist and privatist forms rather than being based on the classical citizen role. Legacies from state-socialist times, such as low levels of social trust, here interplay with neo-liberal economic discourses, affecting also activist subjectivity and self-understanding. This activist 'inclination' contributes to a dynamic and entrepreneurial civil society but at the price of civil society fragmentation and difficulties to act collectively.

Publications

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