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# The Civil Society Of Poland Related To Post Socialism

## Civil Society

Civil society is a powerful, yet vague theoretical concept and everyday practice. Whenever members of international organizations refer to democracy promotion or consolidation, local politicians talk about prosperity and welfare in their town or any non-governmental organization (NGO) writes a grant application, civil society, as a sphere between the state, the market and the family, is referenced. The functions ascribed to civil society are rooted in the history of political philosophy and thinking. They range from protection from state power to control over state power, the critique of “un-democratic behavior”, the articulation of opinions, especially those of minorities, to mediation, education, skill enhancement and social inclusion.

The action patterns known as civic engagement or social activism are closely related to civil society. They are commonly defined as forms of acting which are non-violent, oriented towards compromise, self-organized, voluntary, pluralistic, public, co-operative, non-profit-making and serving the “common good”. Empirically, civil society refers to associations, non-governmental and non-profit organizations (NPOs), trade unions, foundations or citizens’ action groups as well as to a vague, but positively attributed project.

The goal of this study is to present the condition of civil society in post-communist Poland and to provide a preliminary assessment of its role in reducing political, civic and economic inequalities both inherited from the old regime and generated by the process of transformations after 1989.

Poland’s civil society is much stronger and active than it is commonly assumed and that its impact on policy-making is significant. Despite a widely shared belief to the contrary, state socialism was a system that generated and reproduced significant inequalities. While its leaders claimed to be champions of social equality, political power was concentrated at the top of the party state hierarchy. Civic participation was carefully monitored and subjected to arbitrary constraints. Economically, although the income distribution was rather flat, there were many areas of strikingly unequal access to opportunities (employment, housing, education, healthcare, foreign travel, etc.) and consumer goods and services. Access was conditional on a political criterion: party members, especially in high positions, enjoyed considerable privileges. Most importantly, the party-state elite had access to resources ordinary citizens could only dream about. Such inequalities were deeply entrenched, reproduced, and increasingly inherited.

The economic and political situation in Poland in the late 1980s was more difficult than in most

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countries of the region. Western economic sanctions imposed after the destruction of the Solidarity movement, a crushing foreign debt, runaway inflation, and a decade of economic stagnation disrupted the functioning of state institutions, blocked coherent policy, and contributed to an explosion of inequality. Radical economic reforms and the shock-therapy strategy of moving from a crisis-ridden centrally planned economy to a market economy, introduced by the first democratically elected Polish government in 1989 and known as the Balcerowicz plan, were often criticized for their distributional consequences and for bringing about significant unemployment and new economic inequalities on top of the inherited social problems.

By most objective economic, social, and political measures, around 2015 Poland became the most successful country among new democracies that emerged in Europe as a result of the collapse of communism in 1989. After over two decades of transformations, the country was a stable, well-functioning state with fair and competitive elections, robust representative institutions, an independent and assertive media, and a vigorous civil society. The country's political system was remarkably stable since 1989, and its party system consolidated over several electoral cycles. Firmly anchored within the European Union, Poland featured a fast-growing economy, an extensive welfare system, a technocratic bureaucracy, professional political elite, and an institutionalized party system catering to a fairly reliably divided electorate.

Poland's political and economic success is remarkable, given its initial conditions in the wake of communism's collapse. In stark contrast to most other Third Wave democratizing countries where market economies existed prior to regime change, Poland (like other post-communist countries) was characterized by a glaring absence of many of the legal, economic, political, and societal preconditions thought to be necessary for capitalism and democracy to flourish. Although Poland had the most developed opposition movements in the Soviet Bloc and the most vibrant independent communication and unofficial media, the country also featured distorted property rights, a lack of the institutional infrastructure for democracy and market economy, as well as the dearth of rule of law and accountability.

## **Civil Society in Post-1989 Poland: Weak or Strong?**

Among the countries exiting state socialism, Poland stood out for several reasons, but one was dominant: the communist regime surrendered its power as the result of a massive and sustained challenge from below. The Solidarity movement that emerged in summer 1980 as the culmination of an immense wave of contention was brutally suppressed by the imposition of martial law in December 1981.

In brief, civil society organizations and their actions were instrumental in eliminating political inequality (disenfranchisement), a hallmark of state socialism. It is not unreasonable to expect,

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therefore, that civil society might play an equally prominent role in politics and in reducing other inequalities both inherited from the old regime and arising during the post-1989 period. In short, we argue that the pluralist, diverse, and organizationally rich civil society in post-communist Poland has been a major tool of reducing political and civic inequalities; it has also played an important role in combating distributional consequences and economic inequalities generated by the market economy.

## Civil Society in Poland an organizational perspective

Organizational perspective: An organizational perspective is the way that an organization defines the roles and the personnel that are needed and responsible for given processes within the body of the organization. This would be job descriptions, skills, or educational requirements that are required to hold different positions. This also includes the plans for growth and expansion and what will be needed to accomplish those goals.

In Poland, associational life under the old regime was more diverse, less controlled by the communist state, and more pluralistic than in other communist countries, particularly after 1956. Moreover, Poland experienced a number of political crises involving significant mobilization from below by various segments of society (workers, students, intellectuals, peasants, and Catholics) culminating in the emergence in 1980 of the massive Solidarity movement and its suppression in 1981. These conflicts often included efforts to establish organizations independent of the state or to expand the autonomy of existing organizations.

Even in the generally repressive post-totalitarian regime, the more or less independent “civic” initiatives influenced practices of state controlled organizations that eventually shed some of their ideological rigidity and developed partial autonomy from the ruling communist party. Moreover, the associational landscape of Poland was not exclusively populated by centralized mass organizations. Some pre-communist civil society traditions and even old organizations (mostly in the realm of leisure, education, and culture) survived under communist rule, especially at the local level. They served as hidden carriers of local traditions and provided space for some activities sheltered from direct political interference.

In sum, under the old regime Poland had a relatively robust associational life, arguably more vigorous than in other countries of the Soviet bloc. It had two distinct “sectors”: a state-controlled network of formal social and professional organizations and a very active and relatively large independent sector of informal political, religious, and cultural organizations. The organizational resources, leaders, and social capital in these two sectors provided solid foundations for the re-formulation of civil society after 1989. The idea that civil societies in post-communist countries were built from scratch has little merit and is patently false in the case of Poland, where millions of people were involved not only in state-controlled organizations, but

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also in independent movements and organizations (for example, in 1981 the Solidarity trade union had some 10 million).

The collapse of communist regimes opened a space for the reconstitution of civil society and unleashed the process of civil society mobilization common to all cases of democratization. New civil society emerged as a result of two parallel developments.

First, the organizations of the ancient regime have undergone organizational and leadership transformations and most of them managed to incorporate themselves into the new democratic system. Secondly, independent sectors of civil society, which had been banned or suppressed under state socialism, have been reinvented and experienced massive organizational development. In short, the resources of these two sectors were recombined to produce a new associational sphere representing diverse interests and identities members.

Associations controlled by the communist party before 1989 often lost a significant portion of their members and resources, frequently split into smaller organizations, and changed their names, leaders, and agendas. Many of them, however, survived transition to democracy relatively intact, and they were able to protect most of the resources that they had before 1989. Some of the reformed organizations also preserved old linkages and preferential access to various bureaucratic levels of the state administration. Only a small number of communist-era organizations completely disappeared from the public scene. These were mostly highly ideological organizations involved in promoting the “brotherhood” within the Soviet bloc, championing Marxism-Leninism or assisting the Party-state in implementing ideological surveillance and political control.

## **Civil Society and Three Dimensions of Inequality in Poland**

**Social inequality:** Social inequality is the existence of unequal opportunities and rewards for different social positions or statuses within a group or society. Although the United States differs from most European nations that have titled nobility, the U.S. is still highly stratified. Social inequality has several important dimensions. Income is the earnings from work or investments, while wealth is the total value of money and other assets minus debts. Other important dimensions include power, occupational prestige, schooling, ancestry, and race and ethnicity.

Since the fall of communism, Poland has developed a diverse, pluralist, and robust civil society that has played a significant role in shaping Polish politics, institutional reforms, and government policies. As in all other countries in Central and Eastern Europe, the post-communist civil society in Poland emerged through complex recombination encompassing often far-going transformations of the communist-era associations and the rapid advent of new sectors. The high survival ratio of old organizations was complemented by the dynamic growth of new

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organizations producing a diverse, competitive, and balanced associational sphere that has flourished in a liberal, civil society-friendly legal and institutional environment.

In comparison to other post-communist countries, Polish civil society is relatively robust, with a large number of organizations and the capacity to grow across all sectors and locations. It is also pluralist, that is, characterized by a high level of fragmentation and competition across and within all sectors of civil society. The trade union sector with some twenty thousand registered unions and several unions representing workers in a single enterprise provides a good illustration of these characteristics.

While the positive role of civil society in the reduction of political and civic inequalities in the post-1989 Poland is well documented, its role in reducing economic inequality is harder to determine. The rise of inequality in the post-1989 Poland has been modest by comparison with many other post-communist countries. There was “a moderate, but steady growth in economic inequality in Poland since early 1990s” to 2010, concludes an authoritative study.

## Conclusion

Since the fall of state socialism, the relatively vibrant civil society in Poland has been a major institutional vehicle for virtually eliminating political inequality, advancing civic equality, and slowing down the growth of economic inequality. However, in light of the Comparative Politics April 2017 advancing wave of economic and political populism, we cannot assume that these effects are permanent. Harbingers of civil society by the nationalist populist government signal the possibility of reversal of the trend towards strengthening of civil society. Similarly, growing political polarization of Polish civil society may significantly reduce its capacity to monitor and shape government policies and create a privileged sector closely cooperating with the government. This in turn may be a setback for political and civic equality achieved during the first two decades of post communist transformations.

## Sources

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