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DOMINIKAV. POLANSKA

Polish civil society in bloom

Expert article • 1902

There is an established view among researchers and broader society on the development and functioning of civil societies in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). The conventional view on CEE civil societies has in recent research on the topic been updated and challenged, showing that post-socialist civil societies are no longer solely characterized by financial and organizational donor dependence separated from the local context and struggling with the passivity of the grassroots. A clearly changed and more nuanced picture is emerging at the time of this writing. Despite some differences in the development of civil society among the countries in CEE, we can observe thriving activity among the grassroots and decreased importance of financial support from abroad, along with traces of “informalization” of civic engagement and the growing significance of urban social movements. Here are some of the recent findings in research on civil societies in this part of Europe, and in particular in Poland.

Several recent studies demonstrated that the assessment of passivity of civil society in CEE is outdated (Jacobsson & Saxonberg 2013; Jacobsson 2015; Jacobsson & Korolczuk forthcoming; Fabian & Korolczuk forthcoming; Polanska 2015; Polanska & Chimiak forthcoming). To summarize, these studies go against 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 as a form of neo-colonialism, interpreting civil societies in CEE 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 CEE (Buchowski 1996). It is time to challenge this powerful discourse by showing the thriving activity of civil societies in the area.

Poland is singled out as having an exceptionally lively civil sphere, intensifying its activity in the last few years. Urban movements and mobilizations have gained in popularity in the country, and the term “urban movements” was introduced to the public debate in 2010 (Mergler *et al.* 2013: 15) as a confirmation and a unifying category of the activities undertaken in the field of urban activism. This, in turn, led to further attempts to consolidate the variety of urban mobilizations and actors, and the *Congress of Urban Movements* was held for the first time in 2011. Since then it has been held annually in different Polish cities, aiming at creating a platform where various activists and or-

ganizations can discuss national urban policies and spatial planning. In many ways, 2014 was an exceptional year. The *Urban Movements’ Coalition* was founded targeting national urban policy and challenging existing political order. This was followed by local self-government elections with as many as 1,000 candidates coming from the urban movements all over the country (Domaradzka and Wijkström 2014).

There is considerable activity to be observed among Polish grassroots. Several recent studies have shown activity in fields that hitherto have been overlooked or not included in the perception of civil society. For instance, the blooming of informal social activism among Poles has been discovered to be an important and widespread feature of self-organization (Chimiak & Iwinska 2015). Meanwhile, the majority of studies have, until now, been focused on the formalized and professionalized NGO activity in the country, dismissing informal activism as lacking a political/critical angle. Civil society organizations founded during state socialism, like rural women’s organizations, sports associations, religious groups, scouts, fire brigades, self-help groups or neighborhood groups have been omitted in studies or discarded as “false” expressions of civil society due to their a-political character (Jacobsson and Korolczuk forthcoming; Matysiak 2015; Polanska 2015). According to Iłowiecka-Tańska (2011), these kinds of organizations have been absent due to their alternative style of organizing, not comparable to the organizational style of Western NGOs. Over-looked civil society mobilizations on issues of motherhood and parenthood, tenants’ organizations, mobilizations of people in precarious positions, along with right-wing extremists in the Polish context have been examined in the work of Jacobsson and Korolczuk (forthcoming), arguing that these mobilizations’ socio-economic status, gender, religious identity or ideological position have disregarded them as not worthy/interesting enough to study. 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 recent studies and the narrow perspective has been broadened, showing the variety, innovative character and extent of civil society activity in the country.

DOMINIKAV. POLANSKA

PhD in Sociology
 Institute of Housing and Urban Research (IBF)
 Uppsala University
 Centre for Baltic and East European Studies Södertörn
 University
 Sweden