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Published online: 13 Feb 2018.

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ABSTRACT

The first decade after the fall of state socialism in Poland was characterized by moderate aspirations to reform or oppose the dominant (neoliberal) rhetoric by social movements in the country. In the last decade, a turn toward more informal grassroots activity has been observed by scholars, above all in the field of urban activism. This article looks into this recent development in urban activism and focuses especially on the hitherto neglected grassroots, noninstitutionalized, and nonformalized forms of activism that take place in Polish cities aimed at urban change. It will be argued that this form of urban activism developed as a reaction to professionalization and NGO-ization of social movements, defying the (until now) established forms of organizing collectively. The analysis is built on qualitative data gathered in 2014–2015, including 36 in-depth interviews with urban activists in informal initiatives and groups in different Polish cities.

Introduction

The first decade after the fall of state socialism in Poland was characterized by moderate aspirations to reform or oppose the dominant (neoliberal) rhetoric by social movements in the country (Ekiert & Kubik, 2014; Ost, 2000; Polanska, 2016). 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 (Domaradzka & Wijkström, 2014; Jacobsson, 2015; Pluciński, 2013). Slogans of "the right to the city" and "urban revolution" have guided noninstitutionalized politics of the 2000s, and there have been 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).

In previous studies, the development of Polish civil society in the first decade following 1989 was described as being characterized by donor dependence and professionalization. The impact of foreign donors was significant and the number of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) grew in the country, resulting in "gradual maturation and professionalization" of civil society (Gliński, 1999, p. 2). Simultaneously, research on civil society and social movements in postsocialist Europe focused mainly on institutionalized forms of collective action, ignoring noninstitutionalized and informal forms. The urban dimension of Polish civil society, urban social movements, and urban activism was furthermore discovered late in scholarly work, and there are a number of gaps in the research field on the topic. Additionally, the conventional view of Polish civil society as suffering from its socialist past in its passiveness and weakness has constrained the perspective and curiosity of researchers in the field. In describing the development of civil society in Poland, researchers used models developed in the West, assessing civil societies in postsocialist Europe as passive (Howard, 2003), ambiguous, and "a pale reflection of its counterparts elsewhere in the world" (Salamon &

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Anheier, 1999, pp. 33–34), marked by distrustful and individualist attitudes, obstructed by learned helplessness and scapegoating (Anheier & Seibel, 1998), uncivil (Kotkin, 2010), or even as characterized by "civilizational incompetence" (Sztompka, 2004, p. 163).

However, recently some researchers studied urban grassroots mobilizations in this neglected part of Europe. Jacobsson's (2015) collection of research on the topic shows the variety of urban grassroots in several central and eastern European countries, arguing that the marketization and privatization processes in the region have been significantly persistent, resulting in a revival of a variety of urban grassroots. The authors show that these urban grassroots are somewhat different from other social movements previously studied by researchers in their independence from foreign donors and low-key, bottom-up character. Moreover, in the study by Aidukaite and Jacobsson (2015), the authors demonstrate that external funding and support were significant in the formation of community organizations in Lithuania. In other words, 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 artificial. Several studies (Polanska, 2014; Polanska & Martínez, 2016; Polanska & Piotrowski, 2015) argued in favor of that, demonstrating lively activity among urban grassroots (of the left-wing extra-parliamentary type).

Aidukaite and Fröhlich (2015) examined urban grassroots activism in Moscow and Vilnius and concluded that repertoires of action differ in these two contexts regardless of similar urban and housing policies in the past. Above all, the willingness to institutionalize or work with institutional actors differed depending on the context. Domaradzka and Wijkström (2014) studied the emergence of the Polish urban movement and uncovered its heterogeneity, different institutionalization paths, and tensions between different parts and actors of the movement. Furthermore, in their studies on Polish informal activists, Polanska (2015) and Polanska and Chimiak (2016) showed that institutionalization is not always the goal of collective action, arguing that Polish civil society has recently gone "beyond NGO-ization" to "informalization" of self-organization, or a "going back to the (grass) roots" (Polanska & Chimiak, 2016; p. 663; see also Herbst & Żakowska, 2013). Moreover, Polanska (2015) emphasized the importance of the local level for the motivation of activists in informal and noninstitutionalized groups to act together (cf. Domaradzka, 2015; Gilejko & Blaszczyk, 2011).

This article examines the recent development in urban activism and especially focuses on the hitherto neglected grassroots, noninstitutionalized, and nonformalized forms of activism that take place in Polish cities aiming at social change through community and solidarity building. Only a few of the above-mentioned studies have devoted their full attention to initiatives that are more or less explicitly not willing to institutionalize and built around informal networks (Polanska, 2015; 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 argue 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. The argument put forward 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 want to conceptualize 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 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 community and build solidarity.

In this sense, the goals of activism studied here are to create community and practice solidarity on a local level.

The article begins with a description of the material and methods in the study. The next section introduces the theoretical framework and elaborates the concepts of urban activism and urban social movements in order to understand the specific form of informal urban activism that is examined in the study. The theoretical section is followed by the analysis of the interview data where motivations for organizing informally along with the advantages and shortcomings of this kind of organizing are studied. Lastly, conclusions are drawn arguing that Poland is going through an "informalization" of urban forms of civil society as 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 nongovernmental organizations in the country.

Methodology used in the study

The analysis is built on interview data conducted in 2014–2015 (in the project "The Undiscovered Dimension of the Third Sector: A Study of Un-institutionalized Civic Activism" funded by the the Polish Ministry of Labor and Social Policy and implemented by the Center for Local Activities Association in partnership with Collegium Civitas in Warsaw) and consisting of a selection of 36 in-depth interviews with activists in informal initiatives that were formed in various Polish cities and focus on some specific urban issues in their activity. Within the research project, far more interviews were collected with activists in informal initiatives (60 in total), but only those active in urban areas and focusing on urban issues were analyzed in this study.

The activists chosen in this study followed the criteria of (a) being active for at least 2 years, (b) being active in urban areas, (c) at least 2 months of activity with the initiative the activists are representing, and (d) diversification of worldviews. To achieve all of the criteria, mapping of informal initiatives and a snowball technique were used in the selection. The interviewees came from varied social backgrounds and the following occupations were represented: artistic director, educator, researcher, sales assistant, project coordinator, artist, graphic designer, civil servant, entrepreneur, librarian, financial analyst, university student, pensioner, lawyer, architect, therapist, and so on (see Table 1). The cases those activists represented varied from initiatives oriented toward revitalizing or animating their immediate neighborhood or local community, gathering individuals cultivating particular hobbies connected to their areas of residence (fans of walking tours, cyclists, urban gardeners, musicians), providing free assistance (help to homeless, repairing bikes, organizing activities for youths or other groups), creating public and commonly managed spaces (social centers, noncommercial cafés, art collectives), commonly seeking alternatives to capitalism (food cooperatives, alternative exchange systems, alternatives to growth), and so on. Their overarching goals could very simplistically be defined as creating local communities and practicing solidarity (for instance, on the neighborhood, district, or city level) with other groups through practices emerging from a locality and aiming at contesting how we use the city, producing autonomous cultural expressions and identities, and promoting self-management (cf. Castells, 1983). If it is through gardening together, or cycling around the city, or creating spaces for social and cultural activities, this form of activism strives for people to come together and create something in common. The practice of solidarity is another goal of such activism and is manifested in sharing immaterial and material resources within and with other groups.

The interviews were biographical and covered the respondents' age, education, occupation, length and history of civic engagement, family background and its influence on engagement and values, the role of school or friends for social engagement, previous experiences of grassroots organizations, experiences of being active in NGOs, experiences from abroad and work life, and so on. Moreover, the questions asked in the interviews encompassed issues of institutionalization and the respondents' experiences and views on being active in institutionalized and noninstitutionalized initiatives. Moreover, questions were asked on the motivations, values, role models, and identification.

Table 1. Interviewed urban activists.

No.	Gender	Age	Occupation	Initiative	Active since
1	M	37	Art director	Promotion of the city outside of the institutions	2011
2	M	30	Educator	Neighborhood improvement, focusing on public spaces	2011–2012
3	M	34	Researcher	Public space gathering people in civic activities	2012–2013
4	M	29	Researcher	Integration through cycling activities	2012
5	F	23	Sales assistant	Socializing with and helping homeless	2012
6	F	31	Art coordinator	Alternative system of economy	2012
7	F	50	Cultural worker	Common gardening	2011
8	M	34	Curator	Common gardening	2014
9	F	31	Civil servant	Residents promoting public space and cultural activities	2014
10	F	35	Artist	Gathering organizations working with neighborhood issues	2010
11	M	29	Artist	Art collective	2011
12	M	28	Project manager	Food cooperative	2014
13	F	35	Psychologist	Food cooperative	2012
14	M	28	Lawyer	Group working with preserving a specific part of the city threatened by demolition	2013
15	M	X	Lawyer	Free of charge and do-it-yourself bike repair and courses in bike repair	2012
16	F	30	Doctoral student	Bike repair for women	2009
17	M	25	Civil servant	Promotion of tourism, sightseeing, and traveling	(several years)
18	M	29	Psychotherapist	Partnership for stimulating local activity	2006
19	F	67	Accountant	Partnership for improvement of the area	(1984)
20	F	26	Designer	Network of groups focusing on city improvements	2014
21	F	31	Therapist	Neighborhood-based social center	2012
22	F	21	Student	Noncommercial café	2013
23	M	36	Animator	Neighborhood community	2014
24	F	30	Student	Fighting evictions, organizing platforms for urban activists	2007
25	M	61	Civil servant	Support of grassroots initiatives in an area	1998
26	F	19	Student	Informal art group working with youths	2013
27	F	23	Student	Social center organizing concerts, free meals, etc.	2014
28	M	28	Student	Promoting city development, preservation of historical sites, activities for residents	2013
29	F	23	Civil servant	Neighborhood promotion and integration	2013
30	F	31	Financial analyst	Urban gardening	2014
31	M	27	Artist	Promotion of the city with the help of music	2013
32	M	33	Entrepreneur	Social center promoting co-working, organizing workshops and creative activities	2013
33	M	28	Graphic designer	Through workshops, discussions and film screenings seeking alternatives to growth	2011
34	M	69	Pensioner	Educating youth in the history of the city	(few years)
35	F	31	Architect	Raising architectural awareness of the residents	2012
36	M	29	Librarian	Promotion of a neighborhood, organizing critical mass	2009

Forty-seven percent (17) of the respondents were women and 53% (19) were men. The average age of the interviewed activists was 33 years, with the youngest 19 years old and the oldest 69. Examining the occupations of the respondents, we can observe that the vast majority of the group holds, or is in the process of acquiring (students), a university education. The majority were thus well educated and worked as professionals in their field. The length of their initiatives was difficult to calculate because not all of the interviewees specified the exact number of years they have been active, and one specified the length of her activism. However, from the remaining answers, we can see that the average length of these informal initiatives was approximately 3.5 years.

Interviews were taped, transcribed, and complemented with interviewers' reflections and analysis of the interview. In the article, all respondents are anonymized and the names of their initiatives are not stated; only their main activities and a numbering system were used when referring to specific interviews. Interview material was coded and thematized theoretically (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2014), concentrating on the themes of institutionalization (versus activity in noninstitutionalized forms of

collective action) and motivation (for and against noninstitutionalized activism), which will be focused on presenting different aspects of activism in noninstitutionalized form.

Urban social movements and urban activism: Theoretical framework

Castells's (1978, 1983) groundbreaking work in the field of urban social movements is drawn upon in this study. Although Castells demonstrated the diverse character of urban movements, he distinguished three shared characteristics among them. The first one is their consideration of themselves as urban or related to the city. The second is that they are locally based and territorially defined. The third is that their mobilization coalesces around three goals: collective consumption, cultural identity, and political self-management (Castells, 1983). The goal of collective consumption often uses arguments of use value as opposed to the logics of exchange value widespread in capitalist societies. Cultural identity as a goal strives for preserving and producing autonomous culture in the city. The third goal regards democratization of decision-making processes in cities in either increasing participation of ordinary citizens in local governments or by self-management.

Castells's anti-institutional character of urban social movements along with the emphasis on formation of a distinctive group identity fits in well with the form of urban activism that is studied here. The purpose of this study is to understand *why* the informal urban activism has emerged in the country and Castells's standpoint on social movements as "the sources of social innovation" (Castells, 1983, p. 294) is shared. The definition of urban social movements as consisting of grass-roots mobilizations sharing the characteristics in their self-denomination, their local base, and their goals, distinguished by Castells (1983), is highly useful but might miss the more informal and "hidden" forms of urban activism. When the focus is on the transformation of urban structure by urban social movements and their innovatory potential for the role, meaning, and structure of the city, the risk is high that mobilizations not primarily focused on protests or reactive, visible, or spectacular activity remain concealed and invisible to the researcher's eye.

The more informal side of urban activism is thus seldom focused on in research. It has been "hidden" or just regarded as not interesting enough due to its invisibility in politics or covert existence. Those studying informal mobilization outside of the realm of institutional politics have often interpreted this phenomenon in accordance with Scott's (1990) definition of infra-politics as "the strategic form that the resistance of subjects must assume under conditions of great peril" (p. 71), a resistance of subordinated groups that matures and takes a more institutionalized form over time. In other studies, its more reactive expressions have been classified as a NIMBY kind of activism as it has been initiated around a local community issue and dismissed as narrow and temporal mobilization lacking the desirable features of sustainability and politicized collective action. In the case of urban activism in Poland, the groups undertaking such activism are not subordinate in the sense that Scott (1990) was referring to and might have been initiated by some kind of reaction to a local issue but sustained their activity over time. I view this kind of urban informal activism as a mobilization of its own kind that does not necessarily lead to institutionalization or instant decline as the initial goals are reached. The aim of this article is to fill the gap on informal forms of urban activism and demonstrate that social change can also be pursued by informal groups focusing on the creation of local communities and practicing solidarity with others.

Nevertheless, before proceeding to analysis, let us dwell for a moment on the social background of urban activists that in previous studies in Western contexts have been described as made up of the following:

- "radical autonomous, anarchist and alternative groups and various leftist organizations,
- middle-class urbanites who seek to defend their accustomed quality of life,
- disparate groups that share a precarious existence, whether in the informal sector, in the creative industries or among college students,

- artists and other creative professionals which may cut across these backgrounds,
- frequently, local environmental groups that fight problematic energy, climate or development policies,
- and finally, but in Europe so far rarely present: the marginalized, excluded, oppressed, people of color" (Mayer, 2013, p. 11).

Apart from the lack of people of color and significant mobilizations of local environmental groups in the noninstitutionalized sphere of Polish urban activism, the rest of the cited groups are represented. As with other contexts, they have concentrated around the four frontiers challenging the neoliberalization of urban governance: municipal growth politics, fighting social and spatial polarization of particular communities, mobilizing for social justice, and against the local effects of globalization (anti-globalization/alter-globalization mobilizations; Mayer, 2007). However, they also have a communitarian dimension that contradicts sociological prophecies of loss of community in modern times and especially in central and eastern Europe since the collapse of state socialism. This informal and noninstitutionalized activism revolves around the search for new forms of community on the local level struggling for the common good (cf. Bilewicz & Potkańska, 2013; Polanska & Chimiak, 2016). The renewal of communitarian values among urban activists is interpreted here as a reaction to the professionalization and individualization of the civil society in the country and as a possible reaction to the fragmentation of civil society in Poland (Jacobsson, 2012) in a context of precarization of work conditions, the retrenchment of welfare provisions, (re)privatization and rising economic inequalities, migration, and the renewal of nationalist ideologies and discourses, which clash with the liberal ideals of citizenship promulgated and promoted in the rebuilding of civil societies after 1989. (Jacobsson & Korolczuk, 2017, p. 6)

By organizing in informal and noninstitutionalized groups and networks, urban activists critically position themselves against the dominating forms of organization and openly critique the dependency, conformism, instrumental character, and other constraints related to bureaucracy and the lack of room for maneuvering in institutionalized organizations. Therefore, the following analysis will focus on the specificities of informal urban activism in Poland in highlighting activists' striving for independence, unconventionality, ideation, and symmetrical character of collective action.

The specificities of informal urban activism in Poland

To analyze the reasons for the emergence of informal forms of urban activism in Poland, the motivations for organizing informally along with the advantages and shortcomings of this kind of organizing are examined. The interviewees tended to describe their activism in binary oppositions and contrasted informal activism to formal and institutionalized forms, most often to NGOs (that some of them had previous experiences of voluntary or paid work within). I have identified nine central oppositions in the interview material where informal organization is compared to formal organization and the advantages and disadvantages of each form are weighed against each other.

Table 2. Binary oppositions associated with formal and informal organizations.

Formal	Informal
Hierarchical	Horizontal
Rules	Norms
Bureaucracy	Pleasure
Dependency	Independency
Constraining	Liberating
Conformity	Challenging and opposing
Instrumental	Ideational
Structure	Interpersonal relationships
Responsibility	Creativity

Table 2 presents the differences identified between the formal and informal groups and organizations in the analyzed interviews.

These themes often overlap and therefore are distinguished solely for analytical purposes. They indicate a reflective and distanced stance of activists in informal initiatives toward formal and institutionalized forms of organizing. The following section presents these oppositions in four subsections.

Going against the dependency in institutionalized forms

Independence in acting informally and outside of institutions is understood by the interviewed activists as liberating them from the burdens of instrumental tasks related to formal and institutionalized activity and as an ideational freedom providing greater independence. Here are the words of one of the interviewed activists:

> They [informal initiatives] don't want to formalize because they don't want additional tasks related to paper work, reports; they want to keep their independence. They don't want to be involved in all those grants, competitions, filling in thousands of papers. They prefer to do things on their own, using their own resources that are much smaller but guarantee independence. (6)

The interviewees see the informal kind of activism as of a more genuine character than the engagement of institutionalized actors. Institutionalized and formal actors are perceived as constrained by the economic conditions of their institutions. Keeping independence in relation to donors is regarded as a more authentic form of involvement:

> This is real activism, not "under somebody's supervision," it is civic action, because we the citizens want it this way. And it is not that we have a grant and we want to do it according to the grant. (3)

In addition to being seen as more authentic, informal activism is seen as freer from the burdens of conditions posed by institutionalized action. One of the interviewees stressed this freedom in terms of commonly set rules:

> It gives us such huge freedom, that we, you know, don't need to act within the frames of some project, but that everything that is set as a result of our agreements, between ourselves, you know. . . . We have free hands and we set the rules ourselves. It is not a result of a written project that we need to follow. (8)

Moreover, the expectations of donors or financiers in formalized organizations are brought forward as negative examples of why not to engage in this kind of organization. The expectation of getting something in return is described as a "pressure to fulfill their expectations" (11) instead of focusing on the main idea behind one's actions.

Dependence on external financial sources is also seen as creating asymmetrical relationships with the donors or financiers resulting in limitations of what can be done or said in one's activity. The sphere of criticism of those who are economically dependent is perceived as smaller compared to that of those who are not. The management of money is associated with corruptive behaviors and compromising ideational and visionary ambitions of activists. From this perspective many NGOs are described as "existing solely for attracting money" (33).

The possibility of attracting financing for some parts of the activity is nevertheless depicted as necessary at times by the interviewees. They appreciate activism that can be done without financial means and hold it as an ideal, but they also reveal that it is oftentimes helpful to get economic support. Those of the activists who have the practical or theoretical knowledge of the functioning of more institutionalized actors (like NGOs) mention the possibility of attracting funds and grants as an important facilitator. Sometimes cooperation with institutionalized actors is described by the interviewees as an instrumental solution to access or attract economic resources without the necessity to institutionalize.

Turning away from bureaucracy and securing a wider room/capacity for action

Bureaucracy of institutionalized forms of engagement is described in negative terms by the interviewees perceiving administrative work as time and spirit consuming, in the sense that the ideational spirit of activism is lost in paperwork. One of the interviewees stressed the "magnitude of energy eaten by bureaucracy, and it is too much in relation to the reached effects" (9).

An important reason for acting in informal initiatives is to avoid bureaucracy and to keep the parts of activism that are more pleasurable. From this perspective, NGOs are described as an unsatisfactory form of activism. One of the respondents described NGOs as "unfulfilling" and argued:

> The disappointment in NGOs has caused informal … more informal initiatives to emerge. People simply stopped wanting to write all of those papers, to do all the accounting, when it has proven that it is more than a month's bureaucratic work in order to get five thousand zloty. (9)

The freedom from administrative tasks in informal initiatives is appreciated and the activists noticed a recent change in the broader effects of their activism, arguing that

> it somehow dissolves and penetrates to some social and political awareness, also to the awareness of city authorities that seem to more and more change; they are changing their style of urban governing and are absorbing the ideas generated by such informal movements. (8)

Moreover, the lack of constraining administrative work is seen as favorable to the creativity and capacity of acting together in informal initiatives. The capacity for action, its conventional or unconventional form, is not conditioned by rules and regulations coming from outside of the group. Due to the lack of such conditions, the action itself is also deemed to be faster to realize than in institutionalized and formalized organizations. Moreover, the interviewees stress the flexibility and lesser demands of responsibility of informal activism:

> Also the elasticity, but maybe it is an intermediate stage of testing different things. And also as an incubator, it gives time for trying without any greater responsibility. Especially, when one is working ordinarily and has some kind of a job, or a family. (20)

Conversely, the interviewees also reveal that the bureaucracy of institutionalized organizations could be positive in the sense that it gives more structure to collective action and also transparency. Transparency is emphasized in particular when the issue of financing arises and the interviewees stress that financial clarity, in relation to the donors and financiers, is an important aspect of a group's or organization's reliability and trustworthiness. Trustworthiness, in turn, is connected to the ability to attract support (in members and financial resources) by the interviewees.

Going against the instrumental character of institutionalized civil society

The interviewees described informal activism as a more symmetrical form of acting together. Symmetrical relationships are believed to encourage creativity, friendship, diversity, and enthusiasm in informal groups. The horizontal democratic structure guarantees that "nobody is dominant, nobody is ego-driven, and in our partnership, everything is so smooth. We meet and everybody has a voice" (10).

The activists in informal initiatives are described as not driven by instrumental reasons but by the pleasure of acting together with others. The possibility of jumping in and out of the initiative is also emphasized as an advantage of acting informally. Here are the words of one of the interviewees:

> I go there after three years and it is still functioning, such an action as Food Not Bombs. And it suits me, because when I have the time, desire, and a period [of activity], I will go there during a year and participate. Then I will not go there, but it will still function. And this is beautiful. That it is possible. (11)

Furthermore, the social character of noninstitutionalized and informal initiatives is perceived as rather different from institutionalized forms of engagement (cf. Polanska & Chimiak, 2016). Institutionalized forms of organizing are understood as a more rationalized and detached arrangement, with a few active and leading individuals, something that does not fit informal activists' "will to act commonly and to have a common goal" (4).

The instrumental character of organizing is considered as a threat to the communal nature of relationships within the group, which are seen among the major assets for engagement in informal activism. Each and every activist is seen as "contributing with something to the community" (23), and the cooperation and friendship ties that are developed in such activism are seen as positive outcomes that might be threatened by more instrumental and rational functioning associated with formalization.

However, the view of the interviewees is more nuanced than this. Symmetrical relationships in an organization are discussed as not always practical and goal oriented. Some of the interviewees describe the frustration of horizontal decision-making processes and their time-consuming nature. The instability of organizations based on informal ties and the lack of responsibility is highlighted as a significant obstacle for the widening of the scope of action and for its longevity.

Providing an opposition to current power relationships

Activists in informal initiatives regard their engagement as a way of pursuing the common good or a way of contributing to leveling out asymmetrical power relationships prevailing in their society. They describe their activism as an intervention in a system where common good is not prioritized:

> It is not enough to live with the user's manual of an obliging citizen and nobody is caring for the good of the people.
> You have to take care of it yourself, you have to influence your environment in order to form the reality. (33)

Providing an opposition to the present public power holders and decision makers is stated in the interviews as an important reason to join informal initiatives. Informal initiatives are believed to differ from formal ones in their political views, in representing more alternative views of politics and allowing for more critical and not always legal or widely accepted actions, where the responsibility is difficult to connect to specific individuals.

Informal organizations are perceived by the interviewees to be more popular in recent years, and their popularity is explained by one of the interviewees as a consequence of a braver attitude among the citizens: "It is a result of openness, a result of a breakthrough. A breakthrough to simply go and fight for your backyard. I think, people are more courageous" (10).

In addition to the courage of the people, the activists point to their belief in possible change as a result of their actions. They see a vacuum created by the political system to be filled by their actions. The quotation below illustrates this argument well: "I am encouraged by, for instance, city politics, governmental politics, with which I totally disagree" (7).

Moreover, the nonconformist stance of many of the informal and noninstitutionalized actors and groups is regarded as emancipating on both personal and collective levels. The interviewees see it as an aspect of their informal activism that opens up plenty of possibilities of acting together that do not need to apply with imposing rules coming from outside.

Polanska and Chimiak (2016) argued that activists' motives are less oriented toward the protection of their social status, career, prestige, or reputation but more concerned with acknowledging and challenging the power of existing structures. Activists interviewed for this study express an explicit belief in democracy and democratic governance, where the citizens they represent have a legitimate voice that ought to be heard, preferably through collective action.

Conclusions

So, what are the motivations of Polish informal urban activists a case of? And why are they interesting for social scientists studying collective action in other contexts than the Western one? Firstly, they show that conventional views on the functioning of civil society and social movements in central Europe and Poland are inaccurate in their narrow assessment and definition. There have been a number of informal initiatives active in the country escaping the lens of these scholars for a number of years.

Secondly, they demonstrate a novel aspect of urban activism in its often strategic position outside of institutionalized forms of organizing and communitarian values. Holding the common good as an ideal and striving for the creation of local communities among Polish activists is relatively novel and contradicts previous research on civil society in Poland. In their studies of informal civic activism in Poland, Chimiak and Iwińska (2015) and Polanska and Chimiak (2016) stressed this new and recent shift in the character of civic engagement in the country in the communitarian values guiding this kind of mobilization. The authors point to the individualistic values guiding the development of civil society in the first 2 decades after the systemic change in 1989, arguing that there is a clear shift to be observed in the last 7 years toward communitarian ideals (see also Bilewicz & Potkańska, 2013; Polanska, 2015). The shift could also be a reaction to the loss of urban commonalities as a result of state withdrawal from the provision of public goods and the fact that "capitalist urbanization perpetually tends to destroy the city as a social, political and livable commons" (Harvey, 2012, p. 80), a reaction that focuses on self-organization and creation of commons that have been destroyed by capitalist accumulation and urbanization.

These informal urban initiatives are a form of urban social movements that are usually invisible in research. What makes them a form of urban social movements is their consideration of themselves as linked to the city, their local base, combined with the three goals they pursue: collective consumption, cultural identity, and political self-management (Castells, 1983) expressed in their will to create local communities and practice solidarity. Most important, they are friendship and community-based groups that value spontaneity, flexibility, and voluntary membership/participation and focus in particular on local issues. Interestingly, these informal activists often identify their activism against more formal and professionalized civil society organizations (anti-institutional orientation). They strive in their informal character to go beyond the professionalization, "NGO-ization," and individualization that has characterized Polish civil society since the 1990s (cf. Chimiak & Iwińska, 2015; Jacobsson & Saxonberg, 2013; Polanska & Chimiak, 2016). In this sense, they are network based, not needing "a formal leadership, command and control centre, or a vertical organization to distribute information and instructions" (Castells, 2012, p. 221), protecting themselves from the risks of bureaucratization and manipulation.

The most likely question that researchers would pose when studying informal activist groups would probably be about 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. What I would like to argue here is that the "informaliza-tion" 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 nongovernmental organiza-tions in the country. Therefore, the argument 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). What is also characteristic of these initiatives is that in their activity they are focused on, or in some way emphasize, the local context in

which they have emerged. Moreover, they are, as Jacobsson (2015) previously observed, independent from foreign donors and of low-key, grassroots character.

About the author

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