

# Civil Society and Three Dimensions of Inequality in Post-1989 Poland

*Grzegorz Ekiert, Jan Kubik, and Michal Wenzel*

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. We argue that 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.<sup>1</sup> 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 declining years of state socialism brought about region-wide economic recession, anarchization of bureaucratic allocation of resources, spontaneous privatization of state assets, explosion of black markets, and embourgeoisement of party elites. All these developments resulted in a dramatic increase of already existing economic and social inequalities as “apparatchiks turned into entrepreneurchiks”<sup>2</sup> and new market-generated inequalities emerged.<sup>3</sup>

The economic and political situation in Poland in the late 1980s was more difficult than in most countries of the region.<sup>4</sup> Western economic sanctions imposed after the destruction of the Solidarity movement,<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup>

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. In 2015, *Freedom House* ranked Poland near the top of the scale among consolidated liberal democracies.<sup>7</sup> 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, a professional political elite, and an institutionalized party system catering to a fairly reliably divided electorate.<sup>8</sup> Poland was the only country in the European Union that did not experience economic recession in the aftermath of the global financial crisis of 2008. Between 1989 and 2015, its GDP per capita quadrupled, and it ranked ahead of many European countries in the Global Competitiveness Index.<sup>9</sup> While economic inequalities increased during this period, they were less severe than in many other post-communist countries. For example, absolute poverty was reduced from 13.2 percent in 1993 to 3.9 percent in 2010.<sup>10</sup> In 2013, public opinion in Poland was only second to Germany in supporting European economic integration, and Poles held the most favorable views of the European Union among all European countries as reported in a recent study.<sup>11</sup> The Parliamentary and Presidential elections of 2015 brought to power the Law and Justice Party (PiS) that has since started implementing a populist economic program and introduced several measures that are commonly seen as serious challenges to the foundations of liberal democracy. The long-term effects of these changes are still unclear, but government policies, especially the new child benefit program, had immediate distributional consequences.

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. Its citizens were unaccustomed to electoral competition and mistrustful of the state in addition to other political and social organizations. Finally, Poland was in the midst of a long and debilitating economic crisis with hyperinflation, recession, and a near collapse of the consumer market. Thus,

Polish transformations began inauspiciously during the devastating economic crisis and in the context of weak political institutions with the highly fragmented party system, strong and mobilized trade unions, and the high level of regional uncertainty.

In this article we focus on the impact of civil society transformation on Polish politics and on reducing the inequalities that were both inherited from the old regime and generated by institutional transformations after 1989. Most contemporary studies on democratization, democratic consolidation, and performance of democracy suggest that there is an intimate connection between the strength of civil society, the health of democratic institutions, and the quality of government policies and performance. Most scholars agree that a strong, active, and assertive civil society is a fundamental precondition for successful consolidation of democracy and stronger governance and accountability.<sup>12</sup> A related literature on the relationship between social capital and democracy offers a similar conclusion.<sup>13</sup>

We argue that Poland's civil society has contributed to the consolidation and quality of Polish democracy by reducing political inequality and facilitating civic participation. It has been a powerful agent that helped to eliminate the citizen disenfranchisement inherent in the old regime as well as an effective guardian of the regained civic and political rights during the democratic consolidation process. Two and a half decades after communism's collapse, Poland has a relatively robust civil society that is organizationally comprehensive, dense and diverse, representative of all major interests and identities, and ideologically pluralist but increasingly polarized since the 2015 elections. The picture of civil society we present remains in stark contrast to most discussions of the condition of civil society in the region, which emphasize organizational weakness and general civic malaise.<sup>14</sup>

The contemporary state of Poland's civil society is the result of four distinct and simultaneous processes: First, the initial years of transition witnessed the process of *reconstitution and recombination* in which the dense network of social organizations inherited from the old regimes adapted to new democratic conditions and a large number of new organizations and social initiatives emerged across the country.<sup>15</sup> The reconstitution of civil society paralleled *de-etatism*,<sup>16</sup> whereby the state lost control of professional and social organizations, and *de-corporatization*, a process in which large professional organizations and trade unions lost their dominant role in politics and their influence on policy-making. Finally, the *professionalization* of civil society has resulted in the emergence of tens of thousands of NGOs and foundations during the last two decades. These are mostly small organizations run by professional staffs that rely on public funding, fundraising, and volunteers. They focus on a wide range of local and national issues and initiatives and operate in a well-structured and (until 2016) friendly legal environment.<sup>17</sup>

Our *diachronically* oriented study is based on an assumption that the development of civil society and its impact on politics and policy making should be explained, first of all, by organizational transformation of civil society and by the change in relations between civil society organizations, the state, and other actors of the public space. Thus, the constitution and condition of civil society is not the epiphenomenon of transient

economic developments, nor is it driven by fluctuations in public opinion. Moreover, in contrast to many existing analyses based on a small number of indicators and/or on cross-national public opinion surveys or expert panels,<sup>18</sup> we employ a more realistic and empirically sensitive notion of civil society and collect data on a broad range of civil society actors and their behavior.<sup>19</sup> The study, “The Logic of Civil Society in New Democracies: Hungary, Poland, South Korea and Taiwan,” provides empirical evidence generated by the method of event analysis that is supplemented by the entire range of existing data on non-governmental organizations and public opinion surveys.

### **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. The movement survived underground and continued to defy the communist state throughout the 1980s. The Round Table negotiations of 1989, leading to democratic transition, were not only a direct result of this sustained pressure from below, but also took place against the backdrop of mass political mobilization and waves of strikes. 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, 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. Yet, the post-breakthrough civil society and the level of its activity have been diagnosed by many analysts as weak or surprisingly lethargic.<sup>20</sup>

We do not agree with the dominant view that civil society in post-communist Poland is weak and underdeveloped. Instead, we see a dynamic, evolving reality of active associational sphere whose members engage in various activities via many different organizational vehicles. Moreover, we detect a distinct pattern in the evolution of the post-1989 Polish civil society: while the magnitude of contentious forms of activity (strikes, demonstrations, etc.) and their overtly political tenor has been gradually declining since mid-1990s, the intensity of the more “civil” forms of activity (participation in and support for NGOs, volunteering, etc.) has been growing. During the last two decades of post-communist transformations, the center of gravity in Polish civil society has shifted from large, membership-based, formal organizations, such as trade unions and professional associations (mostly inherited from the old regime), to a highly diverse sector of small, professionalized NGOs that rely on voluntary involvement and public as well as private funding.<sup>21</sup> We describe this shift as the de-corporatization and professionalization of Polish civil society. Accordingly, from 1989 to 2010, the highly contentious pattern of civil society activities present in early years of transformations<sup>22</sup> gradually changed in favor of non-contentious activities. Since 2010,

we observe, however, the resurrection of contentious politics, both on the left and the right of the political spectrum. Thus, the highly politicized and adversarial relations of the early years gave way to more cooperative and complex ones, to be followed by increasing political polarization and the rise of protests in the last few years.

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**

Under the communist system, all East European countries had a distinct (politicized, bureaucratized, centralized, and comprehensive) regime of associational life and interest “representation.” After the communist takeover it was characterized by obligatory membership in mass organizations, complete etatization, and extreme levels of political and civic inequality. This dense network of large associations tightly controlled by the party-state (once dubbed transmission belts of the party-state will) was a defining element of totalitarianism (and post-totalitarianism) and constituted one of the most fundamental institutional differences between it and other types of political regimes, both democratic and authoritarian. However, over time, these mass organizations gained a modicum of autonomy and began lobbying the party-state to extract concessions for their members.

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.<sup>23</sup> They served as hidden carriers of local traditions and provided space for some activities sheltered from direct political interference.

In the 1980s, Poland had an incomplete civil society,<sup>24</sup> with a large number of associations and a dense structure of organizations at various levels and in all functional domains, but without autonomy or a legally defined public space and enforceable rights

and liberties. This incomplete civil society had a massive state-controlled sector comprised of mass organizations, including youth organizations, trade unions, farmers unions, professional associations, recreation and leisure organizations, sports clubs, women's organizations, and veteran's and retirees' unions. As a result of the Solidarity experience and post-martial law developments, this sector had significant levels of pragmatization, de-politicization, and pluralization as well as a relatively high capacity to extract concessions from the communist state. The independent sector of civil society comprised of a wide range of groups, including underground structures of the de-legalized Solidarity movement, semi-autonomous churches and religious organizations, human rights organizations and illegal political opposition, independent artistic and cultural movements, single-issue apolitical movements (environmental, ethnic, and consumer), and self-help groups.

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 (often clandestine) 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 also in independent movements and organizations (for example, in 1981 the Solidarity trade union had some 10 million members).<sup>25</sup>

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.<sup>26</sup> New civil society emerged as a result of two parallel developments. First, the organizations of the *ancien régime* 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.

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.<sup>27</sup> 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.

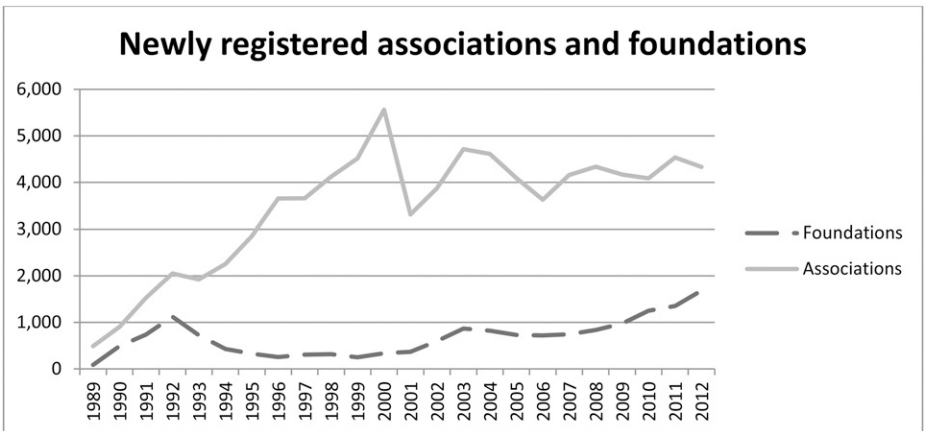
Reform of communist-era associations was paralleled by the rapid emergence of the “new civil society,” comprising a wide spectrum of NGOs, foundations, charities, religious and ethnic minority organizations, but also employer and business associations.<sup>28</sup> These newcomers were by and large the organizations absent in the associational landscape inherited from the communist regime (such as NGOs, charities, or foundations) as well as organizations competing directly with the inherited organizations (such as independent trade unions or new professional associations). Many of these organizations failed to secure sufficient resources and attract members, and they disappeared as quickly as they emerged, especially in the sectors of civil society where they faced competition from the former communist-era organizations (e.g., professional associations).

Following the organizational explosion of the transition period, Poland has experienced a steady growth in its number of associations and foundations.<sup>29</sup> Data on new NGO registration show that every year several thousand new organizations are founded, and the rate of registration is relatively constant during the entire period (Figure 1).

It is important to note that the organizational growth of Polish civil society is relatively even across all of its sectors; all types of organizations show numerical gains from year to year. It is also relatively well distributed across the regions and between urban and rural areas.<sup>30</sup>

Finally, it is also important to note that even the sectors that enjoyed preferential treatment in terms of resources and support under the communist regimes registered quite impressive growth after 1989. The number of sports clubs can serve here as a good example. Their number increased from less than 2,000 in 1980 to more than 6,000

**Figure 1** Dynamics of NGO Registration, 1989–2012



Source: Klon/Jawor.

in 2006. Additionally, the number of people participating in their activities grew impressively between 1990 and 2006.<sup>31</sup>

In sum, based on the sheer number of new organizations, the growth of Polish civil society during the twenty-some years of democratic consolidation has been remarkable. The rate of new organization creation was steep from 1989 until 2000 and since then it has stabilized at a relatively high level of around 5,000 organizations per year with no major declines. New organizations have emerged in all sectors of civil society and in all types of localities. At the same time, the survival rate of the associations from the old regime has been very high. These two trends together produce a relatively dense and consistently growing civil society. The growing robustness and diversity of Polish civil society by definition generates the decline of civic inequality and is a major factor in the dramatic reduction of political inequality.

### **Post-1989 Civil Society: A Public Opinion Perspective**

The picture of organizational growth of civil society presented above is not confirmed uniformly by the extant public opinion surveys. There are striking discrepancies between various assessments of the organizational dynamic of civil society, actual behavior of civil society actors, and opinions concerning civic engagement expressed in various surveys. Particularly puzzling are the discrepancies between comparative, multi-nation surveys such as the World Values Survey or European Social Survey and surveys conducted by the major Polish polling agencies. Considering the country-specific expertise of the Polish research organizations and their long-term experience in researching social movements (e.g., CBOS has done this type of study since as early as 1984), we tend to treat their results as more reliable.

In comparison with other EU countries, protest actions (as measured by declarations of participation by survey respondents) are not particularly common in Poland. European Social Survey 2012 reports that Poles are near the bottom with only 2.4 percent declaring participation in lawful demonstrations (average for all the countries is 6.8 percent) and 10.7 percent admitting to signing a petition (average, 19.2). This is strikingly low not only in comparison to older EU members (in Spain, for example, 25.9 percent of respondents declared participation in demonstration and 33.2 percent admitted to signing a petition), but also to other post-communist countries (in Slovakia, for example, 3.5 percent participated in demonstrations and 20.5 percent signed a petition). This is a surprising finding since we know from our data that Poland has quite a robust, though gradually cooling off, protest scene. Assuming that there are no methodological errors in the collection of survey data, this may mean that Polish protest activities are highly professionalized and organized by well-defined, relatively small groups of activists and organizations.

This picture of a passive civil society is partially confirmed by the ESS survey data on declarations of participation (“working”) in non-political organizations and associations.<sup>32</sup> Poland is at or near the bottom of the European rankings of membership



in non-political organizations and associations, although the situation is changing. Only 7.3 percent of Poles admitted to belonging to a civil society organization. This is a conspicuous contrast to Nordic states or Western Europe, but it is the best result among the post-communist countries.

In contrast to international, multi-country surveys, polls conducted in Poland present a different picture of involvement in civil society organizations. According to these surveys, Poland is placed firmly in the middle of European rankings, on par with Germany, France, and Spain. For example, according to *Diagnoza Społeczna* 2011 survey, 14.8 percent of the adult population belonged to “organizations, associations, parties, committees, councils, religious groups, trade unions or circles.”<sup>33</sup> In 2003, it was 12.2 percent. CBOS surveys indicate that more than 20 percent of adults claim to be performing some type of civic activity in organizations, many in more than one area.<sup>34</sup>

In conclusion, better-contextualized polls of public opinion in Poland provide a picture of a more energetic and extensive civic activism than the transnational surveys. This picture is more in sync with the portrayal that emerges from the database on contentious events. This, of course, does not exclude the possibility that protest activities have become more professionalized and are carried out by a limited segment of the population.

While there has been a steady growth in many types of civil society involvement in Poland, the rise in volunteerism seems to have been nothing short of spectacular. In 2008, 20 percent of adults declared that they performed volunteer, unpaid work for the benefit of their environment, church, neighborhood, town, village, or for people in need in the “last year.” A much bigger number declared that they “had volunteered in the past”—about 58 percent in 2012 (see Table 1).

Similarly, surveys conducted by *Klon/Jawor* Association, SMG/KRC, and *Stowarzyszenie Centrum Wolontariatu* indicate that 14 percent of Poles declared membership in an NGO, social or religious movement, trade union, or charity. The *Klon/Jawor* assesses that between 14–20 percent of adults volunteer in NGOs. But even these numbers may not reflect the real social involvement of Poles. A form of civil society activity that tends to be under-reported in standard studies on civil society is community service. It is a type of social engagement that often does not have a discernible institutional vehicle. For example, according to the *Diagnoza Społeczna* 2011 survey of adult population, 15.6 percent of Poles claim to have been active on behalf of their community (town or neighborhood). Interestingly, we see a slow but consistent increase in reporting of this kind of activity: 8 percent of the surveyed people in 2000, 12.9 percent in 2003, and 13.6 percent in 2005 reported it.<sup>35</sup> Similarly, reported participation in public meetings shows gradual increase.<sup>36</sup>

Given the data presented here, Polish civil society looks different from that in the standard portrayals dominant in the literature on the topic, where Poland—together with other post-communist countries—is often featured as an example of weak civicness, contrasted with the “West” where it is ostensibly uniformly stronger. To be sure, Poles are not among the most civically active Europeans; their level of involvement in volunteerism, for example, is assessed as “relatively low” at 10–19 percent of the adult

**Table 1** Volunteering and Charitable Giving in Poland, 2001–2012

	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2012
Volunteered in the past		58%		58%		56%		47%		54%	58%
Volunteered last year		19%		24%		23%		20%		20%	20%
Donated money to charity							49%	43%	54%	49%	62%
Active in NGO		21%		24%		23%		20%		28%	32%
Active in NGO and volunteered	33%		37%		36%		31%		36%		

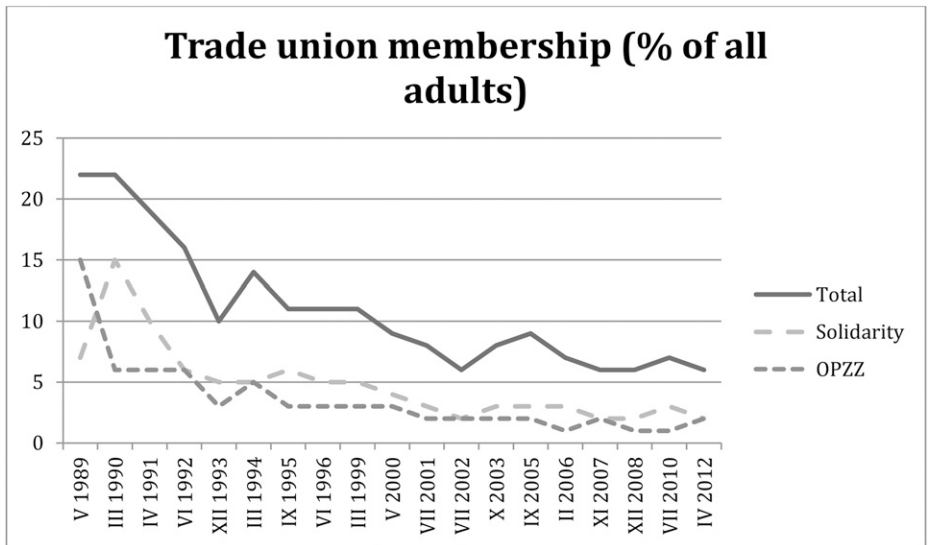
Source: CBOS data (various years).

population. But it is on par with Belgium, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Ireland, Malta, Portugal, Slovakia, Romania, Slovenia, and Spain and somewhat higher than in “Bulgaria, Greece, Italy and Lithuania where less than 10% of adults are involved in voluntary activities.”<sup>37</sup> Given the legacy of communist rule, the recovery of civil society in Poland can be judged as a quite strong sign of a regained “civic equality.” Thus, the fall of communism resulted not only in the elimination of political inequalities, but also created conditions for reducing other dimensions of inequality.

Despite the robust growth of many sectors of civil society, Poland shares with other EU members the general decline in strength and importance of trade unions, pointing to the ongoing de-corporatization process. In fact, it remains one of the most weakly unionized EU members today. It is important to remember, however, that union membership is falling throughout the industrialized world, and low union density in the CEE countries is a part of this trend. The weakness or strength of unions is influenced by such factors as the coverage of workforce by collective bargaining or the type and the robustness of social dialogue (bi- and tripartite). Poland has a weakly covered workforce,<sup>38</sup> and the effectiveness of organized social dialogue (via the Tripartite Commission) is assessed by a group of experts as low.<sup>39</sup>

The post-communist transformation of property meant privatization of large parts of state and communal property and the explosion of green-field investment, but also bankruptcy for inefficient enterprises. The average workplace size fell and services replaced manufacturing as the dominant sector of the economy. All these factors undermined the position of unions, which tend to be strongest in big industrial plants, mining, public administration, and education. The dynamic picture of union membership in Poland is presented in Figure 2.

The decline of union membership in Poland has been faster than in the countries of Western Europe or the US. This is due to global, system-specific, and country-specific

**Figure 2** Union Membership in Poland, 1989–2012

CBOS data (various years).

factors. The basic system-specific factor is the changing role of trade unions in post-transformation economies. Under socialism, union membership was essentially automatic, with density close to 100 percent, but union leaders hardly if ever challenged management. The high membership figures are therefore misleading: they did not signal the workers' ability or willingness to self-organize and fight for their interests and rights. The rapid decline in membership after the fall of state socialism was therefore to be expected.

In sum, the available Polish studies of public opinion show considerable involvement of the population in civil society activities. We interpret this as an indicator of a significant reduction in civic inequality inherited from state socialism. Although the picture is not straightforward and there are puzzling discrepancies between cross-national and national polls, the results of public opinion studies in Poland support our organizational analysis of civil society transformations in this country: civil society is much more robust than assumed by most outside analysts.

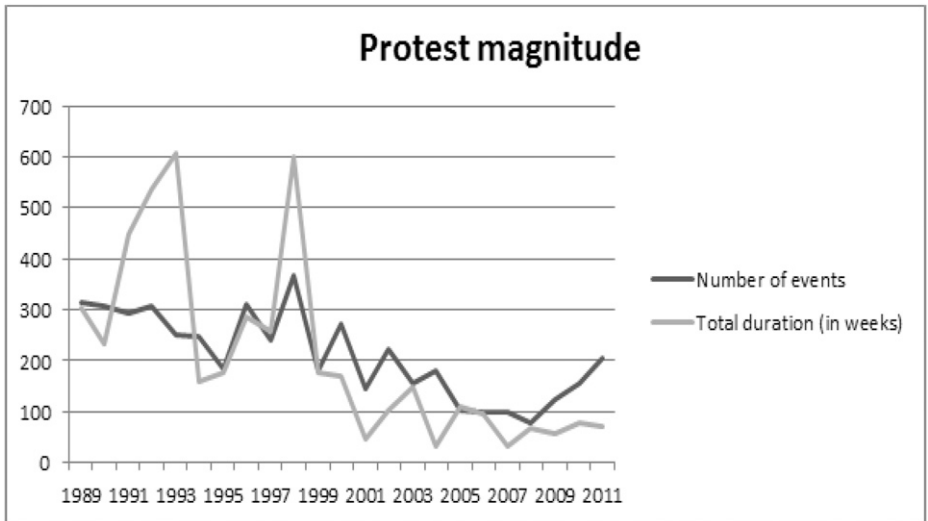
### Civil Society Behavior in Post-1989 Poland: Protest Event Analysis

Our study of contention in Poland from 1989 to 2011 provides further evidence for the developments analyzed above. The processes of de-corporatization and professionalization of civil society are reflected in protest event data that show the declining

magnitude of protest and a change in the composition of protest organizers, the repertoire of contention (decline of strikes), and the nature of demands (decline in economic demands). Our explanation of this finding is simple: large, membership based organizations (labor unions, professional associations) are more likely to resort to protest actions since they have higher capacity and resources to do so. As we demonstrated earlier, such organizations are declining and are being replaced by NGOs and smaller, professional groups that have significantly weaker organizational capacity and resources to pursue contentious strategies of interest articulation and protection. Moreover, public protests such as strikes and demonstrations are a traditional, regulated, and legitimate strategy of the labor movement, while NGOs are usually associated with lobbying and voluntary activities. Our longitudinal data show two distinctive phenomena. First, there was a comparatively high level of contention in Poland in the early years of democratic transformations. Second, there has been a steady decline of the magnitude of contention throughout the entire period under study.

We measure magnitude of contention in two ways: (1) number of protest events and (2) number of protest days per year. Both measures show the declining magnitude from 1989 to 2008 (Figure 3), particularly the latter, which we treat as a more accurate measure of magnitude. From 2008 to 2011, the magnitude of protest measured by the number of protest events begins to intensify again. The number of protest days did not increase, however. This means that there was an increase in the number of short protests actions. Further inquiry shows that during that period there was a considerable increase in the activity of various radical, mostly right-wing, political movements, often staging short yet spectacular rallies.

**Figure 3** Declining Magnitude of Protest in Poland

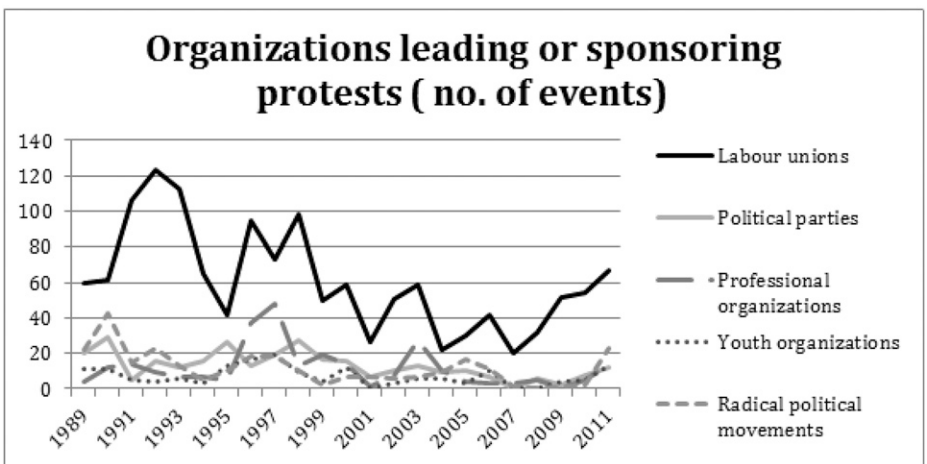


Our data on the evolution of protest repertoire and types of organizations leading or sponsoring protest actions provide further evidence of de-corporatization of civil society. Throughout the entire period under study, labor unions were the most frequent organizers of protest. But, as we show in Figure 4, the number of protests organized by unions was declining from their peak in 1992 to 2007. Then it began increasing again after 2007, but never achieved the levels characteristic of the 1990s.

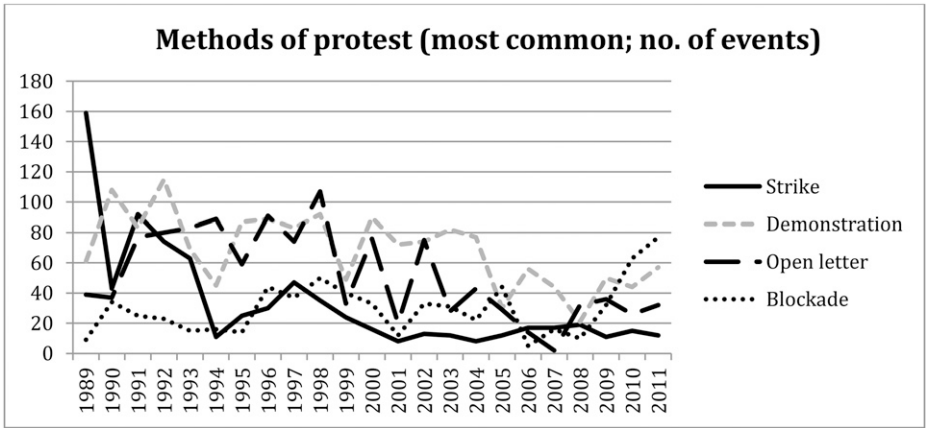
Our data on the repertoire of protest in Poland provide similar evidence of the declining significance of strikes (Figure 5) that can arguably be construed as yet another sign of de-corporatization. Since their peak in 1989, when strikes were the most common form of contention, their significance declined. We also observe a change in the composition of organizers and participants, from corporate, traditional organizations to a more diverse set of civic and political actors, and from working class (privileging industrial protests) to a more diffuse set of participants.

Further evidence of the changing tenor of protest politics comes from an examination of protest demands. While in the 1990s protests with economic demands were most common,<sup>40</sup> their frequency gradually declined in the early years of the twenty-first century, when the socio-economic system consolidated. In the years 2005–2010, their level was lower than ever: we recorded no more than sixty such events in a year. This was the time of fast economic growth and relatively low unemployment. However, the trend sharply reversed in 2011. Poles began experiencing the negative effects of the crisis, which resulted in resurgence of economically motivated protest events organized by trade unions. This shows that the fluctuations in unions’ protest activity were closely related to the changes in the economic situation of their members. Moreover, since 2004 there was a steady increase in demands that were not strictly economic or political. These were demands related to the broadly understood “identity

**Figure 4** Declining Participation of Labor Unions in Protest Activities



**Figure 5** Declining Significance of Strikes as the Method of Protest



politics” focused on rights (abortion, gay rights, and minorities rights), the role of religion in public life, and nationalism.

In sum, our data on the behavior of civil society actors in Poland are consistent with the data on organizational transformations of Polish civil society and with the Polish public opinion surveys that track social activism and civic involvement of Poles. The data also corroborate our arguments about de-corporatization and professionalization of Polish civil society.

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

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 organizations producing a diverse, competitive, and balanced associational sphere that has flourished in a liberal, civil society-friendly legal and institutional environment.<sup>41</sup>

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 this characteristic.

Volunteering and charitable giving has also strengthened together with the growing number of foundations and general increase of support for the NGO sector. The level of volunteering in Poland is on par with several “older” democracies of Europe.<sup>42</sup> In a nutshell, by comparison with the communist period these developments amount to a dramatic increase in what we call civic and political equality. The former has increased as a result of the explosion of various forms of civic engagement and the significant growth of volunteerism; the latter has been revived as the country consolidated its democratic institutions and fulfilled conditions of EU accession. In this process, civil society organizations have played a central role through their involvement in governance, advocacy, and provision of accountability.

The study of the relationship between changes in economic inequality and the evolving structures and activities of civil society is fraught with conceptual and empirical problems. Additionally, the literature on the relationship between economic growth and inequality is inconclusive, although in the post-communist region better performing economies have lower levels of economic inequality.<sup>43</sup> Recently, however, there has been noticeable progress in this area. For example, empirical work on the relationship between economic inequality and civic participation has finally begun moving beyond analyses of correlations between such crude gauges of civil society’s strength as declarations of participation and simple metrics of inequality (usually the Gini coefficient).<sup>44</sup>

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.<sup>45</sup> The authors add “that Poland is more unequal with respect to wealth than most of Western countries, but less unequal than many other transition countries.”<sup>46</sup> Moreover, there is evidence that inequality, as measured by the Gini coefficient (a standard measure of income inequality), stopped rising in Poland around 2008 and actually started declining under some specifications.<sup>47</sup> This reflects not only the fast economic growth and rising living standards during the last two decades, but also the expansion and transformation of the Polish welfare state institutions and policies.

There are three features of Polish civil society that, in our judgment, have contributed to the relatively modest, by comparison with most other post-communist countries, rise of economic inequality after the fall of state socialism.<sup>48</sup> They include: (1) the reformist (not radical or revolutionary) character of labor activism during the critical, early years of Polish economic and political transformations; (2) the steady rise of volunteerism and charitable behaviors that have helped to offset some negative economic consequences of transformations; and (3) the overall high quality of Polish civil society, a keystone of the system of checks and balances that produces a relatively high level of accountability. This, in turn, helps to control the rent-seeking behavior of economic elites that contributes to the rise of inequality in many other post-communist countries.

During the early years of radical economic reforms (1989–1994), the behavior of labor unions in Poland was restrained. The unions were involved in numerous protest

actions throughout the country, challenging the new democratic government on a number of issues, but rarely rejecting the general direction of the reform. Ekiert and Kubik documented this restraint in their earlier study and called it contentious reformism.<sup>49</sup> The unions were not inactive, but they engaged the government in a manner that was not radically anti-capitalist. They did not aim to block or derail building capitalism, but fought to make its implementation as painless as possible for the people they represented. As the result, Polish economy and the institutional structures within which it was embedded were radically reformed, and, after the initial steep decline, the country has experienced the best GDP growth rates among all post-communist countries.

The relationship between inequality and participation is the subject of an inconclusive debate. The dominant view seems to be that there is a negative relationship between the two phenomena: the rise in the former is associated with decline of the latter, particularly in charitable giving.<sup>50</sup> But as we showed above, charitable behavior and volunteerism have been steadily rising in Poland since 1989. Our data can be interpreted as supporting a known regularity that the growing number of people in need can motivate others to engage in charitable behavior.<sup>51</sup> There may also be another mechanism at work here: as the society's wealth increases, voluntarism and charitable behavior become more common, and, as a result, the rise of inequality is somewhat held in check. The data we presented above are consistent with the existence of such a mechanism.

The third, and arguably most important, feature of Polish civil society that is related to the level of inequality is its overall relative robustness, documented earlier in this article. Economic reforms produce desired results, such as economic growth that is equitably distributed, if the mechanisms of political and civic accountability help to curb the rent-seeking behavior of elite actors.<sup>52</sup> Such mechanisms work best in robust democracies. In turn, the robustness of democracy depends, to a considerable degree, on the existence of a vibrant, multi-faceted civil society. What many recent studies emphasize is a complex causal nexus: in post-communist countries that managed to establish and maintain relatively viable democracy, various institutions (more efficient tax collection, less corrupt redistributive policies, etc.) help to curtail the rise of economic inequality.<sup>53</sup> Such a combination of features emerged in Poland early and has been consolidated more firmly than in almost all other post-communist countries. The argument is simple, then: the new democracy in Poland, built *inter alia* on the foundation of a relatively strong civil society, has become hardy enough to curtail the rent-seeking (corrupt) excesses that wrought havoc on many neighboring ex-communist economies. As a result, Poland has less inequality than less firmly democratized countries.<sup>54</sup>

## 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



advancing wave of economic and political populism, we cannot assume that these effects are permanent. Harbingers of clientelization 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.

## NOTES

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1. Ivan Szelenyi, "Social Inequalities in State Socialist Redistributive Economies. Dilemmas for Social Policy in Contemporary Socialist Societies of Eastern Europe," *International Journal of Comparative Sociology*, XIX, 1–2 (1978), 63–87; Walter D. Connor, *Socialism, Politics and Equality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979); Ivan Szelenyi, *Urban Inequalities under State Socialism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983).

2. Jacek Tarkowski, "Endowment of Nomenklatura, or Apparatchiks Turned into Entrepreneurchiks, or from Communist Ranks to Capitalist Riches," *Innovation: The European Journal of Social Science Research*, 3 (1990), 89–105.

3. See, for example, Branko Milanovic, *Income, Inequality, and Poverty during the Transition from Planned to Market Economy* (Washington D.C.: World Bank, 1998).

4. In 1989, Poland experienced hyperinflation (526.5%, end-year), compared to 3.5% in Czechoslovakia, 13.8% in Hungary, and 10.6% in Bulgaria. The consumer market was plagued by massive shortages, and the level of foreign debt was high (44% of the GDP), though not the highest in Eastern Europe. In general, "the degree of the overall difficulties existing in Poland's initial economic conditions appears not to be lower than that of Romania, which had a much more rigid economic system but less dramatic (although serious) macroeconomic imbalance . . . Only Bulgaria with its serious macroeconomic instability, large foreign debt, rigid economic system and especially high dependence on the Soviet market appears to have had more difficult initial conditions than Poland." Leszek Balcerowicz, "Transition to the Market Economy: Poland, 1989–93 in Comparative Perspective," *Economic Policy*, 9, Supplement: Lessons for Reform (December 1994), 75–76. See also, Jeffrey Sachs, *Poland's Jump to Market Economy* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994); Bartłomiej Kaminski, *The Collapse of State Socialism. The Case of Poland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

5. Solidarity Trade Union was formed in 1980 as a result of an agreement between authorities and striking committees. In July and August 1980, Poland was swept by a wave of strikes in major industrial centers. It spread through the whole country (Lublin, Gdansk, Silesia) and was especially strong in the big cities with a high concentration of workers in heavy industry. Negotiations took place between the strike committee and representatives of the government. The strike leader Lech Wałęsa became the president of Solidarity, which was formed by the striking committees. On the basis of the Gdansk agreement, Solidarity Trade Union was formed. It was banned in December 1981, when Martial Law was imposed in Poland. It was re-legalized in 1989.

6. Tadeusz Kowalik, "Why the Social Democratic Option Failed: Poland's Experience of Systemic Change," in Andrew Glyn, ed., *Social Democracy in Neo-liberal Times* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

7. In *Nations in Transit*, prepared by Freedom House for 2015, democracy score for Poland and the Czech Republic was 2.21. Three countries had higher scores: Slovenia (1.93), Estonia (1.96), and Latvia (2.07). Poland had the highest score on the "civil society" dimension: 1.5.

8. Grzegorz Ekiert and George Soroka, "Poland," in Isobel Coleman and Terra Lawson-Remer, eds., *Pathways to Freedom. Political and Economic Lessons from Democratic Transitions* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 2013).

9. World Economic Forum, 2013.

10. Michał Brzeziński, Barbara Jancewicz, and Natalia Letki, *Growing Inequalities and Their Impacts in Poland*, GINI: Growing Inequalities' Impacts. Country Report for Poland, nd, 1.

11. "The New Sick Man of Europe: the European Union," *PEW Research Center*, May 13, 2013, 1.

12. Edward Shils, "The Virtue of Civil Society," *Government and Opposition*, 26 (January 1991), 3–20; Ernest Gellner, *Conditions of Liberty: Civil Society and Its Rivals* (Allen Lane: Penguin Press, 1994); Sidney Verba, Kay L. Schlozman, and Henry E. Brady, *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995); Larry Diamond, *Developing Democracy: Toward Consolidation* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999); Nancy Bermeo and Phil Nord, eds. *Civil Society Before Democracy* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000); Michael Bernhard and Ekrem Karakoc, "Civil Society and the Legacies of Dictatorship," *World Politics*, 59 (July 2007), 539–67; Tiago Fernandes, "Re-thinking Pathways to Democracy: Civil Society in Portugal and Spain, 1960s–2000s," *Democratization* (October 2015), 1074–104. Berman warns, however, that we need "to recognize that civil society can often serve to weaken rather than strengthen a democratic regime" (Sheri Berman, "Civil Society and Political Institutionalization," in Bob Edwards, Michael W. Foley, and Mario Diani, eds. *Beyond Tocqueville: Civil Society and the Social Capital Debate in Comparative Perspective* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 2001), 35). As Bermeo observes, in the discourse of today's social science, civil society has not been always portrayed as a hero; sometimes it is seen as a villain. Nancy Bermeo, *Ordinary People in Extraordinary Times: The Citizenry and the Breakdown of Democracy*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

13. Bo Rothstein, *The Quality of Government: The Political Economy of Corruption, Social Trust and Inequality in an International Comparative Perspective* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011). Pamela Paxton, "Social Capital and Democracy: An Interdependent Relationship," *American Sociological Review*, 67 (April 2002), 254–77; Natalia Letki and Geoffrey Evans, "Endogenizing Social Trust: Democratization in East-Central Europe," *British Journal of Political Science*, 35 (July 2005), 515–29.

14. Grzegorz Ekiert and Jan Kubik, "Myths and Realities of Civil Society," *Journal of Democracy*, 25 (January 2014), 46–58.

15. Stark introduced the concept of recombination in his analysis of economic and institutional transformations in the region; the concept is also very useful for examining other institutional domains. See David Stark, "Recombinant Property in Eastern Europe," *American Journal of Sociology*, 101 (January 1996), 995–1027.

16. In this context the term means the loss of control by the state over creating, running, or controlling civil society organizations. The state's role is reduced to setting up the laws defining the rules of the game in the public space and monitoring the conformity with the law.

17. Andrzej Jurosz, "Zarządzanie w polskich organizacjach pozarządowych" [Management in Polish non-governmental organizations], in Andrzej Jurosz, ed. *Organizacje pozarządowe w społeczeństwie obywatelskim* (2002).

18. Marc Howard, *The Weakness of Civil Society in Post-communist Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Bernhard and Karakoc; Pippa Norris, "Political Protest in Fragile States," Paper for the plenary panel PS01 *Political Action and Beyond* at the International Political Science Association World Congress in Fukuoka, Japan, 2006.

19. Following Diamond, p. 221, we define civil society as "the realm of organized social life that is open, voluntary, self-generating, at least partially self-supporting, autonomous from the state, and bound by a legal order or set of shared rules.... it involves citizens acting collectively in a public sphere to express their interests, passions, preferences, and ideas, to exchange information, to achieve collective goals, to make demands on the state, to improve the structure and functioning of the state, and to hold state officials accountable." We also adhere to the emerging consensus that civil society is a multidimensional and interactive phenomenon. See, for example, Bermeo and Nord; Marc Bühlmann, Wolfgang Merkel, and Bernhard Wessels in collaboration with Lisa Müller, "The Quality of Democracy. Democracy Barometer for Established Democracies," National Centre of Competence in Research (NCCR). Challenges to Democracy in the 21st Century. Working Paper No. 10a (2008); Helmut K. Anheier, *Civil Society, Measurement, Evaluation, Policy* (London: Earthscan, 2004).

20. See, for example, Piotr Gliński, "The Third Sector in Poland. Dilemmas of Development," in Dariusz Gawin and Piotr Gliński, eds. *Civil Society in the Making* (Warsaw: IFIS Publishers, 2006).

21. GUS 2014.

22. See, for example, Grzegorz Ekiert and Jan Kubik, *Rebellious Civil Society: Popular Protest and Democratic Consolidation in Poland, 1989–1993* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1999).

23. Joanna Kurczewska, “Tradycje w przestrzeni lokalnej społeczeństwa obywatelskiego” [Traditions in the local space of civil society], in Piotr Glišński, Barbara Lewenstein, and Andrzej Siciński, eds., *Samooorganizacja Społeczeństwa Polskiego [Self-organization of the Polish society]* (IFIS PAN, 2004), 315; Anna Gąsior-Niemiec and Piotr Glišński, “Europeanization of Civil Society in Poland,” *Revija Za Socijalnu Politiku*, 14 (2007), 29–47.

24. Ekiert and Kubik, 1999; Jan Kubik, “Between the State and Networks of ‘Cousins’: The Role of Civil Society and Noncivil Associations in the Democratization of Poland,” in Nancy Bermeo and Phil Nord, eds. *Civil Society before Democracy* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000), 181–207.

25. Jerzy Celichowski, “Civil Society in Eastern Europe. Growth without Engagement,” in Marlies Glasius, David Lewis, and Hakan Seckinelgin, eds., *Exploring Civil Society. Political and Cultural Contexts* (London: Routledge, 2004), 62–69.

26. Guillermo O’Donnell, Philippe Schmitter, and Laurence Whitehead, *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule. Tentative Conclusions about Uncertain Democracies* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986).

27. Pavel Fric, “The Uneasy Partnership of the State and the Third Sector in the Czech Republic,” in Stephen Osborn, ed., *The Third Sector in Europe: Prospects and Challenges* (London: Routledge 2008), 244–45.

28. Urszula Krasnodębska, Joanna Pucek, Grzegorz Kowalczyk, and Jan Jakub Wygnański, *Podstawowe statystyki dotyczące działań organizacji pozarządowych w Polsce [Key statistics about activities of non-governmental organizations in Poland]* (Program PHARE-Dialog Społeczny, 1996).

29. Unlike associations, foundations do not have membership. According to the law, the statute of a foundation (including procedures for selecting management) is determined by the founder (Article 5 of the Law on foundations from 6 April 1984, with modifications).

30. Jadwiga Przewłocka, *Podstawowe fakty o organizacjach pozarządowych. Raport z badania 2013. [Key statistics about non-governmental organizations. Research report 2013]* (Warsaw: Klon/Jawor, 2013).

31. GUS *Kluby sportowe w Polsce w latach 2004–2006 [Sport clubs in Poland in the years 2004–2006]* (GUS: Warszawa-Rzeszow, 2007), 17.

32. Data from European Social Survey ESS6-2013, ed. 2.0.

33. Antoni Sulek, “Doświadczenie, działania dla społeczności i kompetencje obywatelskie” [Experience in community activism and civic competence], in Janusz Czapiński and Tomasz Panek, eds., *Diagnoza Społeczna 2011 [Social diagnosis 2011]* (Warszawa: Rada Monitoringu Społecznego, 2011), 278.

34. In comparison to other polling organizations, CBOS reports higher numbers. This seems to be the result of the different wording of the question(s). The listing of the types of organizations is very detailed and allows respondents to declare civic activity they might not have otherwise understood in these categories (PTAs, hobby groups, etc.).

35. Sulek, 279.

36. *Ibid.*, 280.

37. *Volunteering in the European Union*. Educational, Audiovisual & Culture Executive Agency (EAC-EA) Directorate General Education and Culture (DG EAC). Final Report submitted by GHK, February 17, 2010, 58.

38. Only 25% are covered by collective bargaining, according to Jan Czarzasty and Adam Mrozowicki, *Poland: Industrial Relations Profile* (EIRO, 2013), at <http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/eiro/country/poland.pdf>.

39. Michał Kotnarowski, Radosław Markowski, Michał Wenzel, and Marta Żerkowska-Balas, *Demokratyczny Audit Polski [Democratic audit of Poland]* (Warsaw: Konfederacja Lewiatan, 2014), 171.

40. The following categories of economic demands were included: 1) Material compensation (i.e. wage raise, bonuses, financial disbursement, strike pay); 2) Change in specific domestic economic policies or the removal of individuals responsible for policy and economic decisions; 3) Change in specific “international” policies (global policies or policies prescribed by international organizations (e.g., the World Bank, IMF, EU, etc.)); 4) General, abstract economic demands.

41. USAID identifies the quality of the legal environment that Polish civil society operates in at 2.2. Among the post-communist countries, only Estonia (1.7) and Lithuania (2.1) score higher.

42. Grzegorz Ekiert and Roberto Foa, “The Weakness of Post-Communist Civil Society Reassessed,” Minda de Gunzburg Center for European Studies, Open Forum Papers, 2012.

43. “All else equal, an increase in GDP per capita by one unit across time and between countries results in a decrease in the Gini coefficient by 0.003401 percent,” conclude Sara Rose and Crina Viju, “Income Inequality in Post-Communist Central and Eastern European Countries,” *Eastern Journal of European Studies*, 5 (June 2014), 13. See also Bernhard and Jung’s contribution to this issue.

44. See, for example, Ekrem Karakoc, “Economic Inequality and Its Asymmetric Effect on Civic Engagement: Evidence from Post-Communist Countries,” *European Political Science Review*, 5 (July 2013), 197–223.

45. Brzeziński, Jancewicz, and Letki, 11.

46. *Ibid.*, 1.

47. *Ibid.* 19–21. For a diagnosis of Gini coefficient’s decline, see <http://www.quandl.com/c/poland> or <http://myweb.uiowa.edu/fsolt/swiid/swiid.html>.

48. Kołodko, for example, presents Gini data from 1998–2001 and 1987–1988 for 18 post-communist countries. According to these numbers, the value of Gini (income per capita) coefficient for Poland rose between these two periods by 4.5%. That is the fourth lowest rise in this group of 18. Only in Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Hungary the Gini coefficients increased less. Grzegorz Kołodko, *The World Economy and Great Post-Communist Change* (New York: Nova Science Publishers, 2006), 83.

49. Ekiert and Kubik, 1999.

50. Eric M. Uslaner and Mitchell Brown, “Inequality, Trust, and Civic Engagement,” *American Politics Research*, 33 (November 2005), 889.

51. Brzeziński, Jancewicz, and Letki, 70–71, write: “growth of inequalities and marginalization of certain groups is likely to stimulate charitable behavior and participation in at least some types of associations. Those initiatives that focus on supporting people in need are likely to grow and expand as there is a growing demand for them.”

52. Alina Mungiu-Pippidi, “Of Virtuous Circles: Modeling Control of Corruption Beyond Modernization,” Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Washington, DC, August 2014.

53. Christopher J. Gerry and Tomasz M. Mickiewicz, “Inequality, Democracy and Taxation: Lessons from the Post-Communist Transition,” *Europe-Asia Studies*, 60 (January 2008), 89–111.

54. Gerry and Mickiewicz, 108, detect a positive long-term economic effect of democratic political reforms: “the transition countries that achieved stable democracies are characterized by lower levels of income inequality, perhaps due to a more embedded and active civil society.”