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## Patterns of Poles' self-organization at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries

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**Anna Gašior-Niemiec**

## **PATTERNS OF POLES' SELF-ORGANIZATION AT THE TURN OF THE 20<sup>TH</sup> AND 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURIES**

### **Introduction**

Survey research consistently indicates that the level of Poles' membership in the organizations of the Third Sector is low. This type of data makes many researchers claim that the data reflects a correspondingly low level of social capital in Polish society as such. Accordingly, individual Poles are taken to demonstrate a weak propensity to associate, cooperate and collaborate with other individuals, while the Polish society at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries is taken to be characterized in terms of lacking bonds, waning solidarity and poor self-organization (cf. Jasińska-Kania, Marody 2004; Gliński 2004).<sup>1</sup>

Those claims are based primarily on the conviction that the share of individuals that are formal members of voluntary associations and foundations combined with the share of respondents declaring in the surveys their general trust in others, serve as adequate measures of the self-constituting (bottom-up) civil society. It is worth adding that the above mentioned statements are frequently put forward in relation to sophisticated theoretical conceptions that explain the so called lack of social and civic competences – or, broadly, civilisational competences – of the contemporary Poles primarily by referring to the negative impact of their socialization in the period of real socialism and the shortage of democratic traditions in the nation (see for instance Sztompka 1993).

Not undermining the results of such research and analyses, it is claimed in the present paper that the conclusions drawn on their basis regard-

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<sup>1</sup> This is exemplified for instance by cyclical surveys of the Third Sector in Poland that are carried out by Stowarzyszenie Klon/Jawor based in Warsaw (see Gumkowska, Herbst 2005), comparative international research series known as *European Social Study* (ESS), *European Value Survey* (EVS) or *World Value Survey* (WVS). The results of the latter are quoted in Jasińska-Kania and Marody (2004).

ding the condition of the Polish civil society, especially the society's ability to organize bottom-up and to mobilize for action for the sake of a common good, should be complemented with insights that might follow from at least two sources. The first of these sources – which is not discussed in this paper because of the space limitation – includes publications that critically evaluate tools and indicators used in the survey research to measure civic competences and social capital (cf. Adam 2007). The second of the sources includes data derived from qualitative research that concentrates on specific cases of socially beneficial types of collective action (see for example Kurczewski 2003; *Grajcie...* 2006; Sitek 1997; Wąż 2003). With these reservations in mind, in the following part of the paper a more encompassing view on the issue of bottom-up organization of society in Poland at the turn of 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries is advocated. By introducing the conception of three modes of societal self-organization, not only the need is demonstrated to modify the above quoted general statements that are basing exclusively on the survey research but also a necessity to broaden the scope of research concerning collective action as practiced by contemporary Poles is stipulated.

This basically means that the evaluation of the contemporary Poles' potential for self-organization needs to go beyond the data covering only formal organizational structures and indicating the level of general (abstract) trust as declared during the surveys. The evaluation should also take into account analyzes of such forms of collective and socially beneficial behavior that are not compatible with the framework of the Third Sector and do not fully comply with the characteristics of the „modern” civil attitudes (cf. Ekiert, Kubik 2001). While recognizing the other types of collective behaviour, it is necessary not only to pay attention to different types of social logic that provide the foundation for the different forms of collective action, but also to variegated relations of the particular modes of action to their broader institutional contexts (cf. Gaśsior-Niemiec, Gliński 2007a, b).

### **Three modes of self-organization**

Generalizing, one could identify three basic modes of self-organization that are typical of contemporary Poles<sup>2</sup>. These modes, conceptualized in terms of Weberian ideal types, are proposed to be labeled as:

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<sup>2</sup> In the present paper, the mode of protest, that could be distinguished and characterized for instance on the basis of Ekiert and Kubik's work (2001) is not dealt with.

(1) „membership”; 2) „ad-hoc activism” and 3) „self-help”, respectively. As a rule, only phenomena that exemplify the first of the modes, involving formal membership in officially registered associations and foundations, are subject of the aforementioned survey and comparative research. The other two modes are marginalized both in the academic and political discourse. Their existence is frequently only documented by journalist notes and press articles or does not find any reflection in the public discourse.

As much as the historically debilitating experience of the state-society relationship constitutes a common background for all of the three modes of the Poles' self-organization capabilities, each of the modes is, nonetheless, rooted in a different social logic. These different logics are themselves, in turn, based on different approaches to the production of common/public good and different types of social bonds. The compatibility of each of the three modes with the exigencies posed by the currently dominant institutional order – which is primarily resulting from the systemic change initiated at the beginning of the 1990s, the impact of the European integration and the rising role of the mass media as a source of the public discourse, attitudes and social behavior – also varies considerably.

### **Mode I: Membership**

This mode of self-organization includes associational activities that are carried out within established non-governmental organizations that constitute the Polish Third Sector since 1989 (cf. Gliński, Lewenstein, Siciński 2002, 2004). The most characteristic features of this type of collective and socially beneficial action include: formal membership; status of legal entity (legal person); hierarchical (bureaucratic) structure of management; salaried, regularly employed staff and part-time staff; focus on „professional” provision of public services and/or on expert services; internalization of market rationality; anchorage in urban (especially metropolitan) environment, and transnational linkages.<sup>3</sup> **Pro-**

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<sup>3</sup> This mode of self-organization has relatively shallow social anchorage and a narrow (as well as unstable) membership basis that is dominated mainly by the intelligentia and educated, metropolitan youth (cf. Gliński 2004). The Third Sector milieu, that is an empirical emanation of this mode, is characterized in Poland by strong internal polarization and oligarchic tendencies (Gliński 2004). At this point it is to be stressed that the conclusions that were mentioned in the introduction to the present paper, are formulated on the basis of the Third Sector.

**fessionalization** could be identified as the dominant characteristic of the social logic on which this mode of self-organization of the society rests, whereas **contractual bonds** may, in turn, be assumed to constitute the dominant and preferred type of the social bonds in this case.

The instances of self-organization that entail formal membership and/or employment within formally registered non-governmental organizations, are then characterized by professionalization of their activities and constant competition for financial resources and governmental contracts enabling the provision of public services and the production of public goods. These features might be seen as related to the neoliberal profiling of the institutional and social change triggered in Poland after 1989. The analyzed mode of societal self-organization was primarily shaped in the country by the impact exerted by Western institutions and organizations in support for the development of civil society over the 1980s and 1990s. Currently, this mode is clearly being reinforced by the European Union's discourse of *good governance*, the legal and institutional arrangements that are being absorbed from the EU and/or its Member-States, and lobbying by the organizations that constitute the elite of the Third Sector (see Gaśsior-Niemiec, Gliński 2007a, b). This mode of societal self-organization is presented in the public discourse as a desired norm.

The adoption of legal provisions concerning organizations of public benefit and volunteering in 2003 played a significant role in the institutionalization of this mode of collective behavior in Poland. Equally important was the passing of legal acts and regulations focusing on the sphere of social economy as well as of the regulations included in the act instituting the National Plan of Development in 2004. Those regulations significantly increased – premised on strictly predefined requirements – the access of non-governmental organizations (Third Sector) to public funds (both domestic and foreign) as well as their participation in the implementation of the Union's structural funds (*ibid.*). Owing to institutional arrangements typical of new modes of governance, these organizations were also included (in the capacity of „social partners”) to the management of all of the operational programs (co)financed by the EU funds. In other words, the institutional and policy change, associated in particular with the process of Europeanization, clearly privileges the mode of self-organization that has been analyzed in this part of the paper. It places the organizations of the Third Sector on the position of a legally and discursively pre-selected and preferred „professional” partners of domestic and

foreign governmental agencies, institutions of territorial self-government that are to partake in the structures and programs of the European Union.

### **Mode II: Ad hoc activism**

This mode of self-organization typically involves spontaneous, one-off and occasional actions for the public benefit that are undertaken and performed more or less simultaneously by many, formally not associated, individuals. The frequency, scope and scale of such actions are changeable since they are primarily dependent on the appearance and perception of a stimulus that gives rise to them (e.g. an event, an appeal) as well as on the credibility of the institution that coordinates (turns to the public benefit or uses for a good cause) such actions. Therefore, the following types of behavior could mainly be listed in this category of societal self-organization: a) offering in-kind and/or financial support for a good cause; b) contributing one's labor to support and help the injured and/or people who suffered a loss or a harm (cf. Sitek 1997; *Grajcie...* 2006; Swoboda 2006)<sup>4</sup>. Offerings collected across the Polish parishes for a variety of good causes, *Finał Wielkiej Orkiestry Świątecznej Pomocy* [the Finale of Great Orchestra of Christmas Charity]; various auctions and fund-raising initiatives staged by radio and television stations to help the sick, to assist poor children, to take care of injured animals, financial contributions made *via* banks and post offices or in-kind help offered locally to victims of floods and other natural catastrophes in response to appeals (addressed to the public by means of newspapers, radio, television or made personally by the victims) provide good examples of this type of collective self-organization. **Solidarity** could be assumed to constitute the dominant feature of the social logic that constitutes the foundation of this mode of collective action, while **communitarian bonds (community of fate)** may be identified as the dominant type of inter-human relations in this case.

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<sup>4</sup> These forms of self-organization are by definition predominantly informal and ephemeral. They are best reflected in briefly lasting mass scale activism. The propensity to act in such a manner is stimulated by spontaneous reactions of individual Poles (making up the acting masses) to the situation appearing as a „crisis”, „threat”, „misfortune”, „need for help” etc. It is worth adding, however, that this „spontaneity” ever more frequently resembles a „steered” reaction because of the role of mass media in the triggering of such mass responses as well as their ever more decisive role in the actual choice of the „good cause” that the masses of individuals are to support.

Unfortunately, apart from the cyclical survey conducted by CBOS (Centrum Badania Opinii Publicznej – Centre for Public Opinion Research), during which a general question is asked if the respondent has helped another person over the past year or contributed his/her voluntary work for the sake of his/her local community (see Wciórka, 2004), and estimations occasionally published by mass media, no systematic research is carried out to investigate this mode of societal self-organization. On the basis of irregularly conducted observation, one could, however, put forward two hypotheses concerning the „ad hoc activist” mode of self-organization of the Polish society.

Firstly, the significant dynamics of this type of mass behavior that contributes to the social/public benefit may indicate the existence of a considerable civic and social potential of the Poles that is, however, apparently not compatible with the type of organization known from the Third Sector practice and not tapped by the social logic that animates the Third Sector. Secondly, it might signify a wide-spread and *persisting* conviction that formal institutions are unreliable and incapable of reacting to the needs and social crises in Poland. The perimeter covered by this conviction would have to be extended to encompass the formal organizations of the Third Sector, too (see Żukowski 2006). Nevertheless, to verify or falsify these hypotheses one would need to carry out specific research.

### Mode III: Self-help

The third of the identified modes of societal self-organization in Poland seems the most heterogeneous. It encompasses diverse, more and less institutionalized, forms of the Poles’ involvement in activities aimed at a common good whose original sources and patterns might be sought in Polish national, regional and local traditions. The most typical examples thereof include forms of organization, such as the village committee, the parish group and the neighborly assistance. At times, this kind of initiatives is related to the patronage of traditional local intelligentsia – first of all teachers and parish priests (cf. Kurczewska 2000; Marody, Wilkin 2002; Juros *et.al.* 2004). This mode of socially beneficial action arises from strong **local communitarian bonds** that often are mixed in nature that is they are formed both on the basis of shared territory, neighborhood and religion. **Reciprocity** could be assumed to constitute the dominant feature of the social logic inscribed

in the functioning of the self-help mode of societal self-organization in Poland<sup>5</sup>.

There is plenty of evidence documenting traditions of such local patterns of action, dating back at least to the period of Partitions and the inter-war Polish Republic (*ibid.*). In the period of real socialism, these patterns were for the most part appropriated by the state apparatus. They were controlled in ideological and programmatic terms as well as became subordinated to the state because of their progressive financial dependence on the state subsidies. In this manner, the state and the communist party apparatus exerted an efficient control over the civil activities. In consequence, on the one hand these older traditions managed to be preserved and even reinforced. Such forms of self-help staged on a local basis in the period of state socialism served predominantly quite practical purposes, especially in rural areas. They facilitated the masking of the socialist state's dysfunctions, especially in the sphere of social and educational services as well as in the sphere of infrastructure (*cf.* Marody, Wilkin 2002). On the other hand, over this period the culture of traditional patronage was tightly coupled with a new type of clientelist practices and claimant attitudes – the local action was oriented at demanding and earning favours from the elites' (especially the communist party elites').

The institutionalization of the territorial self-government after 1989 and the beginning of the pilot implementation of the European common policies at the local and regional level in Poland, proved to be the source of ambivalent impact on the discussed mode of societal self-organization in the country (*cf.* Gąsior-Niemiec, Gliński 2007a, b). On the one hand this impact was translated into significantly increased opportunities to get access to public resources. It also entailed the broadening of the scope of objectives that could be classified as con-

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<sup>5</sup> This kind of logic and the norm that accompanies the logic is manifest in the expected and effected exchange of roles (those who need help and support at one time, at another occasion become the ones who lend their help and support to other members of the given local community) and the formula of community that is attached to them. This formula presupposes a tendency to award a status of the „participant” in a local self-help initiative even to those individuals that seem almost totally devoid of any „exchangeable” resources. This feature marks a clear distinction between the practices of traditional self-help and the practices of the Third Sector. In the case of the Third Sector, individuals and social groups who are lacking in „exchangeable resources” are as a rule classified not as „participants”, but „addressees”, „customers” and „beneficiaries” of the collective actions.



tributing to the (local) public benefit. On the other hand, however, this opening was coupled with a strong pressure on modernization of the traditional self-help structures and patterns of action that are typical of them. In practical terms, their adaptation to the changed institutional context means that they have to turn into formalized structures (legally registered entities) and have to succumb to bureaucratic rules, while their modes of action undergo „technicization”, professionalization and commercialization.

This kind of modernization entails huge transactional and organizational costs (and ultimately social/civil costs) that could, for instance, be measured by the time required to deal with the daily maintenance and functioning of the now bureaucratized and professional organizations, the kind and level of specialist competences that are required to make them run as well as the amount of financial resources that are now necessary to engage in collective action. Their functioning in the current institutional context is thus presupposed not only on the requirement of formal registration, but also on the need to constantly trace the opportunities of joining the competitive race for grants, the necessity to prepare complex grant applications, securing considerable financial input that is required from the applicants, and the subjection to business-like procedures concerning the financial and substantive reporting to a variety of controlling authorities.

Modernization means, therefore, in this case that the self-help mode of collective action has to – as a matter of fact – be transformed into the membership mode of collective action, which is congruent with the Third Sector model – with all of the strings attached. However, once this transformation is executed, the grammar of self-organization by necessity transforms as well: the logic of reciprocity makes way for the logic of professionalization and the communitarian bonds are replaced by relations premised on contract and salaried work.

Quite similarly to the mode of self-organization that is characterized by mass (though individually undertaken) ad hoc activism, systematic research investigating the state and dynamics of the self-help mode of societal self-organization in Poland is largely missing. Periodically conducted participant observation and the conclusions derived from fragmented and dispersed reports from small research projects in the field make one claim that the modernization dilemma that is faced by the traditional, self-help initiatives breeds mixed reactions (cf. for example Gaśsior-Niemiec, Gliński 2007a, b; Wąż 2003). On the one

hand, many „animators”<sup>6</sup> and participants of such, so far traditional, initiatives simply refuse to undergo complete modernization of that kind. As a result, most often they „lose in the competition” against the professional organizations of the Third Sector and become marginalized. On the other hand, examples of successful modernization are by no means rare.

In the background of such successful modernization, one sees the establishment of a permanent organizational structure, the collection of founding capital, the recruitment of new members-employees who possess new, professional skills. In addition, what one sees is a re-orientation of aims and objectives, meaning that they usually are modified in such a way so as to comply with the palette of options increasing chances of getting financial support from the public budget, especially from the European funds.

Nonetheless, quite a few of such modernized self-help initiatives still manage to preserve their strong anchorage in their local communities. This might be instanced by some of the organizations that promote local traditions or some of the new rural associations that support the small rural schools and libraries (threatened by liquidation on the argument that their maintenance means financial losses to the state/local public budget) (cf. Gliński 2005). The latter are clearly fed by the memory of traditional village committees (local-territorial and school/parent committees), even though they are now established and run according to quite a different logic.

## **Conclusions**

The aim of the present paper was to expand the analytical field that encompasses the issue of societal self-organization of Poles in the condition of institutional change and Europeanization at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. In the introductory part of the paper, some dominant theses were quoted, regarding the stipulated weakness of the capacity of contemporary Poles to organize bottom-up for the sake of collective action. The quoted statements are predominantly based on survey research that focuses on the Polish Third Sector. Subsequently, it was indicated that both the scope of the survey

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<sup>6</sup> The spread of this particular term as well as terms such a „stakeholder”, „beneficiary” etc. over the 1990s is quite telling in this respect.

research and the conclusions drawn from it should be modified by taking into account that there exist other than the Third Sector-like modes of societal self-organization in the country that are often not reflected in the mainstream research. As a result, three modes of organizing the collective action were identified that co-exist in contemporary Poland. These were labeled, respectively, by terms such as: „membership”; „ad hoc activism”, and „self-help”.

It was argued that each of the three modes of societal organization is animated by quite a different social logic of action and carried out according to quite different grammar of social bondage. In the first case, which is best exemplified by the organizations of the Polish Third Sector, the dominant social logic involved was termed the „logic of professionalization”. In the second case, which is best exemplified by spontaneous, mass actions in support for „people needing our help”, this dominant logic was termed the „logic of solidarity”. In the case of traditional societal self-organization, which is best reflected in the many local initiatives born in so called district Poland (*Polska powiatowa*), this dominant logic was termed the „logic of reciprocity”.

Each of the three modes of societal self-organization in contemporary Poland is currently subject to a formative pressure that originates in the new institutional context that has been constructed since 1989, while being much influenced by the structures, practices and discourses of European integration since the second half of the 1990s. Due to the space limitation, the impact of some of the most important factors – such as the institutionalization of territorial self-government, the introduction of new, legal and institutional framework for the functioning of civil society organizations, and the opening of opportunities to change the position of the organizations *vis-a-vis* the state and the market, the domestic and supranational power structures – on the three modes of societal self-organization could only be signaled in the present paper (for more on the subject see for instance Gaśsior-Niemiec, Gliński 2007a, b).

The new conditions exert a variegated influence on the three modes of self-organization in Poland. They privilege the first of them, that is the mode based on formal membership and the logic of professionalization. The third of the identified modes, that is traditional self-help, is pushed by the new legal, institutional and discursive patterns, to the outside of the new framework or, otherwise, it is forced to undergo costly modernization. If the latter takes place, the result is the actual

transformation of the third mode into the first mode of societal self-organization. The impact of the new arrangements on the second of the identified modes, meaning ad hoc activism, remains unclear (mainly because lacking research).

The co-existence of the three so different modes of societal self-organization must be taken as evidence that the general statements claiming that the logic of solidarity is gone and the propensity and ability of contemporary Poles for cooperation and bottom up self-organization are poor, need to be modified. However, before final modification is done, much broadly conceived research on the *different* modes and patterns of societal self-organization in contemporary Poland must be planned and carried out. Research focused exclusively on the Polish Third Sector does not constitute a sufficient basis on which general conclusions could really be formulated regarding the capacity for cooperative and socially beneficial behavior in contemporary Poland – especially that the membership model is systematically shown to be shallowly anchored in society.

The weakness of the membership model that persists – despite the strong and prolonged systemic incentives – could be related to the lack of trust that Poles express regarding almost all types of formal institutions and organizations – at least domestic ones. The lack of trust has, in turn, very deep (and historically quite understandable) roots that go back at least to the period of Partitions. However, the factors that are responsible for the persistence of the lack of trust at a virtually *unchanged* level since the beginning of the systemic change, despite the wholesale institutional change and Europeanization, have not been so far sufficiently investigated and articulated (cf. CBOS 2006a, b; Żukowski 2006)<sup>7</sup>. The existence of other, not based on formal membership, modes of societal self-organization in the country seems to indicate that the social potential for collective action is considerable. However, this potential is, on the whole, poorly recognized. Refusing to be contained in formal structures and managed by rules typical of the currently preferred membership model, this potential – as a social resource – remains virtually wasted.

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<sup>7</sup> For example there is almost no mention in the Polish academic discourse of the corrosive impact of neoliberal policies on the capacity for civil and civic activities of those social strata that undergo systemic pauperization, let alone the *underclass* produced by the policies (see for instance Taylor 2003).

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