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On the Brink of Populism: Credible Leaders and Unreliable Politicians

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Abstract

This article studies the relationship between the lack of ethical inhibitions among populist leaders and the decline in public trust in democratic systems. It analyzes the role of cynical leaders, who are inextricably linked to populism, on the one hand, and emphasizes the role of social movements and civic initiatives in revitalizing democracy, on the other. An illustration of this process is seen in Poland, where after eight years, in 2023, the far-right bloc led by the populist party Law and Justice was removed from power. The text focuses on activists or social leaders, contrasting them with cynical populist leaders, who have emerged in various democratic systems around the world. Activists play a key role in organizing demonstrations and collective actions, which manifest themselves in various forms: civic initiatives, non-governmental organizations, and social movements. Typically, social leaders refrain from engaging in so called dirty political games between parties and factions. Additionally, this article examines protest movements in Poland: STOP ACTA, the Committee for the Defense of Democracy, and 3xVeto. The process of social emancipation culminated in the Women's Strike of 2020. This mobilization proved to be a decisive factor in achieving high voter turnout in the 2023 parliamentary elections and the victory of the democratic bloc.

Keywords

activists; leaders; social movements; unreliable politicians

1. Introduction

In October 2023, Polish society changed the course of history diverging from the global trend of weakening liberal democracy and the rise of spin dictators. In the 21st century, these new, more sophisticated political leaders have generally abandoned physical intimidation and direct violence. "Contemporary autocrats

understand that in today's circumstances, violence is not always necessary or even helpful. Instead of terrorizing citizens, a skilled leader can control them by changing their beliefs about the world" (Guriev & Triesman, 2023, p. 28). The democratic opposition in Poland successfully removed the right-wing nationalist government led by the Law and Justice Party (PiS). How did social actors—whether collaborating with opposition parties or acting independently—mobilize an unprecedented voter turnout of nearly 75% (76% in urban areas and 71% in rural regions) and secure victory for a political coalition encompassing Christian Democrats, centrists, and leftists? Was this merely the consequence of societal exhaustion with the erosion of the rule of law, pervasive xenophobic propaganda financed by public funds, and a growing estrangement from the European Union, despite the majority's will?

If so, such an explanation would be overly simplistic for at least two reasons. First, before being ousted, PiS had won democratic elections twice, in 2015 and 2019, without resorting to electoral fraud or a coup. This underscores the entrenched polarization of Polish society, which remains a defining political reality. Since 2015, Polish parliamentary elections have been arenas of political contention shaped not only by economic cost–benefit analyses but also by ideological and worldview-related considerations. In 2023, a majority of voters opted for democracy over authoritarianism and the erosion of legal norms, signalling a return to democratic governance.

Second, for social discontent to translate into effective political change, several conditions must be met. This article highlights one key factor: the role of social movements and civic initiatives. While political parties are acknowledged, they are secondary to our focus on civil society actors who, since 2012, have driven a long-term process culminating in the removal of populist leaders. This outcome was facilitated by the mobilization of large social groups, particularly women and young voters. Within these demographics, new social leaders emerged, so "activists" played a crucial role in the effectiveness of a multi-component civic movement advocating for freedom and democracy.

Drawing on the sociology of social movements, this article does not seek to delve into the theoretical essence of populism in political science or provide an exhaustive review of existing studies on the topic. Instead, it examines the process by which social actors revitalized democracy. The central argument is that despite their decisive contribution, these actors did not transition into institutional politics; they did not become part of the political class even after the democratic opposition assumed power in 2023.

2. Populism: The Erosion of Institutional Trust

Populism is used in this article both as a theoretical framework and as a tangible "everyday problem" that poses a real threat to democracy. Contemporary theories of populism include a strategic approach that views it as an instrument to gain or maintain power in the long term. A parallel approach focuses on populist discourses (de la Torre, 2018). Populism has been associated with anti-establishment appeals, top-down mobilization, and a particular concept of popular sovereignty (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). Its manifestations are very diverse, appearing in different regions, political orientations, and historical periods (Arditi, 2003).

The case of Polish anti-populism, which is the subject of this article, is particularly interesting because it deviates from the worrying trends observed in many Western societies. Without engaging in the theoretical debate on populism, it is important to recognize that its global rise correlates with the escalation of

social unrest triggered by crises such as war, climate change, uncontrolled migration, inflation, and technological unemployment.

The restoration of democratic order in Poland in the mid-2020s occurred in an era in which numerous politicians around the world were effectively mobilizing mass support using a populistic narrative. The discourse framework imposed by PIS exploited political competition, reinforcing the conflict between the "people" and the "elite." Right-wing populism is particularly characterized by anti-elitism and nationalist rhetoric.

A crucial aspect of populism is its intrinsic connection to declining trust in institutions. Consequently, populist leaders actively seek to undermine confidence in key institutions, not only at the national level but also within international frameworks such as the European Union and multilateral trade agreements. The success of populism has attracted new political figures who learn from established populists—from Viktor Orbán on how to remain in power, from Donald Trump on how to reclaim power, and from Marine Le Pen and Alice Weidel on how to approach power. No society is entirely immune to populism's resurgence. The primary safeguard against this threat lies in strong institutions and public trust in them, which in Poland have historically been fragile.

Institutional trust, built upon interpersonal trust as a foundational paradigm, encompasses various categories, including trust in different social groups, specific governments, and the broader political class. In democratic systems, newly elected governments typically receive a "credit of trust" from voters, who anticipate the fulfilment of electoral promises (Easton, 1965). However, successive administrations shape—or erode—generalized trust in political actors, depending on their performance and integrity (Citrin & Stoker, 2018). The highest level of institutional trust pertains to trust in structural arrangements such as courts, universities, financial markets, and military command networks. Sztompka explains this sort of institutional trust in this way:

> An even more abstract case is the trust directed at institutions and organizations (understood as specific structural arrangements within which actions and interactions take place). The school, the university, the army, the church, the courts, the police, the banks, the stock exchange, military command network, computer networks, financial markets, and so forth. The principles and mechanisms of their operation are opaque and cryptic for the average user. We usually take them for granted, do not even notice their pervasive presence. (Sztompka, 1999, pp. 43–44)

As Inglehart and Norris (2016) argue, the erosion of confidence in these fundamental institutions poses a greater threat to liberal democracy than declining trust in individual politicians.

From a historical perspective, Polish society has experienced fluctuating levels of institutional trust, often marked by deep skepticism (Sztompka, 1999). The loss of statehood at the end of the 18th century and brief independence between the world wars fostered a reliance on charismatic leaders rather than institutions (Davies, 2005). This legacy of statelessness and foreign domination contributed to a political culture in which personal authority frequently overshadowed the authority of formal structures (Ekiert & Kubik, 1999). Protest movements have played a decisive role in accelerating political change in Poland's modern history, particularly after World War II. Despite subjugation to the Soviet bloc, Polish society resisted sovietization, exemplified by

recurring worker and intellectual protests. These culminated in the Solidarity movement (1980–1981), which not only transformed Polish society but also contributed to the fall of communism (Touraine et al., 1984).

Solidarity propelled its leader, Lech Wałęsa, to the Polish presidency (1990–1995), illustrating the phenomenon wherein populist charisma substitutes for institutional guarantees in nascent democracies. Even today, leaders who publicly oppose populism—as Szymon Hołownia or Donald Tusk—often employ populist rhetoric to varying degrees, highlighting the pervasiveness of this political phenomenon. Populism exists on a spectrum, from radical forms that undermine democracy through xenophobia and attacks on civil society (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018) to moderate variants that strategically challenge specific institutional structures for short-term political gain.

Stanley and Cześnik (2019), who offered a thorough analysis of populism in Poland, showed that PiS has become a party of radical populism: it transformed from a relatively moderate party that, after gaining a majority thanks to the support of centrist voters, attacked the elites, whom it held responsible for the groups harmed by previous governments.

3. Cynical Leaders

The period between 2012 and 2023 witnessed increasing civic engagement in Poland, characterized by grassroots mobilizations against the erosion of democracy. This activism intensified after 2015, when PiS systematically dismantled legal norms, weakened institutional trust, and embraced nationalist and xenophobic rhetoric. However, institutional trust is further eroded when political leaders manipulate governance structures for personal or ideological ends. PiS's assault on judicial independence and media freedom created a public perception of institutional bias, exacerbating democratic backsliding.

Political cynicism—a key driver of populism—manifests itself in voter disengagement or, conversely, unwavering support for populist leaders who claim to represent "the true will of the people." PiS successfully leveraged public disillusionment by positioning itself as a defender of national sovereignty against corrupt elites and liberal institutions. However, declining trust in institutions has not deterred political participation; rather, voters remain engaged but with greater skepticism (Inglehart & Norris, 2016). This paradox underscores the persistence of democratic engagement amid institutional distrust.

As Sadura and Sierakowski (2019, p. 10) put it:

> A new phenomenon that has come to dominate Polish politics is the conscious and open acceptance by voters of pathological behavior on the part of political parties. Political cynicism is being displayed by voters on all sides. It functions as a higher form of polit ical initiation, a kind of co–participation in politics, which all voters see as a hotbed of evil....When they are asked about politics, voters begin to act like politicians, calculating the plays necessary to win and openly accepting underhanded moves. They consider what they should say, whom they should seek accommodation with, what to promise to whom. Just like politicians, they do not pretend to believe the things they say about the other side.

The rise of "spin dictators," who legally ascend to power and sustain popularity without overt repression, exemplifies modern political cynicism (Guriev & Triesman, 2023). These leaders do not promise a utopian

future, as in communism, but rather a nostalgic return to a glorified past. Their primary techniques involve systematic legal erosion and the normalization of blatant falsehoods as politically or culturally acceptable. The appeal of Trump's Make America Great Again slogan illustrates how populist rhetoric fosters a sense of shared destiny between political elites and the masses:

> The language that refers to the retrotopian vision of the world is the source of a specific bond between populist leaders and the electorate. It is the language that generates the effect of political persistence. It consolidates support for the authoritarian versions of leadership. In this sense, retrotopia is more than a narrative, it is a substitute for ideology. It gives its supporters a sense of rightness in the realities of cultural war—an acute conflict over the identity of the nation and its "substance": tradition, faith, family, and so on. (Szczegóła, 2023, p. 253)

Spin dictators know how to use the powerful negative emotions embedded in political cynicism, including violating basic values such as truth and honesty. However, with all their techniques, they have a common goal: replacing trust in institutions with trust in leaders, i.e., themselves. In contrast to institutional trust, trust in leaders is often more volatile and can be significantly influenced by the personal qualities and public personas of those in power. Trust in individual political leaders is a deeply interpersonal and subjective dynamic, shaped by citizens' personal experiences and judgments. Voters often evaluate political leaders based on their behavior, the promises they make, and their perceived integrity. This process mirrors the everyday game of trust that individuals navigate in their personal relationships—people develop a sense of whom they can rely on, and this instinct extends to their political representatives. Trust in leaders often rests on ethical considerations, such as whether a leader is transparent, honest, and capable of following through on their commitments. Trust in leaders can be built on the belief that effectiveness is the most important quality, regardless of whether it has been confirmed in practice or by whatever means it has been achieved. This kind of uncritical faith in the agency of leaders is characteristic of followers of populist politicians, which seems accurately to characterize Donald Trump's electorate.

4. Activists

In this section, we will focus on social leaders, whom we call activists or social activists. They are crucial for building and developing the collective actions of civil society, which take various forms: civic initiatives, non-governmental organizations, and social movements.

We need to distinguish social leaders from two groups, namely classical authorities and contemporary influencers: Classical authorities are, as a rule, people of science and culture, who played an important role in shaping public opinion in Poland during the communist era. The role and history of this group, known as the "intelligentsia," have been well-researched and documented. Prominent members of this group constitute the scientific community found in academia and public institutions. They disseminate their knowledge, usually through the mainstream media, but as a rule, without directly referring to political parties and politicians. They try to shape public opinion in the proper sense of the word, i.e., as a space for free discourse and communication (Łuczewski, 2023, pp. 19-21).

Contemporary influencers have an importance difficult to overestimate, especially when we talk about scandalous influencers. On a global scale, these include, for example, pop culture stars, with a reach

exceeding billions and speaking out on political issues, such as Taylor Swift, who supported Kamala Harris just before the US presidential election in 2024. If influencers speak out on political matters, they do so "in passing," without directly declaring their accession to politics. Their significance, however, is hard to overestimate, if we take into account, for example, the case of Elon Musk. There is no space to illustrate the phenomenon of contemporary Polish influencers entering the political game for a short time, but it is worth citing one example as an attempt to monetize popularity through pseudo-activism. In December 2023, the wife of a Polish conservative politician from the highest level of power debuted on Clout MMA as the "new queen of freak fight." In order to capitalize on her online popularity, she announced the establishment of a feminist political party called "Mam dość" (I've had enough), although the court did not register this party due to the lack of a sufficient number of signatures. This case would not be worth attention if it were not for the celebrity's attempt to mobilize sentiment, which we will return to in Section 9 where we analyse the Women's Strike at the end of 2020, after the tightening of anti-abortion law in Poland.

Not all influencers are scandalmongers who aim to profit from their popularity. It is worth paying attention to those whose role as whistleblowers has reached the heights of power. Cyber activists and social leaders are not anonymous and therefore operate openly in the public space. Although they have much in common with the social leaders we are dealing with here, it is worth pointing out the significant differences between these groups. What characterizes social leaders is that they do not limit themselves to the Internet and build their position and credibility by physically participating in demonstrations in public squares and streets. It is difficult to overestimate the role and significance of experience that social leaders gain by standing face-to-face with their supporters and opponents.

5. Social Movements: Learning Politics From Below

Theories of the "society of social movements" challenge the traditional role of political parties as central pillars of democracy in late modernity. Castells (2012) and Della Porta (2020) emphasize the increasing relevance of social movements as mechanisms that can reinvigorate democratic institutions such as political parties, particularly those belonging to parliamentary democracies. These movements and non-governmental organizations often serve as the vehicle by which new political leaders—commonly known as anti-system politicians—emerge. However, despite their origins outside institutional politics, these leaders are often absorbed into the very political games, arrangements, and transactional systems they originally opposed (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017).

Social movements and civic initiatives form part of an expanding sphere of non-institutional politics, which plays a vital role in a system of checks and balances within a democracy. Tilly and Tarrow (2015) define contentious politics as the interactions in which social actors make claims that conflict with others' interests, leading to collective actions, such as protests, strikes, social movements, and revolutions. It involves mobilizations in which people engage in conflict with elites or authorities. As long as activists do not become party leaders, members of parliament, or ministers, they remain part of non-institutional politics, the importance of which is difficult to overestimate. They rarely cross the boundary of formal politics, departing from their role as social leaders to become politicians. Staying within the realm of non-institutional politics also means rejecting the tools that belong to the repertoire of radical groups, who do not shy away from extremism.

The growing importance of "non-institutional politics" results from discouragement, indignation, or even anger caused by party fights, corruption, and broken promises. The result is radicalization and open conflicts, for example between supporters and opponents of abortion. There is a threat of "anti-institutional politics" that does not shrink from symbolic or physical violence (Kuczyński, 2023a, pp. 162–163).

The case of Poland illustrates the process of learning politics by social actors, divided into successive stages. In the first stage, in 2012, the youth were the main actors in the protests under the slogan STOP ACTA (Anti-Counterfeiting Trade Agreement; Jurczyszyn et al., 2014). The second stage (2016) was characterized by the participation of the middle class from large cities, especially during the period of the Committee for the Defense of Democracy (KOD) activity in defense of democratic institutions (Kubik, 2016) and in the following year (2017) of the "3xVeto" movement. In the third stage (2020), women became leading social actors, especially during the Women's Strike and later feminist movements (Graff & Korolczuk, 2021). Although these stages overlap, each of them reflects the mobilization of a different segment of society, whose leaders embodied the dominant social concerns of the time.

It is worth mentioning that during this period PiS was supported not only by its voter base but also by a few ultra-conservative non-governmental organizations, such as Ordo Iuris, often backed by the Catholic Church. The National Movement (Ruch Narodowy, in Polish) played an important role as an organization that articulated the populist radical right youth. Some authors use the term "populist social movements" to refer to organizations supporting PIS, such as the large media concern controlled by the Lux Veritatis Foundation, consisting of a radio station (Radio Maryja), a television station (Telewizja Trwam), and a periodical (Nasz Dziennik), which benefit from financial support from the PiS state. Also associated with PIS were Gazeta Polska Clubs:

> A network of local meeting clubs set up by readers of the Gazeta Polska weekly in Poland and among the Polish diaspora. These clubs, which number an estimated 10,000 members, serve as focal points for the presentation and discussion of ideas associated with the conservative right. (Stanley & Cześnik, 2019, p. 77)

The vast majority of NGOs, however, distanced themselves from the ruling populist regime, with many either actively participating in protests or supporting civic actions aimed at opposing the government and its populist president. In the next sections, the focus is on case studies of social leaders whose visibility and activities were not always directly related to traditional politics. These leaders operated across three domains—NGOs, social movements, and ad-hoc civic initiatives—thereby constituting the living fabric of civil society (Koopmans, 2004). Under certain conditions, these distinct groups often merged into cohesive actions, as we will explore through specific examples.

The first case study concerns the STOP ACTA protest movement (2012), studied using a sequence of methods. First, interviews were conducted with the leaders of the movement, who then took part in a sociological intervention, consisting of, among other things, a series of meetings between activists, supporters, and opponents of the movement. Research on the remaining cases—the KOD, the protests known as "3xVeto," and the Women's Strike—in each case began with participant observation, followed by interviews, online discourse analysis, and secondary data analysis. It is important to note at the outset that each of these mass protests, with the exception of "3xVeto," had a nationwide nature. They differed in the level of institutionalization of the movement, which was the highest in the case of KOD.

6. STOP ACTA

On January 26, 2012, the Polish government signed an international agreement aimed at combating piracy, known as ACTA. It covered intellectual property rights for both tangible and digital products. However, the issue of piracy was not the primary concern of the protestors who mobilized across Poland in February 2012. According to demonstrators, ACTA posed a significant threat to privacy rights, particularly by undermining the principle of internet user anonymity (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013). Movement leaders viewed ACTA as a mechanism serving the interests of secret service agencies and large corporations under the guise of intellectual property enforcement. Ultimately, the protests proved successful, leading to the suspension of ACTA ratification not only in Poland but also beyond its borders.

The leaders of the movement, who referred to themselves as "ACTAvists," were predominantly young individuals from major urban centers, although the movement also gained traction in smaller towns such as Siedlce and Bolesławiec. The protest attracted widespread social support, with participants demonstrating a high level of digital literacy and online communication skills. Many had prior experience in activism, spanning the ideological spectrum from anarchist movements, such as the Free Hemp Movement, to far-right groups, including radical football supporter groups (Kuczyński, 2023b).

A key methodological approach employed in this study was sociological intervention, which involved moderating group discussions with movement leaders, supporters, and opponents. Sociological intervention, as developed by Alain Touraine and his team, is a participatory and dialogical method designed to engage directly with social actors in the process of constructing sociological knowledge. Rather than observing passively, researchers moderate structured discussions with key participants to uncover the internal logic, values, and conflicts that shape collective action. In this study, the method serves at least two purposes: An exploratory one, to reveal the subjective meanings, motivations, and identities that movement actors attach to their participation or resistance. And, a reflexive one, to encourage participants to reflect on their own experiences, enabling a co-production of knowledge between researchers and social actors (Dubet, 1994). As Alain Touraine stated:

> Sociological intervention profoundly transforms the relationship between analyst and actor; it does not confuse one with the other, and protects the former from the dangers of ideology as clearly as it prevents the latter from seeing his consciousness devalued in favor of a meaning that would be completely external to him. Hence the importance and novelty of the exchange of views that it has allowed to be established between those who lead social struggles and those who analyze them. (Touraine, 1982, p. 16)

The discussions with ACTAvists provided insights into the movement's self-definition and the framing of its core conflict. They consistently emphasized their detachment from formal politics and political figures, promoting the slogan NO LOGO (with no reference to the concept of Naomi Klein). As one participant explained: "We are a highly diverse group, and we strongly emphasize NO LOGO, which signifies neutrality. It does not matter where you come from; once you enter our world, you become NO LOGO" (Jurczyszyn et al., 2014, p. 95).

This self-definition allowed ACTAivists to engage in collective action while setting aside their political differences. The shared symbolic rejection of political affiliations was exemplified by the widespread use of Guy Fawkes masks during demonstrations. This imagery further reinforced associations with the principle of anonymity and the Anonymous group, who act collectively under a shared or symbolic identity, while maintaining individual anonymity. Such collectives often engage in activism, digital resistance, or protest, and reject formal leadership or centralized control. The internet played a crucial role in the movement's organization, facilitating rapid communication and mobilization. For example, within mere hours, activists successfully gathered 15,000 protestors in Kraków's main square—an effort led by individuals who had never previously held leadership roles. These public demonstrations were accompanied by extensive online discourse, including memes and innovative activist strategies, such as a temporary truce between virtual factions in the Metin2 online game. More radical actions included, on 21 January 2012, the hacking and temporary shutdown of the Polish parliamentary website: "Tango down. Sejm.gov.pl." (Jurczyszyn et al., 2014, p. 17).

One of the participants in the sociological intervention described himself as a citizen journalist who collaborated with others to create a protest map of Europe:

> This map, in my view, helped ignite protests across Europe, fueling the broader freedom movement. On February 11, demonstrations will be held across the continent. I co-created this map with collaborators from Bulgaria, France, Germany, England, and one other person whose name I cannot recall. (Jurczyszyn et al., 2014, p. 67)

The NO LOGO principle also informed the movement's strategy, which focused all efforts on a single objective. As one activist noted: "For now, we are like a laser that can burn through this ACTA document. Just this one document. If we disperse our focus, if we turn into a prism, it may not work" (Jurczyszyn et al., 2014 p. 56). This targeted approach, conceptualized by ACTAivists, facilitated collaboration and collective action with a clear singular goal—enabling the movement to reach a critical mass. Ultimately, the "laser" strategy proved effective, compelling the Polish government to withdraw from the ACTA agreement on 17 February 2012. As reported on 4 July 2012 by BBC News, the European Parliament has voted to reject ACTA.

These developments challenge earlier sociological observations regarding the political disengagement of Polish youth. According to the Public Opinion Research Centre, nine out of 10 Polish teenagers were convinced in 2013 that politicians only care about their careers, while almost eight out of 10 respondents claimed that they had no influence on what the government did, and three-quarters were unable to specify their political views.

Observers of the STOP ACTA movement noted the unexpected presence of right-wing youth factions, whose political activism had previously gone largely unnoticed (Junes, 2016). The movement underscored to its participants that they themselves constituted the most valuable resource in the digital age. Governments and corporations, having long mastered the art of leveraging this resource, were now perceived as direct threats to individual autonomy. This realization prompted internet users to view anonymity as the most effective defense against pervasive surveillance (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013).

7. The KOD

The second case study concerns a much more enduring movement known as the KOD, which was established at the end of 2015 in response to the first decisions of the PiS government. KOD reached its peak in 2016. Sociological analysis undertaken by Anna Radiukiewicz, based on extensive 78 in-depth interviews, revealed that KOD was primarily a grassroots movement composed of the metropolitan middle class. The author of the study analyzed the online discourse and slogans at regularly organized street demonstrations. The results showed, among other things, that the KOD was a social movement focused on strategic alliances with opposition political parties (Radiukiewicz, 2021, pp. 312–314).

The immediate cause of KOD's formation was the dispute over the Constitutional Tribunal and the rule of law, issues that would remain central to Polish political life for the next decade. Between November 2015 and December 2016, six acts concerning the Constitutional Tribunal were passed, prepared by PiS to introduce its nominees to the Tribunal. As a result, legal dualism has occurred in Poland, the consequences of which last until 2025. Prominent opposition politicians participated in KOD demonstrations from the outset, marching alongside movement leaders and delivering speeches from specially equipped vehicles. The protests, including the demonstrations outside the Polish Parliament in December 2015, were acts of solidarity with opposition MPs. Notably, former President Komorowski also took part.

Slogans such as Citizens for Democracy, Defend Constitutional Order, and We Are and Will Remain in Europe reflected KOD's explicit political stance. These protests extended beyond Poland, with large Polish expatriate communities organizing parallel demonstrations in Brussels, London, Paris, and Berlin. The height of KOD's activity came in mid-2016, when a demonstration in Warsaw, organized in collaboration with three major opposition parties, attracted nearly 240,000 participants. The movement's international presence was further underscored by a KOD delegation's visit to Brussels. (Radiukiewicz, 2019).

Internal divisions and ideological tensions ultimately weakened the movement, leading to its decline from public prominence. Two key factors contributed to KOD's weakening: First, the middle-class base of the movement exhibited a sense of superiority over those who did not share their liberal democratic values, revealing a class dimension within the movement. The author of the interesting study on KOD identity stated:

> As a consequence of identifying citizenship with the intelligentsia, contemporary ideal citizens are its heirs who have adopted its lifestyle and ethics. From this perspective, the KOD supporters show what constitutes the sacredness of a democratic society and what a true citizen should look like. Despite their street activities outside the 'salons' in which rational debate takes place, they submit to the regime of the public sphere, situate themselves as defenders of its rules and validate the same. (Radiukiewicz, 2019, p. 367)

Second, KOD's close association with the political class led to a dilution of its identity, ultimately eroding its grassroots appeal. KOD's collaboration with established opposition parties—while initially a source of organizational strength and visibility—blurred the line between civic activism and party politics. This hybrid character undermined its credibility as an independent social movement and alienated segments of its grassroots base who sought non-partisan civic engagement (Domaradzka, 2020).

8. The Judiciary Defense Movement

The third case study is referred to here as the Judiciary Defense Movement or 3xVETO. In 2017, Poland witnessed a wave of protests against anti-democratic judicial reforms enacted by the Polish Parliament, awaiting only the signature of the president, an ally of PiS. The 3xVETO protests were held in various cities, including Warsaw, where demonstrators gathered in front of the Presidential Palace. The protesters demanded that President Andrzej Duda veto three controversial bills: the Supreme Court bill, the National Council of the Judiciary bill, and the Common Courts bill. A very detailed report covering these protests was prepared by Amnesty International (2017), which replaced sociologists in describing this phenomenon. The following analysis was prepared primarily based on participant observation by the author of this article.

The demonstrations were organized by a coalition of KOD, opposition parties, and civic groups. Political party leaders and KOD activists led the protests, which took place in many cities across Poland. Notably, some leaders from the 1980–1981 Solidarity movement, including Lech Wałęsa, participated in the demonstrations. Judges and cultural figures also addressed the crowds, lending a solemn and symbolic weight to the protests in front of the Supreme Court.

This period is particularly noteworthy as it saw the emergence of independent civic initiatives, signalling a deliberate distancing from political parties. One such group was the non-governmental organization Action Democracy (Akcja Demokracja), founded in 2015, which organized a symbolic protest known as the Chain of Light. This demonstration, which took place outside Parliament, featured thousands of protesters holding candles, symbolizing their resistance to judicial subjugation.

Toward the end of the protests, further efforts were made to detach some civic initiatives from political parties. At a demonstration in mid-2017, under the slogan 3 x VETO—Outside the Presidential Palace Without Party Leaders, speakers included writers and anti-discrimination defenders. Standing in the crowd in front of the Presidential Palace, one could hear proposals such as “constitutional patriotism” or appeals for the protection of the Białowieża Forest from exploitative logging practices. Although this surge of civic activism did not lead to a major breakthrough, it foreshadowed a new logic of social engagement, one that would later manifest itself through the Women’s Strike.

9. Women: The Most Important Social Actor

Alain Touraine, in his influential book *Le Monde des femmes*, in 2006, compared the significance of contemporary movements led by women to the importance of workers’ movements that shaped industrial societies:

> The women’s movement and the set of actions carried out by what is called sexual minorities occupy a central place in public life and the post-social era, in the same way that workers’ struggles were at the center of industrial society and democratic and national sovereignty was the mobilizing theme in the previous period. (Touraine, 2013, p. 285)

Evidence suggests that the turning point in the process of doing politics without entering formal politics in Poland was the Women’s Strike in 2020. This event was preceded by the so-called Black Protest in October

2016, when demonstrations took place in most major cities in Poland. The scale of the protests in 2016 forced the rejection of the proposed anti-abortion bill. Four years later, according to police data, there were 410 demonstrations across the country, involving 430,000 people, including 100,000 in Warsaw alone (Zaworska-Nikoniuk, 2023, p. 58). This largest wave of protests was triggered in 2020 by the ruling of the Constitutional Tribunal that some provisions of the 1993 Act, in particular those allowing for termination of pregnancy in cases of serious fetal abnormalities, were unconstitutional (Graff & Korolczuk, 2021).

Who were the participants of the Women's Strike, a movement described by scholars as an example of connective action? As one researcher argues: "I suggest that the protests against the abortion ban are an example of initiatives following the logic of connective rather than collective action, and that this new logic was one of the key factors facilitating mass engagement" (Korolczuk, 2016, p. 101). A survey conducted shortly after the 2020 Women's Strike revealed that participants shared a high degree of agreement on women's rights, unsurprising given the nature of the protests. However, some facts concerning their political preferences are noteworthy. First, the movement was clearly directed against the leadership of PiS, the ruling party, which represented a paternalistic and patriarchal model of political culture. As a result, positive political preferences among participants were secondary. Notably, one-third of the protestors did not identify with any political party (Tomczyk, 2022).

Another significant feature of the Women's Strike was its radicalism, combined with a commitment to non-violence. The radicalism was evident in the protestors' style of communication, which was often seen in the slogans on banners and memes on the streets and shared online. The language of those protests expressed anger, rejected patriarchy, xenophobia, and attacks on minorities and immigrants (Graff & Korolczuk, 2021).

Although the Women's Strike did not result in changes to the strict abortion laws, it had significant consequences, particularly in terms of raising social awareness, creating new social bonds, mobilizing many women, and fostering the development of new organizations and networks (Graff & Korolczuk, 2021). The movement was led by activists and organizers who were not professional politicians but were deeply committed to defending women's rights and democratic values. The movement mobilized hundreds of thousands of people across Poland, bringing together a diverse coalition of feminists, human rights advocates, and ordinary citizens united in their opposition to government policies.

Despite facing repression from the populist state, the leaders of the Women's Strike maintained a non-violent, ethical approach to their activism. Their leadership was rooted in principles of inclusion, equality, and democratic participation. This ethical leadership helped rebuild trust in the democratic process, particularly among younger voters who had become disillusioned with traditional politics, ultimately contributing to the defeat of PiS in the 2023 elections (Marczewski, 2024).

However, the victory of the democratic opposition in 2023 does not appear to have marked a significant turning point in restoring trust in the state, either at the personal or institutional level. Most activists remain in their civic roles, with few entering formal politics, as evidenced by two notable examples: The first is the political career of Michał Kołodziejczak, founder of the Agrounia movement, which was established in 2018 to organize protests, road blockades, and high-profile actions—such as dumping agricultural products in cities—to draw public and governmental attention to farmers' issues. Agrounia transformed into a political party in

2022 but, after unsuccessful pre-election alliances, reached an agreement with the leading opposition party Citizen Platform (Platforma Obywatelska). As part of this deal, Agrounia members were allocated seven spots, mostly at the bottom of Civic Coalition's electoral lists. Only Kołodziejczak was placed at the top of the list, later becoming the Deputy Minister of Agriculture following the election.

Another example is Marta Lempart, who gained political fame as a co-founder of Women's Strike. She has also actively supported LGBTQ+ rights and advocated for the separation of church and state. Her case is important because Marta Lempart is an isolated example of a social leader who was elected to the new parliament in 2023 and, although she sides with the democratic coalition, she is its most active critic and reviewer.

The Women's Strike, despite its radicalism and confrontational stance, awakened hope for building democratic governance from the grassroots level. As one woman, interviewed for a study on intergenerational solidarity, expressed:

> The girls who are on the streets today will soon be in municipal councils, village councils, and mayors' offices, and they will simply take power themselves. They will take the Poland they want. We don't need any man to come and say: "Girl, you can sit here and make me coffee." (Żurek, 2022, p. 74).

On the other hand, any form of connectivity—whether in a more enduring or ad-hoc form—may inspire hope, especially when it transcends party lines, political preferences, and even prejudices. The principle of NO LOGO, as proposed by the ACTAvists, serves as an effective tool for mobilization when common concerns are at stake. From the STOP ACTA protests to the Women's Strike, one can observe the gradual involvement of young people in public life, who resisted the encroachment on their privacy and autonomy of the state. A researcher of Polish feminism noted the similarities between these seemingly disparate protests:

> Both initiatives seemed to appear out of nowhere: they surfaced on the Internet, but participants quickly moved from online discussions to street protests. Both emerged in response to specific pieces of legislation supported by those in power, and both managed to halt further proceedings over the controversial regulations. Moreover, studies show that in both cases, the youngest generation of Poles was the most engaged. (Korolczuk, 2016, pp. 98–99)

However, the NO LOGO principle may prove insufficient when divisions arise over fundamental differences in values, such as those visible in the abortion debate. In this context, it is difficult to overestimate the importance of mobilizations based on shared moral values that transcend ideological and political divisions. There are many manifestations of solidarity between people, but the ones that most attract our attention are those in which the entire society faces challenges that affect everyone. The Covid-19 pandemic in Poland, as in many other countries, has provoked a variety of social responses to support those affected. Social workers, volunteers and religious communities have provided multifaceted assistance, including medical, charitable, and pastoral support in 2022 to war refugees from Ukraine (Kalinowska et al., 2023).

Why is it important to write about this phenomenon, when the solidarity movements we are discussing here are linked to politics only to the extent that they have filled the gap where government solutions were lacking? It is impossible to ignore these extraordinary actions, which reveal the potential of family, neighborhood, and ad hoc groups. Civil society organizations (CSOs) and individual initiatives have shown an unprecedented

degree of solidarity, offering essential services and assistance both behind the scenes and on the front lines of the war in Ukraine. A survey conducted by the Public Opinion Research Center in Poland in April 2022 showed that 63% of Polish respondents or members of their households provided assistance to Ukrainian refugees. Forms of assistance included financial support, donations of goods, and offering accommodation. The survey also indicated that 84% of Poles supported accepting refugees from Ukraine, which reflects strong public support for aid activities.

It is important to emphasize that the solidarity movements in Poland, whether related to the pandemic or to helping war refugees from Ukraine, were primarily animated by women. The war in Ukraine caused families to flock to Poland, usually without men, who stayed in Ukraine to fight. Help for multi-generational Ukrainian families, composed mainly of women, was also carried out in Poland mainly by women of different ages. Its intensity was also related to the sense of threat felt by the inhabitants of Poland, a country located just behind the front line. Nevertheless, its scale was by no means local or regional and reached a global scale. The explosion of aid activity in Poland had a mainly moral dimension, but it is worth noting that many aid workers felt empowered and understood that "what I do matters." It is difficult to overestimate the experience of building networks based on real, direct interactions and activities in physical spaces such as warehouses or collective shelters. In the summary of the book we wrote based on the results of a sociological study of helping war refugees from Ukraine in 2022, we stated:

> The most important factor that cannot be ignored in the analysis was the rapid self-organization, the completely grassroots nature of the aid campaign. Internally, the Movement did not need either leaders or programs. It did not even need internal enemies that would support mobilization, which is also a specific phenomenon. (Kalinowska et al., 2023, p. 243)

10. How Far From Politics?

If disappointment with politics leads to populism, regaining trust in democratic institutions becomes even more difficult. Politicians without inhibitions, who do not shy away from lies and promise a return to the happy years of the past, convince many voters, who will feel an irresistible anxiety. It is hardly surprising that such an image of politics effectively discourages social leaders from fighting for power. They leave room for cynical players who bet on a political career. Of course, we will find encouraging exceptions among professional politicians. Most non-governmental organizations in Poland, as probably in other countries, maintain a healthy distance from "dirty politics" and fulfill their statutory obligations. It turns out, however, that "dirty politics" will not forget about non-governmental organizations. Populist leaders have noticed that non-governmental organizations can be used to build a social base seemingly independent of politicians. Providing them with financial resources and loyal staff has become one of the techniques of spin dictators. The authors, who analyzed many cases around the world, showed, among other things, how these modern populists use communication technologies, especially social media: "The Internet offers previously unknown opportunities to denigrate activists and arouse distrust. In their circles, they can be anonymously accused of working for profit to the detriment of the state" (Guriev & Triesman, 2023, p. 101). Even more worrying are the actions directly targeting breakaway NGOs that are part of a broader group known as CSOs.

Many CSOs, especially those focused on anti-discrimination, equality, and human rights, are increasingly targeted by right-wing populist groups and politicians. Their inclusive outlook is often criticized, and their

funding is questioned or framed as serving elite interests. Across Europe, CSOs also face growing regulatory pressures, funding restrictions, and, in some cases, threats and intimidation (Ruzza & Sanchez Salgado, 2021, pp. 471–472).

A number of countries, following Russian President Putin's decrees, have passed laws restricting foreign contributions to NGOs, often justified by rhetoric emphasizing national sovereignty and the desire to ward off foreign influence. These laws often require NGOs to register as "foreign agents" if they receive a certain percentage of their funding from abroad, exposing them to increased scrutiny and bureaucratic hurdles. For example, in 2017, populist-led Hungary passed a law requiring NGOs receiving foreign funding above a certain threshold to register as "foreign-supported" organizations. This law was later found illegal by the European Court of Justice in 2020, leading to its repeal in 2021. Similarly, Slovakia proposed a law in 2024 requiring NGOs receiving foreign funding to identify themselves as "foreign-supported organizations," prompting warnings from the European Commission of potential legal action.

CSOs in Hungary, Slovakia, and more authoritarian countries (e.g., Turkey and Iran) illustrate how civil society is a contested field shaped by broader power struggles rather than simply a neutral space for democratic participation. Their sociological significance lies in their dual role: as actors resisting authoritarian consolidation and as barometers of the health of democracy in countries governed by populist politicians.

Poland's experience from the last decade shows that significant protection against authoritarianism and populism is provided by the constant activity and vigilance of leaders of democratic social movements and civic initiatives, provided they are able to mobilize their supporters to act in the next parliamentary and other elections. And above all, to act in the periods between elections, in which civic activity should not disappear.

In recent years, the rise of populism has challenged democratic norms and pluralistic values across many societies. In this context, CSOs—including NGOs, social movements, and grassroots initiatives—play a crucial role in defending human rights, promoting social cohesion, and holding governments accountable. They provide platforms for marginalized voices and advocate for inclusive policies, often countering populist narratives that rely on division and exclusion. CSOs also contribute to democratic resilience by fostering civic engagement and public debate. Despite increasing pressures such as regulatory restrictions and political attacks, these organizations continue to be key actors in sustaining open, participatory societies. Their work is particularly vital in protecting democratic space and encouraging solidarity in polarized environments.

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