

Summary

The Traditions and Modernity of Polish Civic Self-Organization. Selected Threads from the History of Institutions and Social Initiatives from the 12th to the 21st Century

The traditions of social self-organisation are deeply embedded in Polish history and connected with the adoption of Christianity and the Christian doctrine of mercy. Lester Salamon and Helmut Anheier in their social origin theory emphasise the importance of historical tradition as a factor differentiating the role of grassroots institutions and organizations in social systems of particular states. Indeed, similarly to Western Europe, almost all institutional forms of Polish self-help were initiated by religious and secular social entities. However, compared to Western countries, grassroots social initiatives have unprecedented significance in Polish collective life.

Social self-organisation on Polish soil was mainly formed under the influence of historical and cultural processes specific to the Republic of Poland. These include values, ideas and principles such as Sarmatian republicanism, social teaching of the Church, socialist doctrine, “Solidarity” Trade Union, as well as the principle of subsidiarity and the liberal-left concept. The unique nature of Polish spontaneous social activity is most fully reflected in the following keywords: moral energy, faithfulness to higher values, freedom, independence, just social order.

In the present, as in the past, Polish civic engagement is an attempt to respond to the complexity of economic and social processes and one of the pillars of national independence and identity. Regardless of whether grassroots social initiatives were part of the institutional structure or were excluded from social life by foreign or indigenous regimes, they invariably were and still are a reforming force and a mechanism for shaping a more solidarist socio-economic order. This allows organized groups of citizens to participate more socially and economically in it.

In the Middle Ages and in the times of the First Polish Republic (1569–1795) all basic institutions of care, education and health were established solely through grassroots organization within religious and secular institutions and activities. Until the end of the First Polish Republic they had a substitutive function towards public entities.

In times of partitions and the lack of a sovereign state (1795–1918), Polish society showed great intergroup solidarity to sustain Polishness, reject foreign

domination and regain state independence. It resulted in establishing religious and secular educational societies, philanthropic and economic organisations, library foundations and commercial companies, cooperative banking and rural cooperatives, which carried out their activities officially and underground, using organic work to resist political oppression. The civic involvement of the Poles contributed to the rebirth of the Republic of Poland in 1918, after 123 years of partitions, and hastened the historical process of transforming semi-feudal or early capitalist forms of social life organization (inherited from the partitioners) into a modern, democratic society.

In the times of the Second Polish Republic (1918–1939), thanks to the interventionism of the Polish state, in the economy and in social development, social societies, foundations and cooperatives became part of the institutional structure of social and economic policy. It was considered that to overcome poverty, effectively alleviate socio-economic tensions, and build a democratic society it is necessary to include the entire civic community in the new political project: social activists, cooperative members and clergy. Social societies, foundations and Catholic Church, religious congregations, religious associations and cooperatives ran schools, health clinics, cultural institutions, care facilities, sports, defence and agricultural organisations, and financial self-help funds. One of the important mechanisms for the effective establishment of cooperative entities in the state system was the adoption of the Act on Cooperatives on October 20, 1920. The Act was generally considered to be one of the legal regulations most conducive to cooperatives in Europe at that time. An important regulatory function in the early days of the Polish state was the introduction of the Decree on foundations and on the approval of donations and bequests as early as February 7, 1919.

During the Second World War and German occupation (1939–1945), the conspiracy of official and underground civic initiatives had its indisputable share in ensuring minimum living conditions for society and in reducing material and human losses¹.

The times of real socialism in Poland (1945–1989) resulted in restrictions on the right to freedom of speech and the right to association. Strict political and administrative controls on the part of the communist authorities resulted in dismantling all foundations operating in the Polish People's Republic. Associations, trade unions and cooperatives which have been authorized by the political and administrative authorities to operate, served as a conveyor belt for directives from party authorities to the society. The rejection by the then state authorities of the pluralistic order in social life and the introduction of a monocentric order and the principle of monism, for many years strengthened the monopolistic position of associations, trade unions and cooperatives in individual areas of collective life, depriving citizens of the opportunity for organised actions. The self-governance of cooperatives was limited by entrusting them with tasks assigned to the state administration, which were appropriate to the public authority and exceeded the

¹ During the Second World War Poland lost more than 5 million citizens and suffered the greatest, in relation to the total population and national wealth, material and human losses of all European states. Cf: *Report of the losses suffered by Poland as a result of the German aggression and occupation during World War II in the years 1939–1945*, Ministerstwo Spraw Zagranicznych RP, <https://instytutstratwojennych.pl>.

possibilities of fulfilling their implementation (state control). Nevertheless, in keeping with existing legal and organizational conditions, associations and cooperatives provided social protection to society, conducted scientific and cultural activities, and formed small circles of freedom. Similarly, the Catholic Church and religious associations conducted limited educational, charity and care activities. They were a place where adaptation mechanisms were formed and a battle for social awareness, battles for a sovereign Poland were fought.

In the short period of “Solidarity” (1980–1981), many spontaneous civic initiatives were created, including charity associations, human rights control organizations and environmental organizations. The Martial Law Decree of December 13, 1981 suspended the activities of grassroots structures. Some of the associations established in 1980–1981 were dissolved, some undertook underground activities. Clandestine activities were also carried out by works commissions and regional structures of “Solidarity”.

After the historic breakthrough of 1989, the main stimulus for the reconstruction of civil communities was readiness to utilize the newly regained freedom and the strong need of Polish women and men to relieve the totalitarian pressure. Poland, during the transition from communism to a pluralistic order, confirmed Burton Weisbrod’s and James Douglas’s arguments concerning the unreliability of the state and the commercial sector in providing part of public goods and the limitations of state institutions in the development of public services. It is particularly necessary to emphasize the importance of civic initiatives in recognizing the needs of this part of Polish society which was previously excluded and omitted, i.e. the unemployed, families, children and young people affected by poverty, people with disabilities and senior citizens. Citizens’ initiatives after 1989 became an important instrument for building historical memory and seeking dialogue with history, searching for identity and cultural distinctiveness and appreciating local traditions. It is worth noting the new identity trend in civic activity, based on different worldview profiles, different forms of expressing opinions and representing public interest. An important area of activity of Polish social associations, foundations and institutions of the Catholic Church and religious congregations at that time was international cooperation and providing humanitarian and development aid to the poor countries of the South. Numerous women’s organizations ran professional and personal development programs and female entrepreneurship. Their pioneering initiatives include educational activities, supporting equal treatment of women in employment and in holding more responsible positions, and preparing young parents to return to the labour market. It is important to highlight the increasingly effective role that civil sector organisations play in raising the organizational culture of Polish companies to a higher level, expanding employers’ activities in the area of work–life, promoting a family-friendly culture and improving social services for the family. Education is an example of the successful inclusion of civil sector organizations in the fulfilment of public tasks. Allowing pluralism in education and upbringing at the beginning of the political changes enabled the participation of civil sector entities in running schools and launched the process of creating civic education policy. Thirty-five years after the political transformation, Polish social education significantly complements the offer of public schools and performs a complementary function to the state primary and secondary school system.

Social and professional inclusion belongs to important areas of social life, in which foundations, associations and cooperatives have been present since the very beginning of transformation. After 1989 social and professional inclusion programs became, as earlier in Polish history, one of the key areas of social self-organization. Since the beginning of the transition, in response to the problem of rising unemployment and the lack of effective public programs, foundations, associations, and grassroots informal initiatives have developed many special programs such as job clubs, employment agencies, training and counseling programs for the unemployed youth, school leavers, graduates and women, as well as business incubators, social integration centers and clubs, occupational therapy workshops and vocational activity centers. During the period of high unemployment in the early 1990s, small business courses were an example of effective professional activation of unemployed women and promotion of women's entrepreneurship.

The "gamechangers" of social policy in Poland in the last thirty-five years are definitely Barbara and Tomasz Sadowski – the founders of the "Barka" charity, and Piotr Pawłowski – the founder and president of the "Friends of Integration" association and the "Integracja" foundation. The founders of "Barka" together with co-workers developed humanitarian aid activities, support groups and therapy sessions, as well as precursor forms of social and vocational education such as self-study groups, training and vocational workshops. Piotr Pawłowski was an animator of many initiatives integrating people with disabilities into social life and professional activation. He established a network of Integration Centers and ran numerous educational projects. He was a very effective advocate for the rights of people with disabilities, the author of the program "Poland without barriers", the editor-in-chief of the TVP program „Mission Integration" and a motivational speaker encouraging CEOs and entrepreneurs, directors and employees of companies and firms, including Siemens, Citi Bank, MetLife, PKN Orlen, Poczta Polska and Polpharma, to activities friendly to the disabled.

What strengthens the self-organization of Polish society after 1989 is state policy at the national and local government levels. It can be assumed that it constitutes a partial realization of the theory of state cooperation and grassroots institutions and initiatives. With regard to government initiatives to support civil society development, it is necessary to emphasize the initiation in 2013–2015 and implementation in 2018 and in subsequent years government programmes for civil society by The National Institute of Freedom – Centre for the Development of Civil Society. They include, among others: The Civil Organization Development Programme, The Solidarity Corps – Government Program for Supporting and Developing Systematic Volunteering and The Government Support Programme for the Development of Scout and Scout Organizations. Thanks to the government policy undertaken on the initiative of Deputy Prime Minister Piotr Gliński and the government programs effectively implemented by the National Institute of Freedom in 2018–2023, the availability of public funds and the possibility of implementing social initiatives by organizations from smaller backgrounds have increased significantly. The role of the state as a factor supporting new directions of involvement such as monitoring and expert activities and citizen media has also increased.

Further legislative and institutional initiatives are needed to support the development of civic self-organization. The idea is to simplify registration and reporting

procedures for foundations and associations with a local scope and low revenues. In reference to the theories of Paul DiMaggio and Helmut Anheier on the importance of NGOs in stabilizing political systems, it is also necessary to strongly emphasize the need to change the regulations of Polish law regarding third sector organisations, especially foundations, associations and employers' organizations, due to the increase in recent years in the practices of their indirect impact on political decision-makers and because they mobilize public opinion in actions that influence political decisions.

Translated by Bożena Lesiuk