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# COSMOS WORKING PAPERS

## Grassroots Groups and Civil Society Actors in Pro-Democratic Transitions in Poland

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## **Mobilizing for Democracy: Democratization Processes and the Mobilization of Civil Society**

The project addresses the role of civil society organizations (CSOs) in democratization processes, bridging social science approaches to social movements and democracy. The project starts by revisiting the “transitology” approach to democratization and the political process approach to social movements, before moving towards more innovative approaches in both areas. From the theoretical point of view, a main innovation will be in addressing both structural preconditions as well as actors’ strategies, looking at the intersection of structure and agency. In an historical and comparative perspective, I aim to develop a description and an understanding of the conditions and effects of the participation of civil society organizations in the various stages of democratization processes. Different parts of the research will address different sub-questions linked to the broad question of CSOs’ participation in democratization processes: a) under which (external and internal) conditions and through which mechanisms do CSOs support democratization processes? b) Under which conditions and through which mechanisms do they play an important role in democratization processes? c) Under which conditions and through which mechanisms are they successful in triggering democratization processes? d) And, finally, what is the legacy of the participation of civil society during transitions to democracy on the quality of democracy during consolidation? The main empirical focus will be on recent democratization processes in EU member and associated states. The comparative research design will, however, also include selected comparisons with oppositional social movements in authoritarian regimes as well as democratization processes in other historical times and geopolitical regions. From an empirical point of view, a main innovation will lie in the development of mixed method strategies, combining large N and small N analyses, and qualitative comparative analysis with in-depth, structured narratives.



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# ***Grassroots groups and civil society actors in pro-democratic transitions in Poland***

Grzegorz Piotrowski

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**Abstract:** The transition to democracy in 1989 in Central and Eastern Europe is said to be the achievement of the dissident sector. In Poland the biggest power in the democratization process was the Solidarność trade union. At the same time many smaller grassroots groups from that time remain unnoticed and their influence on the democratization process is underrated. Such grassroots groups were responsible for organizing numerous strikes, campaigns on the issues of environmental protection and many others. They also brought novel protest repertoires and managed to mobilize different sectors of the society. This paper aims at presenting the complex environment of civil society actors in the democratization of Poland as well as presents the broader context for the transformation of 1989: structural preconditions, cleavages within the authorities and main waves of protest events.

**Keywords:** civil society, Poland, transition, Solidarność.

## **Introduction**

Poland's transition from communist regime to democracy in 1989 is often cited as the most important event in the country's modern history. Despite its political significance, the transformation engaged large sectors of civil society and a broad spectrum of grassroots social movements and groups. This paper presents the dynamics of the protests as well as the complexity of the dissident sector in 1980s Poland. In particular it focuses on the role of civil society and grassroots groups in the process of transformation, and the main frames and protest events of the period. Ethnic, religious and economic dimensions of political life in communist Poland are also taken into account.

## **Transition: periodization/s**

It is very difficult to pinpoint the beginning of the transition period. Some may point to the first cracks within the communist system after the uprising in Poznań in 1956. For instance, Maryjane Osa (2008) shows the continuity of networks of Polish opposition from the late 1950s and the milieus of Catholic journals *Więź* and *Znak*. She recalls that later "in 1967 a group of students at the

University of Warsaw, called 'commandos', organized political discussions and 'political salons'. Initially, its activities were confined to matters of the university. They tried to change the official that is controlled by the communists, student organizations into an independent association. Students also were leaning towards to the youth culture of the sixties. Their relationship to the student movement in France and West Germany was a positive, and the attempt made by the Czechoslovak students to democratize socialism received enthusiastic reception” (Osa 2008: 223). Protests organized by the students (among which were the future leaders of the democratic opposition, Adam Michnik and Jacek Kuroń) spread to the biggest academic centers in Poland and lasted several weeks in 1968.

However, the most commonly cited turning point is the founding of the Komitet Obrony Robotników (KOR, Committee for Workers’ Defense) that later transformed into the Solidarność [Solidarity] movement. KOR, established in 1976, brought together the intelligentsia and the workers, initially as a means to provide legal aid for the leaders of protests in an Ursus tractor factory and in Radom in 1976. Structures established at that time evolved into a larger, countrywide network of dissidents and workers. Most observers claim that the legalization of Solidarność as a trade union (in November 1980) and the introduction of martial law (December 13, 1981) marked the beginning of the transformation period. The registration of Solidarność as an independent trade union was preceded by huge waves of strikes, including general strikes. The former undermined the state’s monopoly on organizations and the representation of workers, the latter signified the regime’s helplessness when confronted with social mobilization. The time in between is often referred to as the ‘Carnival of Solidarność’ (Kenney 2002, Ost 1990). On 11 September 1986 interior minister Gen. Czesław Kiszczak announced the release of all "non-criminal prisoners" (around 300 people) still in prison even after the ‘general’ amnesty of 1984. The September 1986 amnesty was announced in the act of 17 July 1986. Initially, opposition activists approached the act with great caution, suspecting that it would concern at best only a small part of the prisoners. The fate of political prisoners during this period was the main obstacle in relations with the government, ruling out the possibility of any negotiation. The size of the amnesty surprised the opposition leaders. Among others, Bogdan Borusewicz, Henryk Wujec, Leszek Moczulski and Władysław Frasyniuk were released from prison. The most impressive, however, was the release of Zbigniew Bujak, the legendary leader of the underground "Solidarity" who had been arrested in May 1986 after nearly five years in hiding from the secret service, and who was portrayed as an arch enemy of the socialist state in official propaganda.

By the end of the 1980s the communist regime embarked on a round of negotiations with the opposition later known as the Round Table negotiations. Meetings, held in Belvedere, the presidential palace, were supposed to bring about a peaceful transition and democratization of communist Poland: “The

deliberations of the Round Table ended on April 5 [1989] and agreement was reached on some important matters. The most important of them, the re-legalization of Solidarity, the authorization to publish the weekly and daily journals, and the announcement of a semi-free elections to the parliament (including free elections for the Senate) on 4 June [1989]" (Kenney 2005: 301). Soon after the elections a former dissident, Tadeusz Mazowiecki, was nominated the first non-communist prime minister in Poland of the period after 1945. At the same time general Wojciech Jaruzelski became the president, this position having been restored (the previous president, Bolesław Bierut, had died during a visit in Moscow in 1953, and there had been no president in office since then, the most important political figure being the first secretary of the Polish communist party).

Some observers stressed the symbolic meaning of the evacuation of the Soviet Red Army in 1993. However many of the processes initiated with the 1989 transition continued for much longer. Some (especially amongst those holding right-wing political views) even claim that the post-socialist phase was in fact a continuation of the former regime through informal networks and business alliances (cf. Staniszkis 2005).

## **Protest**

The 1989 transition was not a turbulent time when compared with the wave of strikes of 1980 and the military and police interventions during martial law in 1981. In 1980 "Proponents of the strike [the end of August 1980] opposed to the unfair and incompetent - in their opinion - regime a sense of dignity and moral values of the workers, putting forth a request for a re-evaluation of their status and the status of the whole society" (Barker 2008: 274). By the end of the decade most of the dissidents were in favor of negotiations and compromise with the authorities. As Padraic Kenney writes: "The strikes [of 1988] differed significantly from those of 1980. They did not spread to many sites, nor did they have much support among the local population" (Kenney 2005: 261). The strikes of the two waves in 1988 (in May and August) were often organized by grassroots committees and smaller groups that did not belong to the mainstream opposition.

The so-called 'constructive opposition' (as opposed to the 'konkretny' activists from grassroots organizations, cf. Kenney 2002: 172) aimed at a peaceful transition. Rafał Górski writes that: "between the years 1983-88 numbers of demonstrators were in decline. It was a result of the attitude of the underground leadership of Solidarity, which sought to limit the scale of anti-government speeches in fear of the victims. Another factor was the growing public apathy, which have already pushed some of the activists of 'Solidarity' to

desperate acts<sup>1</sup>”. Jany Waluszko, who began his activism in Gdańsk in the 1980s, describes the situation in a similar way. He writes that: “Strikes in 1988 were sluggish and did not have the support not only the general public, but even among the ‘Solidarity’ activists. Radical groups of young people had to drag Wałęsa to them and he just went for it when he realized that it would give him the advantage in bargaining with the authorities. Only a few plants (and the University of Gdansk) were on strike, and there were almost as many people from outside as the crew on strike - almost all young, not always positively related to the authorities of ‘Solidarity’, active mainly on the street (with the use of violence and without)<sup>2</sup>”. There was in fact fear that public manifestations of discontent could jeopardize these efforts and start a new cycle of confrontation. (Ackerman and du Vall 2001, Ost 2005). To avoid confrontation, a series of meetings was held which acquired the name of Round Table (most of the meetings were in fact held at a round table in the Presidential Palace in Warsaw). Even though the Solidarność camp had the capabilities to organize a strike, most were called by more radical groups (often anarchists, nationalists etc. or locally organized workers’ committees).

The widespread aspiration was for a peaceful systemic transition, with the introduction of democratic institutions in Poland. One of the key elements to be achieved was the introduction of party pluralism, to be gained with the first semi-free elections: “According to the agreement reached at the Round Table on April 9 Solidarity was allowed to nominate candidates for 161 seats - 35 percent - and for all 100 seats in the Senate” (Kenney 2005: 308). For the opposition, this was a disappointment in addition to an unimaginable amount of work to be done. After this election came another disappointment - election turnout was 62%. Demands by the opposition included the freedom of assembly and the right to self-organization. The abolition of the censorship office was another of the central claims that would result in freedom of speech and publication. This was accompanied by claims for the right to protest. Other topics included market reforms (transition from the centrally planned economy to a free market) and an institutional shift in public administration that would remove the monopoly of the communist party (Garlicki 2004).

The Round Table negotiations were divided into several sub-sections, each dealing with a prioritized topic. The top officials of the communist party began to negotiate with the leading figures of the pro-democratic opposition, with relations mediated by the Catholic Church. Even though most of the figures of the pro-democratic opposition took part in the negotiations, the first splits and cleavages now began to surface. Among others, two leaders of the

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<sup>1</sup> Górski, Rafał, ‘Opór społeczny w Polsce (1944 -1989) II’, In: Przegląd Anarchistyczny nr 6 (2007)  
downloaded from: <http://www.przegląd-anarchistyczny.org/samorząd/29-opor-społeczny-w-polsce-1944-1989-ii>

<sup>2</sup> Waluszko Janusz P., „Kłęska Solidarności D. Osta”, in: Przegląd Anarchistyczny nr 6, downloaded from  
<http://www.przegląd-anarchistyczny.org/kultura/24-kleska-solidarnosci-d-osta> on 30.01.2012



1980 strikes, Anna Walentynowicz and Andrzej Gwiazda, did not take part in the Round Table, later calling it a 'rotten compromise' and 'treason' to the cause of Polish independence. The cleavages within the Solidarność camp were mostly visible along ideological lines (right-wing vs. more center-oriented approaches). On the question of the legal responsibility of the regime's leaders, Tadeusz Mazowiecki as prime minister supported the politics of the 'thick line' ['gruba kreska' in Polish], suggesting that the regime's actions should be left in the past; others – including the later prime minister Jarosław Kaczyński and president Lech Kaczyński – called for a screening procedure ['lustracja' in Polish] which later became a keyword in Polish politics. In their opinion, people that had been part of the regime should be banned from public office for a certain period of time and their cooperation should be made public.

After the amnesty of 1986, Henryk Wujec wrote in the "Tygodnik Mazowsze", commenting on the establishment of the Provisional Council of "Solidarity" [Komitet Tymczasowy 'Solidarność'] that: "despite the many differences between the activists, I consider the success of the Union, as evidence of a spirit of conciliation in the search for solutions that would situate Solidarność in the new political situation." (Osęka 2011: 19).

Citizens' Electoral Committees (Obywatelskie Komitety Wyborcze) won all of the 160 seats available in the first round of free elections, and 99 places out of 100 in the newly established Senate (one senator was an independent entrepreneur, Janusz Stokłosa). The electoral committees were established in December 1988 and transformed into a series of political parties soon after the elections. Soon after the announcement of the results, a TV actress, Joanna Szczepkowska, announced on air that with these results 'communism in Poland has finished'. For many this is the date of the end of the transition.

Even though most of the protest from the 1970s onwards was limited to strikes, street demonstrations became more frequent during that time. The police used harsh measures against protesters (tear gas, water cannons, beatings etc.) but no live ammunition as had been the case during protests in 1970 and 1976, and under martial law (introduced on December 13, 1981 and suspended on December 31 1982, finally being revoked on July 22 1983), particularly in its early stages in 1981 and 1982 when the most infamous massacre took place in Wujek during the pacification of a coal miners' protest. The protests were usually organized by the Solidarność labor union or by smaller political groups – from right-wingers, conservatives and nationalists to anarchists, pacifists and environmental groups. Many of the protests had local agendas and focused on the issues of local factories and their workers, but the most problematic for the government were solidarity strikes by workers in many factories at once and general strikes. Many of the protest events were moreover not limited to material claims--for example workers demanded the prosecution of policemen accused of brutality in the repression of other protests. Demonstrations and

strikes also accompanied every increase in food prices, which were occasionally revoked. Murals and slogans on walls began to appear (some groups later developed stenciling techniques and began to use spray paint smuggled from Czechoslovakia, as it was unavailable in Poland), and many leafleting actions were held.

In 1987, a referendum was held asking the citizens their opinion on the introduction of ‘the second stage of reforms’ supposed to rejuvenate the economy devastated by martial law. The economy would be more open towards small business, private entrepreneurship and foreign capital. Even though the criteria for a valid referendum were not met (voting turnout was below the required 50%), the consultation showed that there was little support for the plans. This notwithstanding, the plan was implemented. One of the results was a huge increase in food prices in February 1988, which resulted in strikes as well as hyperinflation (reaching 639% in 1989).

The strikes that preceded the transition were, as mentioned, much smaller and far less organized than those that led to the registration of Solidarność in 1980 (for instance, almost all working people in Poland took part in a 4 hour warning strike on March 27, 1980). However, the threat of the de-legalized trade unions bringing the whole country to a halt forced the authorities to start negotiations with the opposition.

### **Structural conditions**

By the mid 1970s, the era of relative prosperity based on international loans was over and the centrally planned economy began to fall into an ever-deeper crisis. The rise in living costs (mostly food prices) triggered increasing numbers of protests that peaked in 1980 when general strikes became frequent. After martial law was waived, the economy was unable to get back on track. To overcome this problem the authorities began to liberalize regulations on private entrepreneurship. As Kenney writes, “The second reason for the collapse of communism - it was an economic system that had a fatal flaw [...] growing familiarity with the West among the citizens of Central Europe (because more people were traveling or met with Western products or have been in contact with the Western media) resulted in the awakening of the need of the benefits of the Western markets” (Kenney 2005: 19). The underground exchange of videocassettes of western movies and the black market were growing, especially since the era of relative prosperity of the early 1970s was still in people’s minds.

Besides economic problems, the aftermath of martial law was observed in the de-mobilization of society after the dramatic response of the authorities to the challenging social movement Solidarność (imprisoning its leaders, introducing a curfew, pacifying protests and using the military to police the streets). Not only were people feeling endangered and afraid of further harsh

reactions from the regime (during martial law several thousands of dissidents were detained under administrative procedures instead of legal ones), they also had to struggle with the challenges of everyday life, mostly triggered by the malfunctioning of the centrally planned economy.

After 1981 and the introduction of martial law, a strong divide between ‘us’ (the people) and ‘them’ (the authorities) resulted in crisis for the political regime. “This opposition was crucial for the development of the concept of an independent civil society: first, civil society was almost completely framed as an antithesis to the (totalitarian) state [...]. Second, it was a monolithic conception, which stressed the unity of opposition of 'us' ('the people') against 'them' ('the corrupt elite')” (Kopecky 2003: 5). Some scholars add a third group, the ‘silent majority’, to this division (especially in the late 1980s) (Wertenstein-Zuławski 1991). The lack of legitimacy of the regime was becoming more obvious, although there were no opinion polls at the time. Many low-ranking party officials began to take more interest in their own affairs creating a *nomenklatura*, a kind of caste or informal network of people with the connections and know-how for running businesses, mostly associated with the communist party. After regime change, some became the managers – and sometimes the owners – of the former state companies and factories. Using their ties to former party officials that joined the public administration, they began to benefit from the changes in the law. Corruption began to grow and after regime change became one of the biggest public concerns and one of the most frequent political issues.

Poland was formally tied ‘with eternal friendship’ to the Soviet Union and no serious decision was made without consulting the Politburo in Moscow (Roszkowski 1998). The martial law of 1981 was presented as an attempt to avoid Soviet invasion (and avoid the scenario witnessed in Czechoslovakia in 1968), although this claim is still a subject of heated historical and political debate. The changes of 1989 would not have been possible without the politics of Mikhail Gorbachev: *perestroika* (reforms) and *glasnost* (openness, in particular in terms of information), which removed the threat of invasion. Also, until its dissolution on July 1, 1991, Poland was – and had been since the beginning in 1955 – part of the Warsaw Pact, a military alliance of communist countries designed to counterbalance NATO. Also, there were around 300 000 Soviet troops on Polish territory located in bases outside of Polish control and jurisdiction. Their withdrawal between April 1991 and the end of 1993 is considered as one of the milestones of democratization.

Poland was also involved in geopolitical alliances outside the communist world. One such alliance was the London Club – a consortium of over 500 privately owned banks with which the Polish authorities began to discuss the restructuring of Polish debt in 1976. The Paris club, on the other hand, is a group for cooperation between ministers of finance from the 19 wealthiest countries in

the world. The first negotiations on the restructuring of Polish debts took place in 1980; soon after the changes of 1989, around 50% of the debt was cancelled and some was converted into subsidies for ecological investments. The EcoFund (EkoFundusz) operated with part of the debt, which, rather than being paid back to the countries of the Club, was invested in environmentally friendly projects and helped the Polish green NGO sector to develop. The successful negotiations allowed the communist authorities to sign their first agreement with the International Monetary Fund in 1986.

Another factor that facilitated the transition was the signing and later ratification by the Polish authorities of the Helsinki Agreements that granted human rights to Polish citizens. This was used by the dissidents in their legal struggles with the authorities and provided them arguments in support of democratization: “referring to the Helsinki Agreement of 1975, signed by almost all European countries, intellectuals continually demanded respect for fundamental human rights. They also revived the national and religious traditions” (Kenney 2005: 20).

The most important impulse for change was the economic crisis (see below), food and goods rationing and the increase in food prices. Also, the government, aware of the poor condition of the state and its weak position, decided to open up debates with the leaders of the opposition and began implementing changes that broadened individual freedoms. These included economic reforms (in 1987), which allowed private entrepreneurship to bloom, and citizens to buy foreign currency (before these transactions were limited and every attempt to buy foreign currency had to be justified, for instance by a trip to a conference abroad).

It was not only the macroeconomic conditions of communist Poland that signaled the crisis, shortages were also a daily routine. The Polish economy was not only unable to compete on other markets; it also failed to supply its internal markets. The centrally planned economy had been based on heavy industry since the 1940s and by the 1980s this was outdated and struggled for its own supplies. The economic system also operated within a different logic; a new currency for export transactions was introduced (for international transactions the ‘transfer ruble’ was introduced in 1964 for transactions within the communist bloc; it could not be exchanged into any other currency and existed only in accounting entries; for the internal market there were *bony towarowe* – a dollar equivalent emitted by the Polish bank and accepted only at certain stores with foreign goods, this was introduced January 1, 1960); inflation was hard to measure as prices were fixed centrally. Mechanisms such as ‘internal export’ were invented.<sup>3</sup> Economic ties with the Soviet Union resulted in the selling of

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<sup>3</sup> Internal export was a way to collect hard currency from the market. It was not possible to send foreign currency directly to socialist Poland; it could only be done in the equivalent in coal or construction materials. Since these were made locally but paid for in foreign currencies, they were ‘exported internally’.

goods, i.e. coal, below production cost, resulting in frustration among the workers and the spread of rumors. Farming was based on state-owned farming cooperatives that were mismanaged and not flexible enough to meet market requirements or weather changes. Housing was also controlled by the state, as was the sale of cars (used cars were scarce and often more expensive than the official prices at the dealers); household appliances were available only for those who received special vouchers. By the late 1980s many basic products for daily needs (such as sugar, meat but also alcohol and shoes) were rationed and hard to find in stores. People had to queue for almost everything; the supplies in stores were irregular and often chaotic (toilet paper – a highly in-demand and scarce good – could be bought in bicycle shops or obtained only after bringing recyclable materials such as paper or bottles to special meeting points). More luxurious goods like furniture, TVs, household appliances etc. were available through complicated systems of pre-payments, official queues, waiting lists and recommendations from workplaces. Waiting times for flats, cars or even telephone lines were measured in years.

Examples of social mobilization seen in Eastern Germany (in particular the peace marches in Leipzig and Dresden) gave activists new hope. Connections with dissidents from Czechoslovakia (meetings were held in the mountains at the border) showed that similar situations were developing in other parts of the communist bloc. The rise of the global human rights movement became a huge support for the dissidents, who claimed that communism could not guarantee such rights to its citizens. Growing political pressure on the USSR and other communist regimes, mostly from Germany, the US and the UK, was steered towards the peaceful solution of internal conflicts between the authorities and society. The Nobel peace prize awarded to Lech Wałęsa in 1983 and the later implementation of the Helsinki agreements were important steps in this process. These gave the opposition in Poland support from other countries as well as legal tools for struggling against the regime. The actions of pope John Paul II were also placed pressure on the communist party officials. Much of this information, as well some news from Poland, reached the people over the airwaves of Radio Free Europe, which communist authorities unsuccessfully tried to jam.

### **Contingent political opportunities**

The Peoples' Republic of Poland was a 'people's democracy' with the 'leading role of the party' mentioned in the constitution. The main party was the Polish United Workers Party (Polska Zjednoczona Partia Robotnicza; PZPR), formed in 1948, mainly from the Polish Workers Party (Polska Partia Robotnicza; PPR). The two other parties were the Democratic Party (Stronnictwo Demokratyczne; SD) and the United Folk Party (Zjednoczone Stronnictwo Ludowe; ZSL, which took part of the electorate and structures of the pre-war farmers' party).

Although formally independent, both fully supported the PZPR. No other party was officially registered, although some right wing parties (such as the Confederation of Independent Poland – Konfederacja Polski Niepodległej; KPN), the Polish Socialist Party (Polska Partia Socjalistyczna; PPS) and the Communist Party of Poland (Komunistyczna Partia Polski; KPP) had their own underground structures. The rank-and-file members of the PPS and KPP, whose elites were in conflict with the Soviet-supported the PPR and later the PZPR, gradually joined the structures of the PZPR, and eventually these groups became marginalized. The PZPR, which at its peak had 3 million members, suffered a decline in membership in the 1980s. I kept a hold of its unofficial monopoly on political life however.

The communist regime was most repressive at its beginnings, but repression gradually declined with the exception of the 1981 martial law. In the 1940s and 1950s brutal interrogations, death sentences for political prisoners, kidnappings etc. were nothing unusual. The secret police became the most powerful organization by spreading terror and fear. By the end of the 1980s the Peoples' Militia (police forces) dispersed demonstrations, but court trials ended in smaller sentences. The Security Service (Służba Bezpieczeństwa; SB, the secret police) was also progressively less brutal, although in 1984 two of its officers received prison sentences for kidnapping and killing a priest, Jerzy Popiełuszko, who was the chaplain of Solidarność. Over the years, the police (both the secret and the normal branches) shifted tactics from beatings at stations (during interrogations or as preparation for interrogations) to infiltration and the use of collaborators. Regime oppression could be observed at different levels; directly there were the beatings, arrests and imprisonment for 'hostile propaganda' or 'conspiracy to overthrow the regime', house searches etc. Indirectly, many activists lost their jobs, students were thrown out of universities and schools, and psychological harassment was used. In 1980s, under international pressure, the authorities ceased giving prison sentences to activists and imposed fines instead. In fact, the "Majority [of the activists] felt fines more painfully than jail. In 1987, when the average monthly wage varied between fifteen and twenty thousand, the typical fine for participating in demonstrations or distribution of underground publications amounted to fifty thousand zlotys"<sup>4</sup> (Kenney 2005: 41). This had tremendous consequences: "People lost their jobs, and sometimes flats (if you lived in a dormitory or workers hotel). Without being registered it was not possible to get a job" (Kenney 2005: 42).

The secret police collected all data potentially useful for blackmailing, for instance information about sexual preferences (in cases of homosexuals this was done in the frame of actions that received the codename 'Hiacynt' [hyacinth]) or after involvement in petty crimes such as drunk driving. Many trips abroad were conditional to an agreement to collaborate with the intelligence service or the

<sup>4</sup> About \$ 20 at black-market exchange rate in the 1980s.

secret police, who wanted to get information about the Polish diaspora, their political preferences and plans to support the opposition in Poland. As Osa writes: “in 1980-81 the repressive capacities of the state were significantly reduced as a result of social mobilization capacities. This was partly influenced by the low morale of the party apparatus and government as well as the depletion of declining state resources and organizational effectiveness. Another reason was the growing number of nationalist organizations, which caught the attention of the Security Service. The leaders of the party had to suppress radical organizations, such as KPN, which undermined the socialist order and alliance with the USSR. No response could exacerbate relations with the Kremlin” (Osa, 2008: 237).

After the years of relative prosperity (in the early 1970s) the communist hardliners were not only marginalized in Polish politics, there were also less and less of them. By the late 1970s (when the coming crisis had already been signaled) many among the party elites were pragmatic apparatchiks that understood that party membership was a gateway to a better career or business opportunities. These people were much more open towards discussions about Marxism-Leninism and communist dogmas. At the same time, a new class of intelligentsia was rising – educated people living in large cities that travelled around the world (this was much easier from the early 1970s). Many members of university faculties supported the opposition.

The main ally for the dissidents was the Catholic Church and conservative parts of society. The Church was not homogenous in its support for the opposition. After its hard-won independence achieved in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Church leaders were reluctant to confront the authorities: “although individual clergymen, like Father Popieluszko, supported *Solidarność* throughout its legitimate activities and during the martial law, the Church leaders such as Cardinal Primate Jozef Glemp, had serious doubts in connection with the leftist currents in opposition, as well as to the harm that could result to the nation by confrontation with the use of force” (Kenney 2005: 48). Framing the anti-regime struggles as a fight for independence allowed anti-communist battles to be linked with previous wars for independence. This deepened the ‘us’ vs. ‘them’ division and reinforced the confrontational attitude of the dissidents.

The communist party had almost no internal allies after losing the trust of the workers. The opposition could win the trust and support of workers, students, farmers and intellectuals, whereas those belonging to these groups that supported the regime were already party members. Local party structures were also becoming less dogmatic and could not be relied upon by the party elites as their members were more focused on their own agendas and wellbeing. Internationally, the Polish authorities had the support of other communist parties in the region. This, however, weakened over time as other countries were facing similar problems to Poland. After perestroika the leaders of the Soviet Union

were less reliable as potential allies as they had to address internal party struggles, growing independence movements in the Soviet republics and the Afghan war.

### **Actors in the transition: elites**

In the late 1980s the hardline faction of the communist party became internally marginalized, and the new communist elites became much more pragmatic and less ideological. After martial law was suspended, the Prime Minister Mieczysław Rakowski and minister for internal affairs Czesław Kiszczak began a process of normalization. The biggest challenge for the regime was how to implement this process (mostly through economic reforms), while at the same time fighting the deepening economic crisis. Normalization also included social engineering to close the gap between the elites and the society, which was manifested in a less repressive attitude towards dissidents.

No new foreign loans were available and the previous loans needed to be paid back. In 1980 and 1981, Poland in fact went bankrupt, as it could not pay its debts to the countries of the Paris Club. Also, the centrally planned economy, based mostly on heavy industry, was proving ineffective. Losing complete power (in particular over the economy), the regime elites began to understand that further confrontation with the dissidents would be devastating for them. This was one of the main reasons why negotiations with the opposition were initiated. In addition, the communist party was facing internal conflicts and many members were becoming ideologically disillusioned. After the amnesty of 1986, experts from the Ministry of the Interior, in a top secret memo to the Political Bureau from the beginning of September, stated that "covering [the leading opposition activists] with the Act [of amnesty] will allow us to develop broader international politics, which should bring an improvement in many areas and result in positive outcomes for the country." The suggestions to the Communist Party leadership included the withdrawal of the sanctions imposed after December 13th, and the negotiation of new loans that would at least allow the specter of an economic disaster to be dismissed. According to the experts, the MSW [Ministry of Interior Affairs] amnesty would "weaken the position of the so-called opposition. [This would] create an atmosphere of distrust in the circles of political opponents" (Osęka 2011: 19). Insignificant facade opposition groups were to replace various institutions - such as the Advisory Council to the President of the Council of State - and, by creating the illusion of political pluralism, block the catastrophic deterioration of the social mood. Only the failure of these plans led general Jaruzelski to negotiate with the underground "Solidarity" in mid-1988 (Osęka 2011: 19).

Another potentially relevant elite was the military. The Polish army after World War II was initially formally dependent on the Soviet Red Army –



significantly, the first field marshal, Konstanty Rokossowski, did not even speak Polish. Later on, after the Warsaw Pact of 1955, the Polish Peoples' Army (Ludowe Wojsko Polskie, LWP) became a part of the communist armed forces. Polish soldiers had to "steadfastly defend freedom, independence and frontiers of the Polish People's Republic against temptations of imperialism, steadfastly stand guard over peace in fraternal alliance with the Soviet Army and other allied armies"<sup>5</sup>. At the same time around 300 000 Soviet soldiers were stationed in Poland (as opposed to approx. 150 000 Polish soldiers). Military service was compulsory and at the time of transition lasted 1.5 years (2 for the navy). Most of the officers were educated in Moscow, in particular the political officers responsible for maintaining the morale of the soldiers in accordance with socialist principles. At the same time the army was highly respected and many trusted it, with the exception of general Wojciech Jaruzelski, the leader under martial law (he became the head of the Military Council for National Salvation [Wojskowa Rada Ocalenia Narodowego, WRON] in what appeared to some (Davis 1998: 1021) a coup d'état. Also, most of the cadres showed little political ambition.

One of the changes of the transition was that civilians came to control and manage the army – a situation that was questioned in 1994 at the so-called 'Drawsko lunch' ('obiad drawski' – Drawsko is a small town home to a huge military training ground). A group of high-ranking officers, supported by the president Lech Wałęsa, questioned the civilian control over the army. After a personnel change at the ministry of defense, such claims were not raised again. Unlike under martial law, the army was more a stabilizing force than a threat during the transition period.

The Catholic Church supported the pro-democratic opposition and tried to struggle (albeit not openly) against the communist authorities for whom, it claimed, turning Poland into an atheist country was a goal in itself. Since 1981, a new cardinal, Józef Glemp, had led cautious but pro-opposition politics in the Church. The election of John Paul II as pope supported the opposition, as it led to a massive growth in religious life. The involvement of the Church with the opposition was more hidden than ostentatious, but its influence on the leaders of the opposition is hard to understate (Ost 2005). Some priests, such as Jerzy Popiełuszko or Henryk Jankowski, supported the opposition morally and materially, either during services or by collecting and distributing humanitarian aid to the families of repressed citizens.

Facing deepening economic crisis and growing popular demands, Prime Minister Rakowski introduced new laws in 1986, opening up spaces for private entrepreneurship. Small businesses that in previous decades had been subjected to many checks, criticisms and malicious propaganda, now received plenty of

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<sup>5</sup> Military oath: 'Rota przysięgi wojskowej', Ustawa z dn. 22.11.52, Dziennik ustaw 46, poz. 310. The text of the oath was changed in June 1988.

freedom. In the next few years more and more economic sectors were deregulated, and the spirit of entrepreneurship swept freely throughout Poland. Farmers then began to sell their products at marketplaces in the cities (before this had been complicated and some of the crops had to be sold at state-owned points at regulated and unattractive prices), and the streets were filled with people selling all sorts of goods (Borodziej and Kochanowski 2010). Soon after the new government took power, and the state monopoly on currency exchange was lifted, which helped the Poles going abroad to sell or buy goods (West Berlin was at one point so full of Polish street vendors as to become anecdotal, and soon all places occupied by street vendors from Eastern Europe were called *Polen Maerkte*). Before, small entrepreneurs had been accused (in propaganda, but sometimes also by public prosecutors) of speculation and of being parasites on the ‘body of the socialist economy’. Small businessmen were not organized in any way, but their actions showed real alternatives to the communist system, especially in its economic dimension.

Large parts of the intelligentsia (the educated class) opposed the regime in more or less straightforward ways. Academics in the humanities and social sciences, but also many lawyers, medical doctors, architects and artists participated in protests. Although quotations from Marx and Engels were quasi-obligatory in academic writings (and courses in Marxism-Leninism or materialist dialectics were compulsory for almost all students and soldiers), many intellectuals supported the dissidents. A whole industry of underground publishing – similar to soviet *samizdat* – developed, printing both the works of Polish intellectuals and classics that were prohibited by the censor’s office (the collected works of Karl Popper for instance were published by the thousand). The more Catholic-oriented intellectuals read the *Tygodnik Powszechny* magazine, and others *Kultura*, published in Paris by Jerzy Giedroyc. Also, after the end of martial law, illegal courses – a so-called ‘underground university’ – were held at private homes, where lectures on ‘real’ (i.e. not changed by communist propaganda) history and philosophy were given. This not only mobilized students and other intellectuals. Activists formed an intellectual backbone for the opposition movement, wrote for and edited underground journals and magazines, and translated books. Also with their networks and knowledge of foreign languages they could lobby for support from Western countries, mostly in the form of money and printing materials but also for support for imprisoned dissidents.

## **Actors in the transition: Civil society**

### *Democratization movements*

When analyzing the actors of the opposition in Central Europe at the end of 1980s, Padraic Kenney distinguishes five main currents:

- dissidents (the term is sometimes controversial, often they are referred to as 'intellectual opposition'), reformists and revisionists, who tried to change the system from the inside (in particular in the 1960s in Poland and in Czechoslovakia after the events of 1968, many changed their positions);
- civil society (KOR, Charter 77) that postulated 'living' in truth
- the Church (mainly Poland, and Slovakia);
- counterculture, and rock music in particular (the communist states did not prohibit it, but certain limitations were applied and occasional repression took place);
- the national opposition (support for national liberation) (Kenney 2005: 21-2).

The main democratization movement was Solidarność. Formally a trade union, it quickly broadened its claims to cover respect for human rights, freedom of speech and a free press etc. Among its leading figures were Bronisław Geremek, Tadeusz Mazowiecki, Bogdan Lis, Władysław Frasyniuk, Adam Michnik, Jacek Kuroń, Andrzej Gwiazda, Anna Walentynowicz and Zbigniew Bujak. Stressing the importance of the rise of independent civil society organizations, one of the leaders of the dissident movement, Bronisław Geremek said, that: “the idea of a civil society – even one that avoids overtly political activities in favor of education, the exchange of information and opinion, or the protection of the basic interests of the particular groups – has enormous anti-totalitarian potential” (1992:4). The idea of independent organizations (a network) had far-reaching consequences. As Marek Skovajsa writes: “The strategy of the 'new evolutionism', propounded by Adam Michnik in his famous 1976 essay, aimed at fostering and developing a parallel society, independent of the state, and at first sight did not look too different from Benda’s proposal. The crucial difference was, however, that while the Czech dissidents regarded the expansion of antiregime activism into a society-wide phenomenon as little more than a utopian hope, Michnik foresaw the constitution of a mass and nonelitist parallel social structure” (Skovajsa 2008:54-55).

The direct predecessor of the Solidarność movement was the Workers’ Defense Committee (Komitet Obrony Robotników - KOR) established in 1976 after the brutal repression of strikes in Ursus and Radom. KOR was founded as

a group providing legal aid for the oppressed workers using the tools given by the communist legal framework, especially the constitution and the Helsinki Agreements. These agreements had a special status for the opposition, since “In June 1974, the Free Democrats Movement (Ruch Wolnych Demokratów, RWD) was founded. Its objective was to control the implementation of the Helsinki agreements, by the Polish authorities. The movement sought democratic reform in the long run. It regarded human rights as a starting point for the expansion of civil liberties” (Osa, 2008: 231).

KOR was composed mostly of lawyers who defended the workers in trials after the protests in Radom and Ursus. It also provided material support for workers and the families of those who were imprisoned. *Solidarność*, formally a trade union, had a hierarchical structure, with its charismatic leader and chairperson Lech Wałęsa (later the president of Poland) at the top. Its structure included regional divisions and regional chapters referring to particular industry branches (miners, steel workers, dockers), which allowed greater flexibility and offered more possibilities for solidarity strikes. *Solidarność* had its own budget (from membership fees and external donations), newspapers and magazines, and at one point even issued stamps.<sup>6</sup>

The main claim of the democratization movement was that the authorities should start respecting the law of Poland. The activists also called for political pluralism, the freedom of assembly (and most importantly the right to establish independent trade unions) and the freedom of speech. Many of their claims were linked to the Helsinki Agreement, which guaranteed the respect of human rights in Poland. The movement used legal struggles as a main tool, but also published *samizdat* books and other materials. Many of its protests were symbolic, such as wearing dimmers on jackets (in Polish, the word for the electrical component dimmer is ‘opornik’, and ‘opór’ means resistance, both in the electrical and the political sense) or going for walks when the flagship news program was shown on TV (one of their main slogans was that ‘TV is lying’). All of these actions targeted the oppressive side of the regime. *Solidarność* – together with the Catholic Church – also sought to promote sobriety as a way to fight the authorities. Since 1980, every August was announced as a ‘month without alcohol’, and strict abstention was enforced during every strike.

One of the main differences introduced by Polish dissidents at the time of establishing the KOR as compared to anti-regime actions that had taken place earlier was the openness of their actions. This was a major change compared to the post World War II underground and outnumbered dissidents of the 1960s. In the 1980s, dissidents used their own names when signing petitions and writing court appeals, openly supporting the workers and their families. Their actions were public and most of the time legal; nonviolence was widely agreed upon (in

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<sup>6</sup> <http://blogs.scientificamerican.com/anthropology-in-practice/2012/07/23/the-cultural-legacy-of-postage/>, also Evans 1992

the late 1980s smaller splinter and grassroots groups promoted some forms of direct action). With the rapid growth of the Solidarność movement, structures were established that provided legal help, financial support for the families of imprisoned activists and publications.

The paradigm of openness was partially abandoned when martial law was introduced and many dissidents were imprisoned. Some of the local chapters of the Solidarność movement developed counter-intelligence groups that targeted and analyzed the actions of the secret police, and tried to trace undercover agents within the movement. Kornel Morawiecki established Solidarność Walcząca in Wrocław, and “In 1982 Morawiecki created the main Polish underground unit - Fighting Solidarity [Solidarność Walcząca], who proudly referred to the partisan underground of World War II. Subordinated to military discipline and working in deep secrecy, the organization was a symbol of active resistance of Poles” (Kenney 2005: 39). Along with flyers (usually thrown down onto the streets from high buildings), pamphlets and *samizdat* books, murals were also becoming a popular form of action. In the late 1980s wildcat strikes became more and more popular, and did not always make financial claims (sometimes they called for the release of political prisoners). After the amnesty of 1986, the Provisional Council of Solidarność [Komitet Tymczasowy Solidarność] marked the beginning of what one underground newspaper defined “post-amnesty euphoria”. More and more regional executive committees “came to the surface”, revealing the names of their members. After the events of 1986, the opposition entered a period of half-open trade union activity, which continued until the re-legalization of “Solidarity” in April 1989.

### Labour Movement

The movement developed from the Inter-Factory Strike Committees (an umbrella organization, Międzyzakładowy Komitet Strajkowy, gathering protest committees in numerous workplaces) that mushroomed in the summer of 1980 after the government’s decision to increase food prices. As Barker writes: “For more than two weeks about three million Polish workers took part in occupations and strikes in more than 1.500 plants. Waves of strikes were coordinated by regional Inter-Enterprise Strike Committees (Międzyzakładowe Komitety Strajkowe, MKS)” (Barker 2008: 264). In August 1980 massive strikes brought the communist state industry to a halt, resulting in its signing the 21 August Agreements (Porozumienia Sieprniowe) between August 30 and September 11, 1980. One of the claims of the workers was the formation of an independent trade union confederation, which was granted on September 17, 1980, and confirmed on November 10, 1980 when the Solidarność trade union was registered at a court in Warsaw. On May 12, 1981 the farmers’ section of the union, the Niezależny Samorządny Związek Zawodowy Rolników Indywidualnych Solidarność, was also registered at a court.

The workers also demanded salary increases; better working conditions, amnesty for their imprisoned colleagues, an end to the harassment of activists and a decline in censorship. Later their claims extended to the right to an independent workers' movement, the opening of the political system (by introducing party pluralism), freedom of speech and religious practices (also understood as the right to build new churches, often declined by the authorities). Despite some agreements being reached, the wave of strikes continued: "the authorities have signed an agreement in Gdansk, but hesitated before putting it into effect. Solidarity activists have repeatedly entered into confrontations with the authorities, trying to persuade them to fulfill their promises. The conflict intensified and spread to the whole social system. It became a real cycle of protest" (Osa, 2008: 231).

The movement's main tool and source of leverage was the strike. With nearly a quarter of the population belonging to Solidarność (estimates are around 9-10 million people in a country with a population of 36 million), dissidents could use this numeric strength in negotiations with the authorities. Protest ranged from putting up flags (national and – more often – Solidarność flags) on buildings, to warning strikes (usually 3-4 hours), solidarity strikes with other factories, occupations and general strikes. Where strikes were not allowed (in hospitals for example) or when it would cause damage to the image of the unions, a particular form of strike was introduced, the 'Italian strike' ['strajk włoski' in Polish, 'sciopero bianco' in Italian], which is a kind of work-to-rule, strike. This consisted in the precise and scrupulous adherence to rules and regulations, thus disrupting effective and efficient work. Independent newsletters and magazines were published presenting the activists' visions of the protests and their policing. Workers organized within Solidarność improved their negotiating position with their employers as well as with local authorities.

### *Student movements*

On September 19, 1980 an independent student's union (Niezależne Zrzeszenie Studentów – NZS) was formed and registered by the authorities on February 17, 1981. It functioned under the auspices of Solidarność, but over time, as the university students became more and more radicalized, other groups became more popular among them. For instance, "led by the Leszek Moczulski Confederation of Independent Poland (Konfederacja Polski Niepodległej, KPN), an openly nationalist group was convinced that the days of socialism in Poland were numbered, and the country should leave the Soviet bloc and create a multiparty democracy. Proponents of Moczulski were seen as right-wing radicals. Members of the Confederation were often the target of the Security Service" (Osa, 2008: 233). KPN was particularly popular among students of history and law; students from other faculties preferred actions organized by New Social Movements (see below) and became their base supporters. Prior to

martial law regulations on student governments were quite liberal, resulting in a willingness to use this framework to fight for the opposition's own purposes (e.g. in Wrocław a group called "The Twelve" dominated university life) (Kenney 2005: 50).

### *New social movements/s*

The shift of dissidents towards more conservative positions (especially after the killing of Solidarność's chaplain, Jerzy Popiełuszko in 1984), together with the support of Pope John Paul II, resulted in the emergence of many small youth-based groups that were critical of the communist authorities as well as the pro-democratic dissidents. Because of their anti-systemic attitude, they rejected the communist authorities while also claiming that the dissidents were too eager to compromise with the state. Another criticism was that the mainstream opposition had made a sharp turn to the right and had too close connections to the Catholic Church (Kenney 2002). One of the best-known groups of this kind was the Orange Alternative (Pomarańczowa Alternatywa), established in Wrocław (cf. Kenney 2002, Tyszka 1998). This group later became known for its absurd street happenings, which attracted thousands of people. One such action is described by Kenney: "A group of two-hundred Orange Alternative activists started to reach the top of the mountain in August 1988 (some benefited from the ski lift) staging an unsuccessful re-invasion of Czechoslovakia on the twentieth anniversary of the 1968 military intervention. Major Frydrych donned a samurai outfit, had a huge sword. Paweł Kocięba managed to get himself a GDR army officer's uniform. Anarchists also came from Gdańsk, waved a black flag. It is unbelievable, but it came to dispel the mistrust that still prevailed in the relations between Czechoslovakians and Poles. The events of the 1968 years lay especially in the hearts of the old oppositionists" (Kenney 2005: 133). As it is stated on the group's website: "It is said that the name of Orange Alternative came from Orange being in the middle of colors representing two major political powers in Poland (until this very day) —the Red for the Communist or left, and the Yellow for the Church and the right<sup>7</sup>". Street happenings organized by the Orange Alternative became legendary after Toilet Paper Day (when all participants were supposed to bring a few rolls of toilet paper –resulting in the police arresting everyone possessing such items) or the Santa Claus fests (when police could not differentiate between the 'real' Santa Clauses and the 'orange' ones and also began mass arrests).

When analyzing the history of the movement *Wolność i Pokój*, Kenney writes: "Today WiP is sometimes mentioned as a group of media attention-hungry students who ousted Solidarity from center stage for a short time. It is

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<sup>7</sup> [http://www.pomaraneczowa\\_alternatywa.republika.pl/orange%20alternative%20overview.html](http://www.pomaraneczowa_alternatywa.republika.pl/orange%20alternative%20overview.html) accessed 14.02.2012 also: Kenney 2005: 191

no shame, because this just happened to be in the middle of the decade, when Solidarity was not doing anything that was worthy of attention” (Kenney 2005: 80). These movements found a way to channel the energy of young people at the same time as criticizing some of the dissidents’ positions. In retaliation, their members were mostly excluded from the negotiations at the Round Table that led to the changes: “the Communists opposed the extremists who could not sit at the negotiating table, 'the constructive opposition', as it was called. In the group of extremists were the most eminent thinkers of Solidarność: Jacek Kuroń and Adam Michnik. They were accepted only after weeklong negotiations. From the standpoint of the regime it was not possible to talk seriously with the 'happeners' of the Orange Alternative, and their followers, who refused the fulfillment of patriotic duty that is military service, or with the radicals of the so-called group of Krakow, that is the militants of Wojciech Polaczek, radical wing of the WiP with Marek Kurzyniec and others, not only from Krakow, who were socialized in an atmosphere of confrontation” (Kenney 2005: 298).

For many young activists the actions of Solidarność were too moderate and some issues were ignored, in particular compulsory military service and environmental issues, the latter being particularly visible after the Chernobyl catastrophe of 1986 and the prospect of building a nuclear power plant in Poland. Campaigns against the planned nuclear power plants in Żarnowiec and Klempicz as well as the struggles against the construction of a dam in Czorsztyn are considered the birthplace of the Polish ecological movement. Although other organizations focused on environmental conservation, the campaigns of the late 1980s were much more inspired by subcultures and countercultures and used a different and more direct action repertoire. Other campaigns and important issues shared with the New Social Movements were pacifism, which incorporated Peace Marches (Easter marches in particular), protests against the war in Afghanistan and for the abolition of compulsory military service. Women’s issues were much less visible and more present in academic debates than in social activism.

Pacifist groups and those resisting compulsory military service, such as Wolność i Pokój (Freedom and Peace, WiP) or Ruch Społeczeństwa Alternatywnego (Movement for an Alternative Society, RSA) began to gather more (mostly young) participants. As an activist and influential anarchist author, Rafał Górski, recalls of those days: “There was a new form of protest organized by the anti-military and pacifist-ecological movement Freedom and Peace (Wolność i Pokój - WiP). It consisted of the veterans of KPN, Solidarity, and the new generation of anarchists, leftists, as well as conservatives and Christian Democrats. The dominant actions were small-scale hunger strikes, the takeover of trams for the purposes of demonstrations and the occupation of scaffolding until the intervention of the MO (militia, the state police). In 1985 WiP initiated an action for returning military books (a document with the details of draft and military service) to the Ministry of National Defense and the refusal of the



military oath<sup>8</sup>”. These groups were also much more radical than the main organizations of the pro-democratic opposition: “Freedom and Peace has never sought a settlement with the Communists. The group appealed to the regime, calling for explicit changes in the law, but this was done on issues that did not leave room for compromise” (Kenney 2005: 74). One such case was the right to an alternative to military service (which was theoretically possible, but was not granted to anyone). Many of the groups were associated and connected to subcultures and counterculture and many of their leaders were musicians, theatre actors and movie directors. Lots of activists did not join any organized group, relying instead on small, locally based collectives and groups that picked up particular topics and campaigns. Many of them were university students who – together with high school pupils – formed the majority of the activists. For example: “People aged 15-25 saw Freedom and Peace as the new elite. They were fearless, determined and, as you could hear, seemed to throw best parties. According to some people, this community presented what was the best in the culture of late 1980s” (Kenney 2005: 82).

The main frame for the New Social Movements was opposition to the communist regime, but the stress was put on particular issues: environmental damage, compulsory military service and freedom of speech. Many of the actions and campaigns of these groups either criticized the mainstream dissidents or raised issues not mentioned by the pro-democratic camp. They also stressed the rejection of conservatism: Catholic (represented more and more by the *Solidarność* movement) and communist. This opposition to the dissidents and the Church was seen at its best at cultural events: music concerts, street performances etc. Many artists and musicians began to support these grassroots groups. As Juliusz Tyszka writes: “probably the most important function of Fydrych's happenings was therapeutic. The events on Świdnicka Street, Old Market Square, and their surroundings enabled the participants to overcome their fear - the most important and the most ominous effect of Communist power, especially during the period of Martial Law. After hundreds of bloody street fights all over Poland (and in Wrocław in particular), it was not easy to face the militia on the street once more, to be arrested and interrogated. It was possible, however, and it turned out that the police were not as tough, severe, and cruel as they had been before. The times had changed; the powers seemed not to be as omnipotent as in 1982-83” (Tyszka 1998: 317).

The mobilization of the New Social Movements relied on young people often recruited through subcultural and countercultural frames. These groups were also much more radical and more likely to use direct action (occupations, sit-ins, street protests, hunger strikes, chaining themselves to scaffoldings etc.) than others. What characterized many of their street protests vis-à-vis the demonstrations of the *Solidarność* camp was the use of humor. Górski writes:

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<sup>8</sup> Górski, Rafał, ‘Opór społeczny w Polsce (1944 -1989) II’, In: *Przegląd Anarchistyczny* nr 6 (2007)  
downloaded from: <http://www.przegląd-anarchistyczny.org/samorząd/29-opor-spoleczny-w-polsce-1944-1989-ii>

“Larger demonstrations of WiP took the form of peaceful street sit-ins. On the other hand, since June 1986 street happenings were organized in Wrocław, which troubled and embarrassed the police and party authorities. The anarchist "Orange Alternative" organized celebrations of the Great October Revolution (in which the militiamen were the ‘white’ soldiers), the day of the militia or the Revolution of the Dwarfs<sup>9</sup>”. At the same time an intensive production of leaflets took place and, at the time of the transition, many students occupied their universities, organized sit-ins, and picketed.

### *Ethnic Movement/s*

Poland is one of the most ethnically homogenous countries in Europe (for many years it was only Iceland that had less minorities, until a large wave of migration to Iceland from Poland). According to the census of 2002 (the previous census of 1946 is not regarded as representative), 1.23% of Polish population declared a nationality other than Polish and 2.03% declared no national belonging. The largest ethnic minorities are Silesians, Germans, Belarusians and Ukrainians – all of which are highly integrated into Polish society. After the transition, new laws were issued on minority rights (art. 35 of the constitution of 1997, law of 1991 on teaching in ethnic languages in public schools and the law of 1992 on public broadcasting in ethnic languages). Nevertheless prejudices exist against the Roma people and Jews (the latter is more symbolic, as only 1130 people declared themselves Jewish in the 2002 census). On 26 and 27 of June 1991, in the city of Mława in central Poland riots spread after a young Roma injured two people in a car accident and fled. After two nights of the vandalization of Roma property, the police managed to restore peace. Other incidents against ethnic minorities were sporadic.

After 1989 many local associations and foundations were established to promote the local cultures of the minorities, provide education for their members and about the groups. The vast majority was not political.

One of the main frames of the ethnic groups was the need to show their cultural ‘otherness’ by promoting local ethnic artists and folklore. Also, there were demands for the official acknowledgement of minorities (in particular Germans), the right to teach in minorities’ languages and access to public broadcasting with programs in local dialects and about ethnic issues.

One of the victories of the ethnic movements was the waiving of the required 5% electoral threshold for committees of ethnic minorities in popular elections in 2001.<sup>10</sup> So far, only the representatives of the German minority have

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<sup>9</sup> Górski, Rafał, ‘Opór społeczny w Polsce (1944 -1989) II’, In: Przegląd Anarchistyczny nr 6 (2007)  
downloaded from: <http://www.przegląd-anarchistyczny.org/samorząd/29-opor-społeczny-w-polsce-1944-1989-ii>

<sup>10</sup> Polish electoral regulations require political parties to reach a 3% threshold to receive state subsidies and 5% to enter the parliament (8% for coalitions). In the upper chamber of the parliament – the Senate – members are

managed to get members (usually one or two) elected to parliament. Other lobbying regarded issues of bilingual teaching at schools and dual names for cities and villages. Local groups established and reinforced their identities by organizing cultural events where they presented parts of their folklore: dances, food and other things.

### Religious movement/s

Poland is a country dominated by Catholics – around 96% of the population belongs (through baptism) to the Catholic Church and today around 43% attend Sunday services (during communist times this figure was even higher). Other religious beliefs are associated with ethnic minorities (Protestantism with the German minority and Orthodoxy with Belarusians and Ukrainians). In the mid-1980s movements referring to New Born Christians began to emerge and become more popular, especially among young people. A state-inspired and sanctioned PAX movement created to oppose Catholic intellectuals led by a pre-war right wing politician, Bolesław Piasecki, it received little attention and support as the Church maintained its independence.

The structures of the Catholic Church resisted the policies of the authorities. After the imprisonment of the cardinal of Poland, Stefan Wyszyński, from 1952-55, relations began to become less drastic as did state repression. In 1966, the Catholic Church in Poland celebrated a millennium since the Christianization<sup>11</sup> of Poland and the authorities celebrated the 1000th anniversary of Polish statehood. The election of cardinal Karol Wojtyła as the new pope John Paul II in 1978 gave the Catholic Church in Poland a powerful ally in the international forum. His visits in 1979, 1983 and 1987 were manifestations not only of religious belief, but also of political opposition to the regime.

The Catholic Church, opposing the official atheism of the communist party, framed its actions in contrast with state ideology, avoiding open and harsh conflicts. It also supported the opposition that intensified in the late 1970s. The stereotype of a true Pole-Catholic was used in contrast to the new man of the socialist age and the Catholic faith was linked to independence struggles. References to Polish messianic traditions (particularly lively in the romantic period) were also made. The Church was regarded as a stable institution defending the people, and more and more leaders of the opposition publicly and openly declared their Catholicism.

Attendance at religious services was a manifestation of one's attitude towards the communist system – party members were discouraged from taking part in religious celebrations. A new and paradoxical category of 'practicing

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elected on individual basis.

<sup>11</sup> In 966 the first ruler of Poland – Mieszko I – was baptised and Christianity was adopted in Poland.

nonbelievers' emerged. Some services were held for the motherland and some priests (Jankowski, Popieluszko) openly supported the Solidarność movement. The Church also struggled with the administration for the right to build new churches, organize pilgrimages and nominate chaplains to the army (to replace the officers responsible for 'political education').

### *International NGOs*

NGOs were legally allowed to function in Poland only from 1988 onwards. This sector developed in the early 1990s, when new forms of financing became available. Much of the support came from the outside, whether financial or material aid or providing good coverage of dissidents' struggles.

Before the transition INGOs offered scholarships to Polish dissidents as well as providing them with the necessary know-how (in particular the environmental groups). Worldwide struggles for human rights (i.e. by Amnesty International) also had an indirect impact on the Polish case. One of the most active organizations was the Polish-Czech-Slovak Solidarity [Solidarność Polsko-Czesko-Słowacka] established by KOR, Solidarność and Charter 77 activists in Prague in October 1981. After martial law the group resumed underground cooperation in 1982.

The approach of the INGOs tended towards considering Poland an underdeveloped country, similar to the Third World countries that needed help and assistance. Much of this help was designed to train future local leaders, in particular in environmental protection and the human rights agenda. The Polish-Czech-Slovak Solidarity also concentrated on the exchange of experiences of various anti-regime activities and actions and on the translations of texts important for the dissidents. In the late 1980s solidarity actions for the release of dissidents (mostly in Czechoslovakia) were organized. Comparisons with other pro-democratic movements were also made, in particular with the anti-apartheid struggles in South Africa, in order to make a comparison with the oppressive side of the communist regime clear to other audiences.

Since the mid-1980s a network of Green organizations – Greenway - began to develop under the auspices of Dutch activists who taught the Central European activists about issues connected to environmental protection as well as new tactics. This allowed them to organize trans-border protests, for instance in the case of the Stonava (now in the Czech Republic) cement factory.

Most of the help from INGOs was in the form of material aid, especially to allow the dissidents to continue their publication work. Paper, paint and printing presses were smuggled into Poland. Lots of charity goods were sent to Poland and distributed mostly through the Church. Many of the employees of the INGOs wrote articles for the press in their home countries, presenting the struggles of the dissidents and everyday life.

## Conclusion

The year 1989 is central for the Polish transition from communism to democracy. However, contrary to some popular beliefs, the events of 1989 can hardly be called a revolution. As Padraic Kenney writes: “Over the years the term 'revolution' starts to disappear. Even in Central Europe one speaks of 'transformation', 'transition' or simply 'year 1989'” (Kenney 2005: 27). The changes of 1989 could not have taken place without the events of a decade earlier: the rise of Solidarność in 1980 and the introduction of martial law in 1989. The defeat of the opposition had many consequences, primarily that people were – initially – scared of further confrontations with the regime. Stanislaw Handzlik, a high-ranking Solidarność activist, asked [by Kenney] whether he was afraid that the Communists could again respond with tanks, curfews and mass detentions under the guise of national defense, answered, 'No - you can just scare people once. Once again, it would be simply ridiculous'<sup>12</sup>.

In the mid-1980s people were in fact becoming less and less afraid and began to act as in the 1970s: openly, using legal methods, and peacefully. This way of acting also opened up a window of opportunity for many new groups, mostly youth groups, to emerge: students, high school pupils, environmentalists, pacifists, anarchists and so forth. Many of the activists could be characterized by “‘internalized pluralism' - combining and mixing the issues of identity and, depending on your needs, or that which served to combat communism. One could meet species such as nationalist pacifists or pro-market Greens” (Kenney 2005: 25). Many of the social activists were also much more radical (in their claims but also in the tactics they used) than the dissidents. The scene was overtaken by crowds of radical environmentalists, hippies, artists, performers and pacifists - often mingling threads of anarchism, liberalism, conservatism and postmaterialism in an original way (although all of these ideologies meant something different to a Central European country as compared to the West). (Kenney 2005: 13)

Many of the campaigns sustained by social movement activists were continued after regime change: against the nuclear power plant in Żarnowiec (and also in Kłempicz), against compulsory military service, for the environment. However, without a clearly defined enemy (such as the communists) their activities became weaker and weaker.

The transformation process was not merely a political one, but also had social consequences. With the declining repressive capacity of the communist regime (the amnesty for political prisoners and the everyday practices of the police forces) numerous grassroots groups emerged. Many were connected to youth subcultures and countercultures, adding to the broad spectrum of political opposition in Poland in the 1980s. The mainstream opposition – mostly the

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<sup>12</sup> Padraic Kenney, Young Workers Fuel Solidarity, “The Boston Globe”, 4 September 1988.

Solidarność movement – that opted for a compromise with the authorities sparked the development of many groups that were more radical in terms of repertoires of contention and claims. Many of these groups were the predecessors of today's social movements in Poland.

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