STEFAN BATORY FOUNDATION

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Citizens' Democracy: Social Mobilisation in Poland in the Years 2015–2023

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Citizen power

The history of civic activity in Poland in 2015–2023 – when the United Right coalition, led by the national-conservative Law and Justice (PiS) party, was in government for two parliamentary terms – is a story of perseverance in the face of adversity and increasingly difficult conditions. It is a story of building competence and resilience in times of great crises: the COVID-19 pandemic, large-scale migration triggered by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, and actions by the authorities that violated the fundamental rights of citizens and necessitated effective resistance. It is also a chronicle of civil society organisations gaining increasing public trust and recognition, as well as the emergence of completely new networks of cross-sector cooperation and previously unknown forms of civic self-organisation.

The most important change, as emphasised by almost everyone who agreed to be interviewed for this publication,[1] was the emergence of new areas of cooperation between grassroots organisers and those involved in more formal structures, such as third-sector associations and foundations.

1 For more on these conversations, see: P. Marczewski, *From Resistance to Action. Civic Mobilisations In Poland 2015–2023*, in: P. Marczewski, G. Forbici, F. Blaščák, *Resisting the Illiberal Turn in Poland, Slovenia and Slovakia*, Open Society Foundation Bratislava, Bratislava 2024, pp. 15–45, https://www.batory.org.pl/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Resisting-illiberals-BOOK.pdf (accessed online on 20 December 2025).

The subsequent social mobilisation culminated in the United Right government losing power in the parliamentary elections on 15 October 2023, amid record voter turnout. That turnout was achieved mainly as a result of mobilising people who were undecided on voting until the last moment, or who had previously been less interested in politics or discouraged from participating in it.

How did this happen? At what points did citizens lose trust in the Polish state and decide that they had to start keeping a close eye on those in power? How were new forms of cooperation built between citizens and civil society organisations? And what were the actual achievements of civic power?

Turning points – an attempt at a chronology

Describing the sequence of events – state actions, protests, moments of mobilisation and self-organisation – that led to a change of government in Poland and, above all, to the emergence of new forms of civic action, is a very difficult task. Citizen initiatives and organisations operating in different areas and emerging at different times necessarily have different experiences, consider different events to be turning points, and attribute special significance to different moments. The following attempt at a chronology – a brief chronicle of landmark events among many significant legislative changes, opportunities for self-organisation, and confrontations between the authorities and citizens – is based on a series of interviews with people involved in various areas and in different ways between 2015 and 2023. The events selected were those that were identified as particularly significant, i.e. those that mobilised exceptionally large groups of people or new communities, or required existing methods of action to be rethought.

For most of the interviewees, regardless of the initiatives they were involved in, there was no doubt that the beginning of a series of confrontations between citizens and the authorities was the politicisation of the Constitutional Tribunal, a court whose primary role is to examine whether laws are compatible with the Polish constitution. One interviewee put it bluntly:

> The first moment when the authorities said, "We (aren't playing by the rules), and what are you going to do about it?" was when they refused to swear in the properly elected judges of the Constitutional Tribunal.

The PiS-led United Right coalition started to interfere with the Constitutional Tribunal very quickly. The parliamentary term in which it held a majority began on 12 November 2015, and on 19 November, the Sejm – the more powerful lower house of parliament – passed a law changing the term limits of some judges sitting on the Constitutional Tribunal and mandating the appointment of five contested judges chosen by the new government. In response to these changes, which were viewed as an attempt to politicise the court, the first demonstrations in defence of the rule of law were organised and a civic movement named the Committee for the Defence of Democracy was formed. These demonstrations were sporadic – they began, like many protest initiatives around the world, with a group on social media where people simply expressed their dissatisfaction, which then spilled over onto the streets. As one participant in the events at that time recalled in an interview:

> The parliament was sworn in in October, I think, and at the end of November a Facebook group called the Committee for the Defence of Democracy was (created). Within a few days, thousands of people from different cities joined it. There, people poured out their grievances and their resentment, and someone came up with the idea of formalising it.

Soon, the Committee for the Defence of Democracy decided to transform itself into an association and formalise the movement, quickly going from a spontaneous initiative to a non-governmental organisation (NGO) with its own structures. Some other citizen initiatives involved in opposing the government's initial changes undermining the rule of

law took a different path, remaining informal and, over time, focusing on new areas and topics. However, the impetus for protest created by the politicisation of the Constitutional Tribunal spread very widely and had far-reaching consequences.

Another particularly important event was the adoption on 8 January 2016, of a special law on appointments to public media positions. The legislation allowed for the heads of Polish state television and radio to be immediately dismissed, and transferred to the government the power to appoint and dismiss public media officials. The new law – a major step in the government takeover of public media – prompted demonstrations in defence of media freedom.

On 23 September 2016, a citizens' bill – a legislative proposal initiated by citizens that must be read in Poland's parliament if it is supported by at least 100,000 eligible signatures – drastically restricting the right to abortion was debated in the Sejm and referred to a committee for further work. In response, on 3 October 2016, a so-called "Black Protest" took place – a mass, nationwide demonstration against the further processing of the bill and the restriction of reproductive rights that would result from its adoption. Around 100,000 people took part in the protest across Poland, including both those active in civil society organisations (CSOs) and those who had not previously been involved in social movements but felt that their fundamental rights were being violated. The Black Protest, apart from mobilising people not only in large, more socially liberal cities, was also distinguished by its original aesthetics, using a black umbrella as a simple, clear symbol of opposition. The slogan coined after the protests, "We are not folding our umbrellas," was also immediately understandable, emphatic, and emphasised that the potential created during the protests had not disappeared but could be mobilised again in the future.

Between 24 October and 4 November, Polish public media ran a smear campaign against members of some CSOs, whom they portrayed as

Turning points – an attempt at a chronology

19 November 2015	**The politicisation of the Constitutional Tribunal**
8 January 2016	**Special law on appointments to public media positions**
3 October 2016	**The "Black Protest"**
24 October–4 November 2016	**Smear campaign against CSOs in public media**
12 December 2016	**Public hearing on education law reforms**
March 2017	**Start of protests against logging in Białowieża Forest**
20 July 2017	**Supreme Court Act, protests against changes to the judiciary**
February 2019	**Warsaw Mayor Rafał Trzaskowski signs a declaration on respect for LGBT+ rights**
15 March 2019	**First Polish "Strike for Climate"**
March–May 2020	**Beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, social mobilisation against postal voting**

Turning points – an attempt at a chronology

12 July 2020	**Second round of presidential election**
20 October 2020	**Protests against the Constitutional Tribunal ruling restricting abortion rights**
22 June 2021	**First version of the so-called "Lex Czarnek" education bill is published**
2 October 2021	**President Andrzej Duda declares a state of emergency on the Polish-Belarusian border**
24 February 2022	**Start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine**

having family and financial ties to the previous government. The aim of the campaign was to discredit certain initiatives opposing the changes introduced by the United Right coalition. However, the campaign was met with legal action and public statements by the individuals and organisations slandered in state media, and, in the long term, with an increase in financial support from individual donors for organisations they considered to be defending democratic standards. As one of the victims of the smear campaign recalled in an interview, during this difficult time, she suddenly received support from people she had not been in contact with for a long time.

Another important moment was the public hearing on the education law reforms, organised on 12 December 2016. Reform of the school system – abolishing compulsory schooling for six-year-olds, eliminating three-year lower secondary schools, and restoring eight years of primary school – was one of the first priorities of the new government, alongside changes to the judiciary and public media. As one of my interviewees, who has been active in the field of education for a long time, emphasised, the community of education experts was very surprised that the government was preparing such major changes without any public consultation with teachers, parents, students, or academics. In response to the lack of dialogue, CSOs decided themselves to organise a public hearing discussing the proposed reforms. The hearing not only showed the scale of the discrepancy between the government's ideas and social needs in the field of education, but also marked the beginning of the fight for a more civic education – a fight that continued throughout the two terms of the United Right government.

In March 2017, the government commenced illegal logging in Białowieża Forest – one of the largest remaining primeval forests in Europe – sparking protests from environmental organisations and ordinary citizens alarmed by the destruction of nature. Cooperation between CSOs and individuals concerned about environmental protection, as

well as academic experts, proved to be extremely effective. Thanks to their efforts before the European Commission, the logging was halted under threat of financial sanctions against Poland.

On 20 July 2017, the Sejm passed a law concerning the Supreme Court that would force all its sitting members to retire, while allowing the government to decide which judges would be permitted to remain on the court. That led to further mass protests, with around 100,000 people demonstrating across Poland in defence of judicial independence. As in the case of the Black Protest, those demonstrating against the dismantling of the rule of law developed an original, clear, and emphatic aesthetic. The protests included the "Chain of Lights," in which groups of citizens in various towns and cities demonstrated by holding lit candles, and the "March of a Thousand Robes," in which Polish and European judges marched through Warsaw wearing full judicial garb. These actions emphasised the importance of the issues at stake, brought them closer to a wider audience of supporters, and strongly marked the presence of demonstrators in the public space, while at the same time referring to universal democratic values and avoiding being drawn into political party rivalries.

In February 2019, opposition-aligned Warsaw Mayor Rafał Trzaskowski signed a declaration of respect for LGBT+ rights, which served as a pretext for the government and ultra-conservative CSOs to mobilise against Trzaskowski and what they referred to as "LGBT ideology." The rights of non-heteronormative people became a major campaign topic in the run-up to that year's October parliamentary elections, and some local governments passed resolutions introducing so-called "LGBT-free zones," which acted to marginalise local LGBT+ individuals and organisations. Although LGBT+ communities had been harassed before, this was the first time they had been the target of such a widespread political smear campaign. However, they also gained support from people who had not previously been involved in their cause.

On 15 March 2019, the first Polish "Strike for Climate" was organised, inspired by the "Fridays for Future" movement popularised by Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg. This was the symbolic beginning of a series of demonstrations during which young activists demanded that Polish politicians take more decisive action on climate change.

The first round of the presidential election was scheduled for 10 May 2020. However, at that time a state of epidemiological threat was in place following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. The ruling camp nonetheless pushed for the election to happen, despite the serious threat to the life and health of citizens. It also insisted that the vote be held by mail, even though this was likely to entail serious violations of civil rights as a result of unprepared state institutions organising a postal vote at short notice.

However, CSOs, citizens, and local governments mobilised against postal voting, with the latter refusing to hand over voters' personal data on the basis of an expert opinion prepared through a public initiative. The protests proved effective and the election was postponed. When the election finally took place in the summer, the second round on 12 July 2020, saw the exceptional mobilisation of two social groups that would prove particularly important in the parliamentary elections on 15 October 2023: women and young people. For the first time, women turned out to vote in significantly higher numbers than men, with a turnout of over 71% (compared to 64.4% among men), while young people were no longer the age group with the lowest turnout, but ranked third with a turnout of 67.2% among 18–19-year-olds.

On 20 October 2020, the partisan Constitutional Tribunal led by Julia Przyłębska, a close associate of PiS party chairman Jarosław Kaczyński, issued a ruling banning abortion in cases of serious threat to the life or health of the foetus. Across Poland, 430,000 people protested against the Constitutional Tribunal's restriction of reproductive rights – these were the largest demonstrations in Poland since the events that led to

the country's transition to democracy in 1989. Women's organisations, trade unions, organisations previously involved in defending the rule of law, and people who had never before demonstrated took part in the protests. Once again, as in the case of the Black Protest, the demonstrations had a clear, understandable, and emphatic aesthetic, symbolised first and foremost by the red lightning bolt worn on protective face masks, distributed on stickers, and painted on windows.

22 June 2021, marked another turning point in the conflict with authorities over more civic-oriented education when the Government Legislation Centre announced a draft of the so-called "Lex Czarnek," named after then education minister Przemysław Czarnek. The proposed law would restrict CSOs from conducting extracurricular activities, workshops, and training in schools, prompting concerns that it would allow the ministry to ban any such activities not aligned with the government's policies and ideology. CSOs, teachers, parents, students, and experts mobilised against the restriction of school autonomy.

Yet another turning point came when Polish President Andrzej Duda declared a state of emergency on the Polish-Belarusian border on 2 October 2021 – a time when the regime of Belarusian dictator Alexander Lukashenko, seeking to lift or ease the sanctions imposed on it after its victory in rigged elections, began to put pressure on the European Union. The regime exploited migrants trying to reach Europe by inviting them to Belarus and transporting them to the border with Poland. Those people then found themselves trapped – Polish border guards would block them from crossing the border, while the Belarusian security services would prevent them from returning to Belarus. This resulted in a humanitarian crisis, with the affected individuals lacking food, water, suitable clothing, and medical assistance. The state of emergency in the border area prevented professional humanitarian organisations from reaching those in need, so they began intensive cooperation with local residents concerned about the fate of the migrants.

On 24 February 2022, the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine began, with hundreds of thousands of people fleeing the country in search of shelter from the war. A large proportion of Ukrainian refugees crossed the border into Poland – at the peak in March 2022, more than 100,000 people arrived every day. Unprecedented cooperation between aid organisations and people working with migrants, local governments, businesses, and ordinary citizens proved extremely effective in preventing a humanitarian crisis. According to estimates by the Polish Economic Institute, in the first few months of the war, the value of aid provided by Poles to people from Ukraine, financed from their own pockets, amounted to approximately PLN 10 billion (USD 2.75 billion).[2] This – I would like to emphasise once again – unprecedented mobilisation proved extremely effective and demonstrated that a network of cooperation between CSOs, citizens, and other social actors can function in Poland despite data indicating low social capital and a low level of generalised trust.

2 *Polacy mogli wydać nawet 10 mld PLN na pomoc udzielaną uchodźcom z Ukrainy w pierwszych miesiącach wojny* (*Poles May Have Spent up to PLN 10 Billion on Aid to Refugees from Ukraine in the First Months of the War*), Polski Instytut Ekonomiczny, 27 July 2022, https://pie.net.pl/polacy-mogli-wydac-nawet-10-mld-pln-na-pomoc-udzielana-uchodzcom-z-ukrainy-w-pierwszych-miesiacach-wojny/.

Common issues – themes inspiring cross-sector action

Civil society mobilisation in response to successive government moves – taking control of the Constitutional Tribunal, undermining the independence of the Supreme Court and implementing changes in the courts, carrying out illegal logging in Białowieża Forest, persecuting LGBT+ people, and restricting women's reproductive rights – consisted not only in organising street protests, but above all in building networks of cooperation between very different actors. For example, CSOs and civic initiatives focused on a single, specific issue – such as the rights of non-heteronormative people or reproductive rights – became involved in projects defending the rule of law. In turn, grassroots initiatives and organisations bringing together lawyers seeking to counteract the dismantling of the rule of law joined protests against restrictions on the right to legal abortion and against stigmatisation and discrimination of LGBT+ people.

Interviews with people who were involved in various organisations and initiatives opposing the Polish government's unlawful and undemocratic actions between 2015 and 2023 revealed several common themes. These issues mobilised people from different backgrounds and professions to engage in joint activism outside their usual areas of work, motivated by a sense of civic responsibility for Polish democracy.

Civic counter-democracy was built upon these common topics and issues.

The first theme was, of course, the broadly understood concept of rule of law. Protests, initially in defence of the Constitutional Tribunal and then the Supreme Court, brought together thousands of people from various backgrounds. These people immediately recognised that undermining the fundamental democratic value of the rule of law potentially threatens other civil and personal freedoms. These fears were confirmed in October 2020, when the politicised Constitutional Tribunal led by Julia Przyłębska issued a ruling outlawing abortion in cases of serious fetal impairment. Restricting women's reproductive rights would have been impossible without the prior removal of independence from one of the most important institutions safeguarding the rule of law.

Women's rights, restricted by the Constitutional Tribunal ruling, also united many different protest initiatives. Organisations that had previously defended the rule of law, including the Committee for the Defence of Democracy and legal initiatives, as well as independent trade unions such as the Workers' Initiative, and organisations working to strengthen human rights protection, including the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights and Amnesty International, became involved in the nationwide protest against the ruling.

The school system reforms implemented by then education minister Anna Zalewska, which abolished compulsory schooling for six-year-olds and restored eight years of primary school in place of the existing six-year primary school and three-year lower secondary school, mobilised parents, students, and experts in education, as well as teachers' unions.

Introduced without public consultation and lacking support from reliable research, the "reforms" were perceived by many as completely

arbitrary and dictated solely by a conservative vision of the school "as it was in the past."

Another attempt to undermine the autonomy of schools based on ideological grounds was the so-called "Lex Czarnek," which aimed, among other things, to effectively prevent CSOs from conducting extracurricular activities and workshops in schools. Protests against these changes – Zalewska's reforms were introduced, while the Lex Czarnek was not passed into law – united various communities and made education part of the broader debate on Polish democracy.

Minority rights, especially those of LGBT+ people and people with migration experience, also became an issue that united various groups – not only organisations that had been working in this area for a long time and those previously focused on other issues, but also ordinary citizens. The persecution of non-heteronormative people and the crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border were events that mobilised a wide range of citizens to work together. Protests, solidarity actions, and fundraisers for LGBT+ activists and those providing assistance at the border were met with a wide response, engaging the legal community and mobilising part of the democratic parliamentary opposition.

The defence of Białowieża Forest against logging made environmental protection, especially of local forests, a common cause. Cooperation between citizens and professional environmental organisations raised awareness of environmental concerns in the immediate vicinity. Thanks to cooperation with lawyers, effective advocacy was carried out, which made the European Commission aware of the problem of logging in that forest.

The accumulation of common issues built a broad consensus among various groups and initiatives that became involved in the struggle for political change – thus elections also became a common cause. Organisations working to promote both high voter turnout and transparency

and fairness in the electoral process found allies in initiatives committed to women's rights and nature conservation. Such initiatives saw the electoral process as an opportunity to secure change for the better and rights in areas of key importance to them. In this way, the 2023 parliamentary elections became more than just another vote – for many, they were an act of civic resistance.

One interviewee summed up the experience of cross-sector cooperation as follows:

> Communication has changed over the past eight years. We have learned that we can ask each other questions and find partners for specific activities. Someone knows something, will answer, help, and you don't have to involve all your resources. There are expert organisations, there are those that create content, there are those that edit that content, but there are also those that will help manage the editing. This was the case with election information and information about the referendum (held alongside the elections on questions related to privatisation, retirement, and migration). There was cooperation between people who began to trust each other, meaning that I won't take credit for your success, because we also began to share our media outreach. This or that editorial office is looking for someone who can speak on a given topic. Who will go, who will give an interview? Or suggesting to journalists who they can talk to. Some of the heads of organisations have broadened their thinking, gone beyond their own turf and realised that sharing knowledge and resources ultimately brings better results.

New ways of working – building coalitions and cooperation networks

Some of the social initiatives that opposed the erosion of democracy by the Polish government between 2015 and 2023 arose spontaneously in response to the actions of the authorities, while others already existed. Some operated in very specific areas or dealt with specific issues, while others had a broader profile of activity. However, all of them had to find new ways of organising opposition and defending democratic standards, because the government's violations, even if anticipated, were unprecedented. They took place in many different spheres of civic life at once – in the judiciary, the media, education, Białowieża Forest – and went further than many people had expected. They therefore required new ways of engagement in response to the fact that the state's democratic safeguards had proved defective, and in many cases were simply dismantled.

The most important innovation, which many people involved in defending democracy in the years 2015–2023 consider crucial to their successes, was the establishment of cooperation between organisations and initiatives that had no previous experience of working or acting together, as well as between experienced organisations and spontaneous citizens' initiatives. The new situation required organisations to completely rethink their forms of involvement. One of the interviewees emphatically stated that the change was profound:

> Actually, activism as a whole has changed. The activism we knew and were used to, the methods of advocacy, which were more based on democratic mechanisms, civic participation, monitoring, appealing to the relevant bodies, writing statements, or engaging in dialogue with the authorities, were completely ineffective. It was completely the wrong time for that. And then a whole generation of grassroots activists came to the fore, who got involved in political and civic activities, engaged in street resistance, marches and protests. (...) With our methods of operation, we were completely unprepared for this in terms of infrastructure. For years, we had invested in our institutional development, expanding our internal processes, and as a result, we were slower to react. We tried to find our place in this new situation by supporting those who were fighting on the streets and acting in various ways. And that was the point where we found ourselves doing things we know and are good at rather than pretending to be street protesters. But we also focused on what we know and have experience in, namely lobbying and international advocacy at the European Commission.

In addition to new forms of cooperation between formal organisations and informal groups, intensive cross-sector cooperation was also a novelty. There are many examples of this. Environmental activists demonstrating against logging in Białowieża Forest began cooperating with academic circles, which provided them with arguments and expert opinions for their advocacy work before the European Commission. CSOs defending democratic standards began cooperating with industry organisations representing judges and prosecutors, and a group of socially engaged lawyers undertook to represent judges of the Supreme Court and the Supreme Administrative Court in cases against the state, on whose behalf they were theoretically supposed to adjudicate, but whose independence had been violated. When the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine began and hundreds of thousands of people sought refuge in Poland, CSOs effectively cooperated with local governments and businesses to organise aid for those in need. During the crisis

caused by war-induced migration, cross-sector cooperation was something that happened spontaneously, naturally, and often without prior planning. One interviewee recalled, for example, how a hotline set up for people seeking refuge from the Russian invasion in a town in eastern Poland, which had been advertised only by word of mouth, suddenly began receiving hundreds of calls a day. It turned out that it had been posted on the official website of Poland's Ministry of Internal Affairs as a number to call for help in that region of the country.

Cooperation between organisations which had not previously worked together, but also between organisations and spontaneous civic initiatives, would have been impossible without a change in thinking, replacing competition with cooperation. Formal CSOs, even if they are connected in the form of networks, often apply for funding from the same grantors, which inevitably pits them against each other as competitors. In order to operate effectively in a situation where the democratic foundations of the state were threatened, it was necessary to move away from the "grant-based" logic of competition and replace it with the logic of cooperation. However, focusing on cooperation as a new principle of functioning required mutual trust, which first had to be built, and this involved risk. One of the interviewees put it this way:

> The basis for creating our network was abandoning the formula that had previously been in place, which was simply competition for funds. Instead, we decided to work together to find money for everyone, based on the principle of not dividing it equally, but giving (to) each partner according to their needs. It is very difficult to build trust between partners who are also very different (from each other), so that a shared budget is not divided equally, but according to who needs more funds. I remember that (interviewee's organisation) had very little money for renting the premises we had at the time, and (another organisation), for example, had huge rental costs. Okay, but we don't need more

> (money), and they do because they do a lot of things that require it. And for me, it's okay that the funds are not the same.

Interviewees from organisations working in various areas – nature conservation, LGBT+ rights, and the rule of law – also pointed out how important it was to internationalise their projects, in particular by starting advocacy work in the European Union. Without dialogue with the European Commission, it would have been impossible to effectively block logging in Białowieża Forest. Stopping European funding for municipalities that had adopted resolutions on "LGBT-free zones" effectively convinced those entities to withdraw the acts. Without the European Commission's activation of Article 7 against Poland in connection with violations of the rule of law, the system of independent judiciary in Poland would probably have been completely dismantled. The interviewees mentioned "constant dialogue with the Commission" and "effectively finding a listener in the EU" as very important conditions for the success of their actions.

New models of action did not always involve building broad networks of cooperation between organisations or advocacy work in the European Union. Sometimes they took the form of "voting with donations." The new political situation and confrontation with the authorities over the rights of migrants, which reached its peak in fall 2021 during the crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border, created a new type of relationship between organisations and individual donors. Organisations operating in specific areas became, for some of their supporters, a generalised voice of opposition to the authorities. This was particularly true for people who were unable or unwilling to get involved themselves, but wanted their protest to be heard through the activities of specific organisations:

> As an organisation supporting migrants, we operated in a specific political and social context. The best example is 2021 and the

> crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border, when we saw a very rapid and unexpected increase in individual donations. People told us directly that they were supporting us because they saw it as a form of resistance against the authorities. Our money is going to you because it shows that we disagree.

Building up a pool of experts was also new for many organisations and civic initiatives. Some already had their own expert resources, while others were focused on specific activities, such as aid work, and only then realised not only how much expert knowledge they possessed themselves, but also the benefits of using it in advocacy and cross-sector cooperation. As a result, before the parliamentary elections in October 2023, CSOs working in a wide range of areas – from women's rights to combating climate change – announced concrete proposals for legal changes and ideas for election programmes.[3]

The diverse issues that prompted citizens to become involved, and the varied forms that their involvement took, can be summarised within the general framework of "counter-democracy." This term, coined by French scholar Pierre Rosanvallon,[4] does not mean an alternative or opposition to democracy, but rather the co-governance of engaged citizens who decide to personally and in various ways control a state in which they have lost trust. Rosanvallon writes about three constitutive features of counter-democracy: oversight, i.e. citizens' desire for transparency in authorities' actions and their subsequent surveillance of power to prevent its abuse; prevention, i.e. the ability to block government actions that citizens find undesirable; and finally, judgment, i.e. citizens acting as judges who hold those in power accountable for their

3 See: *Propozycje obywatelskie dla Polski* (*Citizens' Proposals for Poland*), https://www.batory.org.pl/forumidei/demokracja/propozycje-obywatelskie-dla-polski/.
4 P. Rosanvallon, *Kontrdemokracja. Polityka w dobie nieufności* (*Counter-democracy: Politics in an Age of Distrust*), trans. A. Czarnacka, Wydawnictwo Dolnośląskiej Szkoły Wyższej, Wrocław 2011.

actions more often than once every few years and not only by voting in elections.

It is no coincidence that one of the first initiatives in defence of the independence of the Constitutional Tribunal was conducted under the hashtag #PatrzymyNaWas (We Are Watching You) – in other words, oversight – and aimed to publicise successive government actions that undermined the rule of law. In turn, advocacy in the European Commission to stop logging in Białowieża Forest is an example of prevention – successfully blocking the authorities' actions. The third component of counter-democracy – judgment – constitutes an entirely separate sphere of civic action in the period 2015–2023, as many civic initiatives were focused on the government's undermining of the rule of law. The response to the state's actions took not only the form of demanding that law-breaking politicians be held accountable, but went even further, with the people assuming judicial prerogatives – judges from various courts decided to stand shoulder to shoulder with citizens and bring cases against the Polish state, on behalf of which they were supposed to adjudicate, because they believed that the state itself had violated the principles of the rule of law.

The 2023 elections – a breakthrough moment

The Polish parliamentary elections of 15 October 2023, were special. However, their uniqueness did not lie in the fact that after two terms of the United Right government, opposition parties had a real chance to take power – in a democracy, this is a completely natural course of events, and the possibility of political rivals taking power is a fundamental component of even the most minimalist definitions of democracy. The 2023 elections were exceptional because they were the culmination of the entire chain of civic actions described above; for many people, they constituted an extension of their activism, rather than just another opportunity to cast a vote.

The fact that these were not "elections as usual" is evidenced by the record turnout of 74.3%. In addition to the election campaign conducted by political parties, they were preceded by a "multi-campaign to boost turnout," consisting of as many as 27 campaigns conducted by various organisations and social initiatives.

According to research by the Stefan Batory Foundation, a significant proportion of voters decided to vote at the last minute, convinced by social turnout campaigns. Mobilisation on the "final stretch" increased

turnout by around 7 percentage points.[5] Among respondents who said they had seen voter turnout campaigns, 81% also declared that they had participated in the elections. In the group that had no contact with turnout campaigns, 63% declared that they had voted. Two-thirds of respondents said that the campaigns influenced their decision to participate in the elections.

The mobilisation of two groups – women and young people – was particularly significant. Due to the constitutional principle of voting secrecy, data from the National Electoral Commission do not contain information on the socio-demographic characteristics of voters, but we can learn more about them from surveys, such as exit polls. One such poll conducted on 15 October 2023, showed that voter turnout among women was 73.7% (compared to 72.1% among men). This was the second time – after the second round of the presidential election in 2020 – that women went to the polls in greater numbers than men (turnout among women in 2020 was 71.1% – slightly lower than in October 2023 – but the difference among men was significantly greater – 64.4% voted in 2020). Overall turnout in the exit poll was slightly lower than the confirmed turnout of 72.9%, so the actual participation of women in the vote may have been even higher. The scale of women's mobilisation is strikingly evident when comparing the exit poll results with the turnout predicted in May 2023 during the pre-campaign period. In a survey conducted at that time by More in Common Poland, less than 48% of female respondents declared a firm intention to participate in the October elections.

5 E. Bendyk, A. Jaworska-Surma, S. Gutkowski, *Fenomen wyborczej mobilizacji. Przyczyny rekordowej frekwencji podczas wyborów parlamentarnych 2023 – wnioski z badań* (*The Phenomenon of Electoral Mobilisation. Reasons for Record Turnout in the 2023 Parliamentary Elections – Research Findings*), Fundacja Batorego, Warszawa 2023, https://www.batory.org.pl/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Fenomen.wyborczej.moblizacji_RAPORT.pdf.

In October 2023, people aged 18–29 voted in large numbers. The turnout in this age group was 69.9%, higher than in the second round of the presidential election in 2020 (67.2%), which had previously been considered a record in terms of youth mobilisation.

What motivated women and young people to participate in the elections? What was behind the phenomenon of high voter turnout in these two groups? Kacper Nowicki, a young social activist who heads the Poznań-based Varia Posnania foundation, which deals, among others, with students' rights, wrote about the sources of this "revolution at the ballot box" in his article published in the volume *Prawda po wyborach* (*The Truth After the Elections*)[6] published by the Stefan Batory Foundation:

> So turnout won. It was achieved thanks to the record mobilisation of young people, women, and people uninterested in politics, but who shared (the 19th-century Polish poet Adam) Mickiewicz's belief in the romantic need for a popular uprising. What distinguished these elections from previous ones was the identification of target groups during voter turnout campaigns and the ordinariness of those involved, who were focused on defending values. There was little direct mention of PiS; instead, simple alternatives were presented. The right to abortion or a pregnancy registry? Two billion (PLN) for cancer treatment or for television? A dignified life or (a life from paycheck to paycheck)? Social media helped, used more effectively than before by the democratic opposition, as did the sincere commitment of the third sector, which felt PiS breathing down its neck in the form of financial and legal pressure. Fatigue (with the political situation) was the key factor.

6 See: *Prawda po wyborach 15 października 2023* (*The Truth After the Elections of 15 October 2023*), red. E. Bendyk, P. Czapliński, P. Kosiewski, Fundacja Batorego, Warszawa 2024, pp. 149–150, https://www.batory.org.pl/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Prawda.po_wyborach.15.pazdziernika.2023_Zbior.tekstow.pdf.

Zofia Krajewska, co-founder of the Youth Climate Strike, wrote in a text published in the same volume footnote should precede the colon:[7]

> Many commentators claim that the result was determined by the participation of the younger generation and women. Among them, the so-called undecided voters were the most numerous. Let us take a closer look at these people. Most of them declared a lack of interest in and distance from politics, especially in the face of polarisation, from which they saw no way out. They were characterised by a general disappointment with the entire political class, perceiving it as focused on its own interests, and resignation in the face of a lack of proposals for real change. Women in particular were put off by the brutal, confrontational discourse. Among the younger generation, on the other hand, there was a sense of meaninglessness and frustration (around the political process). Its representatives claimed that there was no point in voting, since politicians "do not keep their election promises" (38%), "are constantly arguing and do not deal with important issues" (25%), and "only put out current fires and have no long-term plan for Poland" (24%). (...)
>
> People with such a critical view of politics who ultimately cast their votes cannot be explained by (the logic of) pure opposition. I doubt that they were swayed by any specific policy proposals, since they do not believe that these will be implemented. They clearly saw the systemic corruption of politics and had no confidence in its credibility. However, something must have sparked motivation and hope even among those who were politically withdrawn and resigned.

The voices of young people involved in public life quoted above show that they themselves see the mobilisation of the youngest voters as a manifestation of a broader phenomenon of weariness with partisan politics – a politics detached from everyday problems, practiced by politicians who do not enjoy public trust and do not listen to voters. For many people, voting in the parliamentary elections in October 2023

7 Ibid., pp. 204–205.

was therefore an attempt not so much to change the government as to change politics in general – from party politics to a more civic politics.

In this sense, although the definition of Pierre Rosanvallon's counter-democracy cited in the previous chapter describes it as an action taking place between elections, and, in a sense, as an alternative to them – exerting pressure on those in power not by replacing the ruling team, but by focusing on specific issues that require change during their parliamentary terms – the October 2023 elections were, for a significant part of society, an exercise in counter-democracy, rather than just another vote and the granting of legitimacy to a team of representatives. The aim here was a comprehensive change in the nature of Polish democracy, opening it up to citizens and liberating it from the logic of party conflict.

Long-term social change

The results of the 15 October 2023, elections – which led to the United Right government being replaced by a broad, democratic coalition headed by Donald Tusk's Civic Platform party – are the outcome of civic mobilisation at the polls. However, not all successes were equally visible. Not all of them were about achieving concrete, easily identifiable results, such as blocking the logging of a forest, stopping the dismantling of a particular institution, or providing effective assistance during a crisis. Sometimes success entailed initiating more long-term, wide-ranging social change.

A study examining Poles' views towards NGOs, conducted by the Klon/Jawor Association in 2023, showed that the number of Poles who had personal contact with such organisations increased in the years 2014–2023,[8] despite increasingly difficult working conditions in the third sector and a declining number of organisations cooperating with state institutions (according to data from Poland's Central Statistical Office, between 2015 and 2021, the percentage of third-sector organisations

8 GUS, *Współpraca organizacji non-profit z innymi podmiotami 2021* (*Cooperation of Non-Profit Organisations with Other Entities 2021*), 22 December 2022, https://stat.gov.pl/obszary-tematyczne/gospodarka-spoleczna-wolontariat/gospodarka-spoleczna-trzeci-sektor/wspolpraca-organizacji-non-profit-z-innymi-podmiotami-w-2021-r-,9,5.html.

cooperating with public institutions decreased by 4.2 percentage points).[9] In 2014, 13% of respondents declared such contact, while in 2023, that figure had increased to 24%. In 2023, as many as 63% of respondents said they trusted NGOs – much higher than the 34% that trusted the government and its ministries. The majority of respondents (55%) also believed that NGOs are more effective than state institutions in providing assistance to those in need. Particularly significant was their assessment of activities providing aid to Ukraine and people fleeing the war: 56% of respondents believed that NGOs were coping well with these challenges, whereas 45% positively assessed assessment of the government's work in this area. The percentage of Poles declaring trust in NGOs (63%) in the Klon/Jawor Association survey was also significantly higher than the average level of trust in NGOs (59%) declared in the international Edelman Trust Barometer survey conducted in 2023 in 28 countries (Poland was not included in this edition).[10]

A nationwide survey conducted in Poland on behalf of the Foundation for Local Democracy Development (FLDD) at the turn of 2022 and 2023, i.e. after both the mass protests against the tightening of abortion laws and large-scale mobilisation in support of people fleeing the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, showed the enormous potential of civic engagement.[11] As many as 86% of respondents declared that they had participated in at least one form of civic engagement listed in the survey – from those requiring the least time and attention, such as signing a petition (50.3%) or voting in a participatory budget (48%), to the

9 B. Charycka, J. Bednarek, M. Gumowska, *Ufamy, ale… Polki i Polacy o organizacjach pozarządowych* (*We Trust Them, But… Polish Women and Men on Non-Governmental Organisations*), Stowarzyszenie Klon/Jawor, Warszawa 2023, https://publicystyka.ngo.pl/nowosc-raport-badan-klon-jawor-o-wizerunku-organizacji-pozarzadowych.

10 *2023 Edelman Trust Barometer. Navigating a Polarised World*, https://www.edelman.com/trust/2023/trust-barometer.

11 *Kapitał obywatelski społeczności lokalnych* (*Civic Capital of Local Communities*), red. C. Trutkowski, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar, Warszawa 2024.

most involving, such as participating in a protest (8.6%) or personally attending a municipal council session (4.6%).

Commenting on the survey results, community organiser and human rights activist Anna Dąbrowska pointed out that the figures are higher than in other surveys measuring civic engagement in Poland, such as the European Social Survey, which may result from social desirability bias or methodological differences.[12] However, even if the FLDD figures are higher than the actual participation rate, they clearly show a certain ideal of civic engagement to which Poles aspire. Not only do they value the effectiveness of CSOs, but they also recognise personal involvement as an important value.

Citizen mobilisation in 2015–2023 therefore increased trust in CSOs and allowed a larger group of people to come into contact with their activities or become involved in them, as well as strengthened the ideal of engaged citizenship in the collective imagination of Poles. Mobilisation also brought about changes in attitudes towards important social issues.

When it comes to what is perhaps the most polarising issue, namely the right to terminate a pregnancy, public attitudes changed following the ruling of the politicised Constitutional Tribunal that introduced restrictions on legal abortion and the resultant mass protests against those restrictions. A CBOS survey from March 2023 showed that 57% of respondents believed that the abortion law should be more liberal than that introduced by the Constitutional Tribunal's ruling.[13] In turn, in a More in Common Poland survey from February 2024, in which the question about abortion was formulated in a much less impersonal way ("I would like a woman close to me to be able to decide for herself

12 Ibid., p. 363.

13 *Polish Attitudes Towards Abortion*, CBOS, Research report, 2023, no. 47, https://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2023/K_047_23.PDF.

whether to terminate a pregnancy"), the percentage of people supporting the right to abortion was as high as 61%.[14]

Between 2015 and 2023, there was also a marked change in attitudes toward non-heteronormative people. CBOS data show that in 2017, 32% of respondents believed that same-sex couples in intimate relationships should have the right to "publicly display their way of life." In 2024, this figure increased to 43%. It turns out that even the issue arousing the most social resistance among Poles when it comes to LGBT+ rights – the right of same-sex couples to adopt children – is now met with slightly less opposition. In 2017, 11% of respondents in the CBOS survey were in favor of it, while in 2024, 23% supported it.[15] In a More in Common Poland survey from September 2024, the percentage of those accepting adoption by same-sex couples was, at 35%, even higher, and as many as 61% of respondents supported the right of such couples to enter into civil partnerships.[16]

In conversations with people involved in civic initiatives between 2015 and 2023, one important outcome of social mobilisation kept coming up – the introduction of certain topics into public debate and the realisation that issues such as education should be shaped by citizens to a greater degree. One interviewee put it as follows:

> When the campaign for the October 2023 parliamentary elections began, virtually all female politicians who had made education their cause spoke about the protests, used our arguments and our language, and emphasised the importance of social issues and

14 Z. Włodarczyk, A. Traczyk, *With Care and Empathy. Poles on the Right to Termination of Pregnancy. Research Report*, Warszawa 2024, https://www.moreincommon.pl/nasze-projekty/z-troska-i-empatia-polki-i-polacy-o-prawie-do-przerywania-ciazy.

15 *Attitudes of Poles Towards Gay and Lesbian People*, CBOS, Research report, 2024, no. 88, https://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2024/K_088_24.PDF.

16 *(Un)divided Relationships: Polish Women and Men on Same-Sex Rights*, September 2024, https://www.moreincommon.pl/nasze-projekty/nie-dzielace-zwiazki-polki-i-polacy-o-prawach-par-jednoplciowych.

change. Of course, they also adopted the demands that emerged in this discussion. This is undoubtedly a success, as is the fact that the topic has become more widespread and entered the public consciousness. Today, we are discussing cuts to the core curriculum, the demographic crisis, and the lack of teachers. Who previously discussed these issues? The topic appeared in the media from time to time, but it was not as present as it is today, when it has genuinely become popular. Suddenly, it turned out that this is our common concern, just like healthcare or roads.

Summary – a new civil society

In this study, I have used Pierre Rosanvallon's concept of counter-democracy – i.e. co-governance by citizens that complements and balances the rule of democratically elected representatives – to analyse social mobilisation in Poland in the years 2015–2023. This approach to new forms of civic self-organisation during the PiS-led United Right government allows us, first of all, to move away from the conflict between Poland's main political parties as the main axis organising disputes during those years. Instead of focusing on ideological and programmatic divisions between political elites, it allows for a better analysis of tensions between the government and society. Second, adopting the perspective of counter-democracy allows us to look beyond political polarisation, beyond the left-right divide. This makes it possible to identify a key "meta-division" organising Polish public life – between advocates of democracy as the rule of the people's elected representatives, with the sole mandate to exercise power being the result of a sporadic electoral act, and voters who understand democracy as a continuous, multi-level dialogue between those in power and society.

Considering the fact that both representatives of PiS and their successors in power went to the polls under the slogan of greater government openness towards citizens, the use of the concept of counter-democracy allows for an effective analysis of the extent to which these promises

have been fulfilled, regardless of the ideological orientation of the political groups concerned and personal conflicts.

The challenges for CSOs did not end after the elections. Some organisations point out that their proposals, eagerly seized upon by politicians during the election campaign, have not been taken seriously by the new government. Others argue that in some respects their work is even more difficult today than it was in 2015–2023. Some interviewees emphasised that it is now much more difficult to persuade people to take part in street protests. This is confirmed by research discussed in a Stefan Batory Foundation report published before the local and European elections in 2024, where respondents tended to declare a "wait-and-see" attitude – they were observing the government's actions and waiting for concrete changes.[17] The interviews also provided specific examples of the worsening financial situation of some organisations, especially those working with people with migration experience.

Despite these difficulties and a certain state of "suspension" in its ability to mobilise, civil society today is different than it was before PiS came to power. It now has experience in cross-sectoral cooperation, effective organisation during crises, and expert resources that allow representatives of civil society to engage with the government on equal footing in substantive discussions about changes in the law or reforms of public institutions.

It is high time for those in power to recognise that there is no going back to the past: to treating organisations as supplicants or background noise in sham consultations. Between 2015 and 2023, CSOs not only achieved real successes, but also felt their own strength and recognised their value. They expect the authorities to treat them as

17 P. Marczewski, *Hope of the Demobilised: The Social Mood Before the Local and European Elections*, Stefan Batory Foundation, Warsaw 2024, https://www.batory.org.pl/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Nadzieja-zdemobilizowanych.-Nastroje-spoleczne-przed-wyborami-samorzadowymi-i-europejskimi.pdf.

partners and are ready to cooperate with them, but also to hold them accountable for fulfilling their promises. They are one of the most important resources for a democratic state governed by the rule of law. In this sense, the "awakening" of a new civil society is probably more important than the opposition's victory in the parliamentary elections in October 2023, because it means a real change for the better in Polish democracy.

Politicians who are busy fighting their political opponents and whose primary goal is re-election will not allow citizens greater participation in governance on their own initiative or "in recognition of merit." All governments eagerly seek support from engaged citizens when they are fighting for power, but once they have gained it, they believe that they alone have the legitimacy to govern, as conferred on them by the election results. They are much less interested in what influenced those results.

However, marginalising the voice of civil society has a political price, especially when CSOs and citizens have previously been effectively involved in counter-democracy and the creation of grassroots civic mechanisms to defend democratic standards. Disappointed hopes for the renewal of democracy and greater openness to a wider range of citizens result in a renewed increase in the number of people disillusioned with official, institutional politics – undecided whether to participate in the next elections or to seek representatives who will give voice to their frustration and dissatisfaction, protesting on their behalf against the "system."

This process is particularly evident among the youngest voters and citizens who mobilised during the October 2023 elections and are now becoming increasingly disappointed and discouraged by the lack of profound change in Poland. In a More in Common Poland survey conducted in November 2024 on a nationally representative sample of 1,002 people aged 18–29, 22% of respondents had no specific party

preferences, and 26% declared support for the far-right Confederation party. These results are very different from those in the post-election late poll in October 2023 and show the growing disappointment of a group of citizens whose votes were particularly instrumental in the change of government.

The growing disappointment of citizens with party politics and representative democracy is, for CSOs and civic initiatives, a potential source of pressure on the authorities, but also a great challenge in terms of managing mounting social frustration. If civic counter-democracy wants to continue to effectively exercise control over those in power, it must successfully convince more social groups to get involved. There can be no more shortcuts through consultations in narrow advisory bodies or expert meetings behind closed doors. Fortunately, after eight years of practicing counter-democracy, Polish society is excellently prepared for this task.

Biographical note

Paweł Marczewski – dPhD in sociology, chief specialist for research projects at the Stefan Batory Foundation's forumIdei. His work focuses on the sources of legitimacy for democratic systems, relations between the state and civil society organisations, and the impact of demographic changes on democracy, including relations between the Ukrainian diaspora and host societies. He is a member of Carnegie's Civic Research Network, an international group of researchers analysing changes in global civil society. He is also a member of the editorial board of the Przegląd Polityczny periodical, a regular contributor to the Tygodnik Powszechny weekly, and a columnist for the monthly magazine Pismo. From 2012 to 2017, he was an assistant professor at the Institute of Sociology at the University of Warsaw, and from 2015 to 2017, he was director of publications at the Institute for Human Sciences in Vienna. His most recent publication is *Resisting the Illiberal turn in Poland, Slovenia, and Slovakia* (co-authors: Fedor Blaščák and Goran Forbici, Bratislava 2024).

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Civic activity in Poland in 2015–2023 – the years of the national-conservative United Right coalition – comprised not only successive mobilisations against government actions deemed to have violated democratic standards, but also built competence and resilience during major crises: the COVID-19 pandemic and mass migration triggered by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. These experiences – which culminated in record turnout in the parliamentary elections on 15 October 2023, and the United Right government's fall from power – changed and strengthened Polish civil society in many ways.
This analysis, based on interviews with civically engaged individuals and drawing on data from other social research, shows what these changes consist of and what their consequences may be for citizens' trust in the Polish state and their readiness to self-organise in the future.

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