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The Fourth Sector as a Response to the (In)Action of a Soft Authoritarian State? An Activist-Researcher Trialogue on Civic Experiences in Poland, 2015-2023

The following triologue is the result of an invitation from the Editorial Board of “Ars Educandi” to speak on civic responses to an authoritarian state. Our (triple) experience related to our academic activities, research work and social engagement allows us to look at the issue from both academic and activist perspectives. We have chosen the issue of civic activism undertaken in the face of state inactivity or as resistance against actions that restrict civil rights to be the main topics of the conversation. The discussion takes place in relation to the difficult (and at the same time extremely interesting from the research standpoint) civic experience of 2015–2023, the time of the United Right government. The backdrop of our conversation include radical changes in abortion law and women’s opposition to authoritarian state action; the COVID-19 pandemic and the mass experience of civic resistance; the refugee crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border; and the full-scale war in Ukraine and mass migration to Poland. Although these are different events, the common element is the authoritarian policy of the Polish state in the face of issues that had the potential to trigger a culture war, moral panic or political crisis, and the curtailment of civil rights.

Our triologue illustrates a series of research and activist dilemmas that *a posteriori* demonstrate the agency of active citizens and citizens, but also the aspirations of state power to take control (if only narratively) of events that have heavily involved

the public in the recent years. Also relevant to the context of this discussion is the fact that authoritarian tendencies are not solely dependent on the outcome of elections, but are the result of a certain social logic based on populism and the management of public emotions. In October 2024 –when we are having this conversation –we see that the topic of migration and refugees is once again, not only in Poland, becoming a tool of mobilization and social antagonization, and human rights continue to be questioned.

We invite you to read our trialogue, as well as the resulting polemic, in the pages of “Ars Educandi”.

Paweł Rudnicki: We are meeting to talk about the practices of the authoritarian state in recent years using the example of the so-called “Law and Justice state”, i.e. the rule of the United Right from 2015-2023. But this is not the only topic, because the response to the authoritarian actions of the state comprised of a numerous examples of civic activism and engagement, the likes of which we have not experienced in Poland for a long time, and some of us may have been participants in such resistance for the first time in our lives. Having long discussed the situation of authoritarian practices of power and civic responses to them, and also having conducted research on engagement on the social side, we came to the working conclusion that we were dealing with a new quality in social action. We provisionally referred to this *novelty* as the “fourth sector”. Contemporary practices of civic engagement became part of our research on education. This is basically where I would like to start our trialogue. How do we understand this category, how do we embed it over time? How does it relate to both the actions of those in power and civic activities? How do you remember these two-sided activities? What can you tell us about them?

Monika Popow: I would like to start by expressing a doubt that we should focus solely on the years 2015-2023, which, in my opinion, only constitute the result of processes that have been occurring earlier. We should be wary of creating the myth of an ideal democratic society before the period of the United Right government. The grassroots mobilization we are supposed to be talking about is the result of both our national circumstances and broader global phenomena. An important context, in my view, is also the narrative about the crisis of democracy, widely spread in Europe and the US. Ivan Krastev argues that there is a crisis of democratic reformism, meaning a decline in the belief that democracy implemented in small steps will eventually bring change. Political demands speak of change to come immediately. Krastev writes about the “narratives of the last man” illustrating this by conflating the arguments of climate activists with the right-wing message of the end of Western prosperity. Such positioning of the issue makes the recipient see no alternative, while at the same instilling them with the conviction that governments remain passive in the face of threats. The sense of unfulfilled political demands causes mobilization, as Ernesto Laclau wrote. Polarization, but also mobilization, are

reactions to frustration. My impression is that our civic activism in the face of crises grows out of similar frustrations – and a lack of trust that the state will respond. I therefore ask whether we should focus exclusively on these eight years, or whether we should rather talk about post-transformation society, which over the years has been subjected not only to different types of regimes, but also to waxing and waning liberal and authoritarian pressures, taking into account the fact that modern neo-authoritarianism is different than before, although it is a global phenomenon.

Marta Gontarska: I was thinking about this 2015-2023/2024 period and I thought about my biographical experience. First of all, I wasn't doing any research in 2015, I was a committed global educator, activist, social activist, and I'm trying to remember the moment of reaction to this political change made by the third sector of NGOs in which I was active or with which I was working at that time. I remember one such situation, when in the election campaign, the topic of migration and refugees was heavily exploited negatively in the context of people in the Mediterranean. And I remember that it was a personal, difficult moment for me. At the time, I was conducting trainings for the Buy Responsibly Foundation on responsible consumption, and everyone needed to talk about migration and the fear associated with people who would show up in their communities, and the emotions it evokes. And they entered the training room with all the emotions, stereotypes and prejudices fueled by the narrative of the Law and Justice Party election campaign. This was also the moment when NGOs involved in global or anti-discrimination education realized that they were not doing enough preventive work in this area, that they were not preparing the public – engaged in global issues or open to diversity – for such a situation. Educational work on attitudes and values had to start anew, so to speak.

Secondly, I remember a period of uncertainty and pondering whether this would definitely be a restriction of freedom and what it meant for our environment. My second memory is related to the fact that in 2016, Deputy Prime Minister Piotr Gliński organized a major conference on the new opening of civil society. A few weeks earlier, Prime Minister Beata Szydło had removed European Union flags from official buildings. And at this new opening of civil society there were organizations that were already very different, with different views, diverse in subject matter, there were also many organizations that were not supportive of the government, but were observing the situation. We also were invited there. I remember a moment when we talked about civic education and I spoke about global education and global citizenship. In the time allotted for questions from the floor, I got one very pertinent one: how do I feel as an educator who talks about the global community against a background of only red and white flags. This question actually needed no comment, I knew that the topics I dealt with were not welcome in this space.

These two situations show quite clearly that I was not ready for this change, both narratively and politically. I probably also gave it too much credit at the beginning.

Paweł Rudnicki: I would like to go back to the perspective that Monika outlined. The last thirty-odd years, basically the post-transformation decades, have

already shown us in a fairly broad historical perspective that we are always neo-conservatively and neoliberally oriented. Regardless of whether the left, right or radical right is in power, this style of thinking and acting in the mainstream does not fundamentally change. After 1989, there was no possibility of discussing other solutions, because the market was paramount and the values that were supposed to support that market are conservative by default, albeit with varying degrees of that conservatism.

On the other hand, *à propos* of what Marta said: I am beginning to see a change in the attitude of the state to different situations, of course, in the context of what happens on the so-called street. When the war in Iraq was going on, there were all sorts of demonstrations (I'm talking about the early years of the 21st century). I recall such anti-war activities, where there were more banners than people who could hold them. And I remember exactly such a demonstration, where I myself held two or three. Probably if someone had taken a picture of me, I would have looked oddly, like an activist so committed that he has to hold three boards at the same time to express everything he wants to say. And the truth was much more mundane – I simply had no one to give them to.

And this change in perspective that I noticed was that the streets began to fill up with protesters. People had lots of slogans painted on cardboard boxes, and there were even people to carry them! Manifestations became quite popular during those eight years. In this context, I am reminded of a class at the university when, having been asked about the experience of participating in some demonstration, only myself and a few people in the large hall raised their hands – some of the oldest students still remembering the late 1980s. I asked the same question quite recently and basically everyone raised their hands. In the field of Pedagogy, the vast majority of students had the experience of participating in a street protest. It was mass participation – everyone could find a reason to protest that worked for them personally. This is a big change! A whole new generation, referred to as “Generation Z” has been better represented and although they have taken to the streets for different reasons, they had that experience nonetheless. In fact, these last eight years have launched us socially, engaged us. Or rather this involvement was simply forced! The United Right government “encouraged” people to take to the streets. At the same time, those social emotions, known by a large part of people from history books, family stories or urban legends, were unlocked. The oppression caused by those in power triggered mass discourses of resistance and civic action in the streets. People of different generations, with different views, began to appear at protests, demonstrating on many issues, but united by the opposition to authority. This was intersectional civil resistance, that is, resistance that unites not only because of the interests of particular groups, but also has a broader message. It was about changing the power and narrative of the mainstream, stopping, as it may sound, the conservative revolution.

Monika Popow: I have the impression that we as a society are not bound by the same social contract, that is, we have not agreed on what values are important to us in thinking about democracy. What mobilized the opposition in 2023 – human rights, women's rights, democratic order – is understood differently by different social groups. In 1989, we defined our civilizational affiliation, which involved the adoption of a democratic system and capitalism. This can be seen in education, where Polish civic discourses derive practically directly from Athenian democracy and the Roman Republic, and then from Western thinking about democracy. It is also interesting to note that despite our belief in a civilizational community, certain values – related, for example, to social diversity, minority rights or women's rights – are not an obvious part of that community. I remember a time when integration of migrants or women's rights were of no interest to Polish local governments at all. So what happened that made their discursive presence visible? The slogan "Women's Strike" has become mobilizing, although when the abortion compromise was made in the 1990s, this sphere of life was not mobilizing. Is this a change in a post-transformation society, in which the hierarchy of values and the perception of one's rights are also changing?

Paweł Rudnicki: I will immediately expand this theme to the practice of education about human rights in education and their application in civic activism. The subject of human rights appeared in various materials, and in general was present as a part of a school curriculum, where it was treated just like any other content, that is as something to be learned, graded and forgotten. Occasionally, in cases of schools open to cooperation with educating NGOs, there were opportunities to take advantage of programs dedicated to human rights knowledge in various approaches. These were valuable but rare situations, because the organizations were not able to reach all schools, and limited because this kind of third sector activity was considered undesirable in schools and ideologically hostile by successive education ministers from the United Right government. To put it bluntly: such educational cooperation was radically curtailed.

On the other hand, it seems to me that the communication situation related to the operation of social media, which I prefer to refer to as outreach media, because they don't so much build communities as reach out. These media, creating information bubbles, began to reach their audience groups quickly and effectively, created clearly defined messages, and easily mobilized audiences. In my opinion, they set in motion a whole lot of such flows of knowledge, awareness and encouragement to act. They simply brought people to the streets. Social or outreach media radically changed access to marginalized or absent knowledge in schools and spurred public participation. At a certain point, giving a thumbs up or sending a heart on social media was no longer enough and substantial action had to be taken. Online contributors also began to get realistically involved in the streets. And this is extremely interesting. This kind of hybrid activism somehow became popular, fashionable and necessary. This is where I see the beginning of what we can provisionally call

the “fourth sector,” which I define for my use as a hybrid action –taken online and in real space, focused on a specific goal, task or activity; informal, incidental and short-lived, that is, lasting as long as it takes to achieve the intended goal. This action is followed by the dispersal of the people who make up the group.

Marta Gontarska: I would still like to talk about this form of action, because this is also very interesting in the period we want to address, namely when at the very beginning there is this intensification and bringing people to the streets. A bit like Timothy Snyder advised in his book *On Tyranny. Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century* – to do politics in the physical sense, that is, just by taking to the streets. My impression is that this opposition channels itself in the streets, and there it manifests itself intergenerationally towards important topics, such as the independence of the courts or the foundations of democracy, but also women’s rights. For two terms, however, we see how protests lose their power and importance when the authorities absolutely disregard them, do not see these people, do not go out to talk to them, do not propose dialogue or agreement. In 2015, 2016, even 2020 the street was still mobilizing. Then, when it became clear that it was no longer a vehicle for influence, that it was no longer even a vehicle for the wider public, the street began to die down. Protest culture is pop culture for a while, and it fits in with the trends, as many people on social media show up at demonstrations, but it ceases to be a vehicle for political influence. Again, this begs the question: did it ever work in a neoliberal democracy, or was there just a consensus that it should work?

I think it was an illusion, but we tried it the old way and suddenly found that this kind of opposition doesn’t work. Then we stopped doing it, we looked for completely different ways of expression. Social movements are searching for different forms, much less spectacular, radical – like the Last Generation blockades. I think this change of form is also a significant observation and reflection. Was it the case before that politicians listened to protesters? I sincerely doubt it. On the other hand, we had the impression that taking to the streets gives us something, and this is related to the twilight of democracy or other, deeper crises, which we may come to in this conversation.

Paweł Rudnicki: I, on the other hand, would like to say that the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic changed the articulation of demands, forms of participation, and also activated the youngest generation. This pandemic-induced “hard stop” of our entire way of life and work forced a different way of communication and action. I remember the great Wrocław demonstration of November 2021 on women’s rights. Then lots of young people showed up despite the pandemic restrictions and the ban on public gatherings. The age category was a key aspect here. The small presence of middle-aged and senior citizens was explained by the fact that older people are much more likely to suffer from disease complications. Therefore, this category of youth won here. In the same way, the category of resistance and civil disobedience won. Mass disobedience, which has rarely happened in recent decades! Despite the pandemic restrictions at the time, several thousand

people took to the streets in Wrocław, several hundred thousand people protested all over Poland. The energy was incredible. The slogans painted on the cardboard signs that people had with them were outstanding and they provided blunt commentary on political realities. Public emotions were almost carnivalesque. I haven't seen such unity and action in resistance or such a large demonstration for many years. I thought at the time that only politicians and their ill-considered actions were capable of launching a protest of this scale. November, dark, cold, pandemic – and we go as a big demonstration, we protest!

Our civic presence on the streets in the last eight years has become something remarkably common. It actually had different dimensions, reasons, different generations were on the streets, other actions or forms of opposition were taken, but as a rule, we demonstrated very often! Over time, because of the frequency, there was less energy, but how long can you be in constant action, in constant resistance? Everyone had their own life. Besides, excess civic activity also wears participants down at some point and simply weakens commitment. Monika, what would you say about this topic?

Monika Popow: It seems to me that the forms of protest are different for different generations. Older generation defends democracy understood as an achievement of systemic change, the feminist movement continues to organize Manifa, and in the case of the young we are dealing with the inclusion of global discourses. I recall the protest in Gdańsk against police violence organized after the death of George Floyd or the global movement to defend Andrew Tate.

Marta Gontarska: It is interesting to see how, if only in the context of the Manifa you mentioned, the approach of civil society organizations to demonstrations has changed. This was a demonstration for rights, a pre-discussed, comprehensive formula, often intersectionally incorporating themes related to discrimination against women or having a strong emancipatory context (slogans such as "Enough exploitation, we give notice!" and others). The group first got together and established a catalog of values, rules, communication, definitions of terms, in a word: a whole common cultural code. Later, as the tension grew, the protests became contextual, caused by specific events, actions against women's rights, democracy or minority rights (the unpublished verdict, the Margot case from Stop Nonsense or many others). What is important is the *momentum*, that is, that burning dumpster that someone sets on fire for us and we run to extinguish it through protest, that is, a familiar form of action, expression of dissent. And it's this narrative shift that only protests against something and those organized in a very short period of time, in the moment of catching that fury, that anger, can really erupt. In such cases there are no long debates and discussions on the principles of cooperation or the collective process of determining meanings. There is only post-collective action. Groups convene thanks to technology for a specific reason, for a while to be together and see others who have the same ideas but not to create a movement or organization, because the faith in this form of association is very limited. This is a post-collective

or anti-collective formula for action, opposed to what we previously thought was the only appropriate method of protest, uniting groups and communities around values. With all due respect to the third sector, but these communities are built on different principles. Paul calls them short-lived communities, formed from the bottom up – as exemplified by the solidarity towards those with refugee experiences caused by the escalation of the war in Ukraine. To me, this is an illustration of a change we may want to define in a moment as the fourth sector. Organizations that write statutes around these values, their codes, the important things, are like the knights of a previous era, which doesn't have the resources to put out these burning dumpsters and be up to date, react quickly, have the right *online* and *offline* tools, and the competence within the team or group. Reactivity, speed, dynamism, short-termism have become the new definition of civil society of this period. Less interested in deliberation, more in quick action.

Paweł Rudnicki: I would like to address the three points you raised. They make up a whole to me. Actually, after this experience of helping Ukrainians and refugees on the Polish-Belarusian border, I am concerned with the differences in the approach of the authorities and similar civic actions, but on a different scale. However, I will start with the topic of reactive politics. First, let's look at the reactions of the authorities to migration crises. In the absence of a migration policy and, for some time, civil defense, the state has been unable to take effective action. An illiberal state with a strong bias toward authoritarianism is an institution acting reactively. Society, too, operates in this way. There were no plans for migration from the South and East – there were reactions. And they were different because of political and ideological issues. Government narratives in both cases were radically different: defense of the state against refugees on the Polish-Belarusian border and an open Polish-Ukrainian border. The lack of an action policy, contingency plans and a functioning civil defense is the basis for the lack of meaningful action in general. As a result, people, that is, society or communities, act instead of the state.

Second, short-termism. You said that the time of statutes and formal civic associations is over. I concur. majority of registered organizations are inactive. They were formed to deal with a single issue, for a specific purpose, and after its realization (or lack thereof) they ceased to function, although formally they are still present in the National Court Register. Activities on behalf of refugees, both from Ukraine and those hiding in the forests on the Polish-Belarusian border, show new forms of social activity. This is a short-term, intensive activity, involving people with a real interest in helping. It is not burdened with formal undertakings related to registration, conducting formalities, as in the case of NGOs, or at least a basic knowledge of the law in this area. Specifically, it's just emotion, spontaneity and willingness to take action. This second strand of difference is precisely the short-term/temporary nature.

And the third issue is target orientation. Short-term groups work on behalf of whoever realistically needs help. If it's refugees on the border, there's a group

of people who start acting, get visibility through the outreach media, receive financial support and carry out specific tasks. They are such, let's say, "Polish conscience" working in the spirit of civil disobedience or subversive humanism. When the state's helplessness was encased in propaganda and approval of violence against refugees, citizens were triggered. On the border with Belarus, individuals from the Border Group, exposing themselves to legal consequences, undertook relief activities for refugees. This is how they implemented the formula of subversive humanism. Helping and acting to preserve people's lives is more important than the ideology of the state and its authoritarian practices. Another thing is that when it was necessary to help Ukrainians, we civically organized ourselves much faster than the state apparatus. That is to say, the state was present in many areas, and it certainly took action, but in places of particular importance for welcoming refugees, such as transit hubs like Wrocław's Central Station, it was the action of a group formed *on an ad hoc* basis that triggered mass civic assistance. Over time, it developed into an alternative aid system that was based on the volunteer work of more than 4,000 people. It was we as citizens who were en masse in places where someone needed to be taken in, provide food, emergency medical assistance, find temporary shelter or arrange transportation. When I was a volunteer-researcher at the Central Station, I got to know and study this form of action very well.

And these three categories – responsiveness, informality and short duration – moved us to completely new forms of cooperation. That is, we act wherever the state does not act or prohibits action, guided by partisan interests. And we have such examples of social activity in difficult situations. However, I must emphasize the inalienable role of the coverage media here. It is them, and in fact the profiles on them, that have helped self-organization, crisis management, and real-time aid organization and management. Without the communication opportunities created by the new media, there would have been no chance to organize effectively, to gain broad support, to get resources for action. Yes, they have radically changed the form of grassroots action. They have also given me personally the conviction that for such purposes they are an excellent community building tools. I'll admit that for me, this is an encouraging reflection from the experience I had at the Wrocław Central Station.

Monika Popow: I will add two comments. First, the issue of the lack of reference to the organizational structure of the state. In societies with a firmly established knowledge of the structure of the state organism, the reaction is based on reference to existing state institutions. In ours, this sense of structure was, as Jan Sowa wrote, phantom, so the reaction also does not refer to any structure, it is a bottom-up mobilization of available forces. The second issue is the conscience of the nation. When I interviewed volunteers in 2022, that is, after the outbreak of a full-scale war, people told me that they helped for many reasons, but among them was the need to show that we, Poles, are good. Since the state does not react fast enough, and also does not represent the values we think it should represent,

we save the situation and the conscience of the whole nation. It seems to me that despite the whole aspect of doing good, there is a nationalistic element in this that is strongly mobilizing for action. However, this mobilization is also characterized by the fact that it burns out quickly.

Paweł Rudnicki: The main narrative regarding such aid is usually romanticized, mythologized, and survives as an urban legend in a thousand versions. That's what we had in Wrocław after the 1997 flood. There's nothing wrong with that in terms of personal memories, but it shouldn't obscure the real position of the state and how it (didn't) work.

Monika Popow: It is also important to what extent the experience of mobilization is built on public trust. It is striking to me that the issue of changes affecting the functioning of the third sector in 2015-2023 did not prove to be mobilizing for us as a civil society.

The degree of trust in the organized civil sector, i.e. associations and foundations, is low, and they are often treated as structures for raising funds, but not as a form of action. The fact that we have had a Law on Associations for more than thirty years has not in any way strengthened confidence in these structures. At the same time, it seems that the idea of citizenship, collective action, and social ethics is more strongly present today than during the period of political transformation and the creation of a formal framework for citizen activism.

Paweł Rudnicki: Perhaps this is the new solidarity?

Monika Popow: At the same time, this new solidarity or social energy are dangerous categories, because they can serve social management.

Marta Gontarska: I also see the connection between the forms of action we are talking about and post-collectivity as an effect of how new technologies affect us. Social topics, however, are quickly go up in smoke in social media, losing relevance and urgency. And then something else takes center stage, produces new content, and then also disappears. Again, I'll come back to the metaphor of a trashcan being set on fire, but this is an idea that campaign organizations based on *online* petitions and urgent appeals. Because these are not big things that require years of thought and strategy. In this case it was just a burning dumpster, we ran to put the fire out, because then we feel threatened seeing the smoke and feeling the smell, but a moment later we were somewhere else. This is the key question, however: doesn't this hot-headedness and willingness to act come from the way we observe information and the way we act? Because looking in turn at the – already somewhat historical – research I have done on social movements, those organizations and groups that tried to discuss with a tenacity worthy of a greater cause all the topics related to values, codes, creating their structures, new culture or regeneration culture did not survive until the end of these discussions about the issues most important to them, because they conflicted, fell apart or became disillusioned by inaction. These collectives went through crises earlier, before they settled down, constituted themselves and began to act regularly. It is also possible that the because

of the technological change and differences in the reception of information we no longer have in us the readiness for long-lasting agreements, but need dynamics and short-term, quick interactions followed by breakups without regrets, traumas and conflicts.

Monika Popow: Digital participation is a global phenomenon, observed today during many crises. At the same time, it can be an incidental, random participation with no specific values behind it, happening more on the principle of herd action, because that's how things are done in my information bubble. It's easy to donate to a collection, and at the same time feel like you've done something good. Nor would I be so quick to dismiss, as Anne Applebaum's latest book does, the issue of ideologies – especially those based on nationalism – in mobilizing social groups. Populism built on radical distinction from someone else, be it LGBT people or migrants, still has a lot of power. Virtually every European country currently has some kind of authoritarian tendencies, which are often shaped by the fear that some other society will come along and play a dominant role. It is therefore a fear of the Other. In this case, too, we are dealing with short-term mobilizations. I think that the key question seems to be: are they based on similar mechanisms of social organizing as those we have discussed in the context of civil society mobilizations? If so, this mechanism, which we highlight as new forms of social organization, can have both a positive, civic face and a populist face. And, in my opinion, it is important to notice the instability and fluidity of these mechanisms.

For several years I have been accompanied by a question that Tomasz Szkudlarek asked during a discussion on the “pedagogy of shame”: what happened that we stopped being polite? The old divisions between pro-democracy and right-wing-populist movements no longer work, today we are already talking about the dynamics of social movements and anti-movements. I see forces that are uplifting, but also destructive and based on populism, so from my perspective it is difficult to talk about new forms of civil society organization, because anti-social movements can also mobilize in a similar way.

Paweł Rudnicki: We touched on a number of interesting and important subjects regarding the policies of the authoritarian state and social responses to exclusionary, marginalizing and generally violence-based practices. We talked about our civic experiences and research in the context of grassroots action. I find these transformations in activism extremely interesting research-wise. I would like to ask you at the end of this dialogue about what you as researchers have learned in recent years. What are your key reflections in the areas of pedagogy, the scientific discipline we practice?

Monika Popow: I've learned that today, when studying civil society, you have to be sensitive to the transformations and fluctuations of social mobilization, so I'm now interested in where the social sense of agency is built, but also where the public and the common are constructed. Here I would see a counterweight to authoritarian tendencies.

Marta Gontarska: I have two thoughts, both of which are quite bitter from the perspective of both a researcher and an activist. Looking at my research on social movements completed two years ago with my doctoral defense, I see that they already present historical knowledge. Each of the three movements discussed is in a very different situation, some are also in the process of annihilation or identity crisis. Pedagogy is rarely hosted in these places, and researchers are still late with their diagnoses. As an activist, I only incidentally feel that researchers and scholars support social change. In recent years, I have not so much learned as I painfully experienced that, however, these are two different, hermetically sealed worlds that, although they share ideas, they do not unite even when facing the specter of authoritarian rule or the announcement of the suspension of the realization of human rights. And like one of my interlocutors, I would like academics to fight along with activists for a better world, not only on paper, but also shoulder to shoulder in protest.

Paweł Rudnicki: Thank you very much for the meeting, the conversation, the opportunity to bounce thoughts. I hope that our dialogue will generate discussion, perhaps polemics. I hope to broaden our perspective on the experience of the past eight years and to look critically at the next government, which so far is not proposing better solutions to the issues we discussed. This is because we do not see effective actions or even attempts to act to change the abortion law. Still the issue of the refugee crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border has not been resolved, people continue to die there! There is also no draft migration policy, and the ideas of those in power to withhold the right to asylum in Poland can hardly be assessed other than as radical populism and a cause for international scandal. As a citizen, this does not fill me with encouragement, to put it mildly.

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Abstract

The article analyzes the reaction of civil society to authoritarian practices of the state in Poland in 2015–2023. The authors introduce the concept of the “fourth sector” as a form of short-term, hybrid mobilization combining activity in the digital space with direct actions.

The stages of the transformation of civic engagement are presented: from mass demonstrations of women and pride marches, through spontaneous aid to refugees on the eastern border, to protests involving thousands of people during the COVID-19 pandemic. The role of mass media in rapid self-organization was emphasized, as was the risk of populist movements exploiting fears of “the Other.” The authors point to insufficient institutional trust in the third sector and gradual social fatigue resulting from constant responses to successive crises. In conclusion, the authors emphasize the need for pedagogical reflection on the dynamics of social change and the contribution of scientific research to supporting the sustainable development of democratic structures.

Keywords

fourth sector, hybrid mobilization, civil protests, digital activism, activist burnout

Marta Gontarska – trainer and spokesperson for critical global and anti-discrimination education. PhD in pedagogy, in 2021–2023 she collaborated with the University of Lower Silesia DSW in Wrocław, where she conducted research on social movements. Since the 2023/2024 academic year, she has been collaborating with the Department of Theater and Media Arts and the HAT Research Center at the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, where she teaches classes on socially engaged projects.

She is a qualitative researcher collaborating with international organizations and institutions, including CARE International, Save the Children, and the International Rescue Committee (2023–2024), and Concord Europe (2024). For over 20 years, she has been active in the non-governmental sector as an expert on human rights, development cooperation, and global social justice. She cooperates with many organizations in Poland and abroad, including Akcja Demokracja, Grupa Zagranica, Fundacja Edukacja dla Demokracji, Towarzystwo Edukacji Antydyskryminacyjnej, Fundacja Rozwoju Demokracji Lokalnej, and Fundacja Rozwoju Systemów Informacyjnych.

Paweł Rudnicki – PhD, educator, political scientist, professor at the Faculty of Applied Studies at the University of Lower Silesia DSW, with over 20 years of experience in conducting engaged educational research with a qualitative orientation. His main areas of research include critical educational studies, intervention research, self-organisation in crisis situations, activism and work with minority groups.

In his research, he explores the educational dimensions of NGOs and informal groups, combining critical pedagogy, global education, anti-discrimination education, and human rights. He is a co-founder of the EMCE (Education and Migration in Central Europe) research group. Since June 2024, he has been a member of the Wrocław Education Council. He cooperates with non-governmental organizations in the field of global and anti-discrimination education.

Monika Popow – education researcher, educator. Her research interests include the social and cultural aspects of the learning process, school culture, and discourse analysis. In 2024, she was a fellow at The Leibniz Institute for Educational Media, where she carried out a project on school learning in the post-digital knowledge society. For over ten years, she

has been involved in the Gdańsk NGO community, carrying out tasks in the field of socially engaged artistic activity and cultural education. She works at the Naval Academy in Gdynia.