Rocking the small-town boat: Black Protest activists in small and provincial Polish cities

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Abstract: How it is to be an activist in a small or provincial town? Are the structural challenges the activists face the same as their counterparts from big cities, that are usually studied and described in academic literature? If the environment is different, do small town activists adopt other practices to cope with the challenges that stem from the different milieu they operate in? In this paper we try to answer some of those questions by looking at the organizers of Black Protests in provincial Polish cities in 2016 and afterwards. The protests organized to oppose the intended changes in the already repressive anti-abortion law not only surprised everybody with their scale and intensity, but also with their distribution, as majority of the protest events took place in small and provincial towns in Poland. This article aims at filling the gap within the social movement studies literature between analysis of activism in big cities (upon which majority of theories are constructed) and of rural activism.

Keywords: feminism, small-town activism, Poland

There were also comments that a woman should sit at home and not yell the market square.
One of the interviewees on traditional gender roles in Poland.

Introduction

Monday, October 3rd was a special day in Poland. On this day, tens of thousands of people (mostly women) went out to the streets to protest against an attempt to tighten the already restrictive law on abortion in Poland. The campaign that culminated in Black Monday aimed at forcing the authorities to withdraw from their plans, and has also changed the landscape of Polish social movements. Although the electoral victory of the conservative Law and Justice party in 2015 – both in presidential and parliamentary elections; in the latter the party secured an absolute majority in the parliament – has triggered new waves of protests, approximately doubling the numbers of people on Polish streets[1], Black Monday was special for a number of reasons. What surprised many observers and academics within the Black Protest was the distribution of protest events throughout the country. Apart from demonstrations in big cities[2] numerous protest events were held in smaller towns in provincial Poland. As Ogólnopolski Strajk Kobiet (The All-Polish Women's Strike, one of the key groups in the described mobilization) writes on their Facebook page: *We are a grass-roots, independent social movement of pissed-off women and intelligent [in Polish "rozumny"] men supporting us. We are protesting and are active for women's rights, democracy, Poland for all, mobilizing in over 150 cities in Poland – 90% of those are cities of less than 50,000 inhabitants and this is our greatest strength and pride* [1]. Police sources indicated that 143 protest events were held with a cumulative participation of 98,000 people. However, according to the CBOS public opinion agency, 3% of the population took part in the protest, and 52% supported it (58% among those who have heard of the campaign)[2]. The hashtag #CzarnyProtest was the most popular hashtag on the Polish internet in 2016, and according to Brand24 it had 44 million interactions.

The goal of this article is to present the social, political, and cultural environment of the small town activists, using the interviews with organizers of Black Protests in their hometowns. Despite growing literature on the topic of Black Protests (often coming from the activists themselves, see Korolczuk 2016; Murawska and Włodarczyk 2016; Król and Pustułka 2018; Chmielewska et.al. 2017; Czarnacka 2016, 2018; Kowalska et. al. 2018), its spillover and spillout, and its meaning for the reinvigoration of the Polish feminist movement, there is a vast and surprising gap in social movements' literature that deals with small-town activism. By analyzing

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[1] Or at least this is the case for Warsaw, see http://serwis.mamprawowiedziec.pl/analiza/2017/08/zgromadzenia-w-warszawie.html [access 09/02/2019]

[2] Over 500,000 inhabitants, the usual arena of grassroots protests, sometimes indicated as a characteristic feature for Central and Eastern European social movements, see Piotrowski 2015

the environment in which the activists in small towns organized and staged protests in 2016 and how their engagement has continued and developed over time (such as participation in an electoral campaign before the 2018 local elections), we want to fill this gap. By reviewing social movement literature, we discovered that there is very little written on small town activism that is located between activism in big towns (which are the usual arena of activism) and rural activism. Our assumption is that activism in provincial towns has to be different than in the metropolis, thus one of the key goals of this paper is to define the characteristics of such activism and of provincial small towns as an arena for this activism. Also, by providing empirical material we want to contribute to a more general picture and a better understanding of the Polish women's and feminist movements in recent years.

The structure of this article is as follows: firstly, we define key terms and concepts and embed our study within the tradition of social movement studies. We use concepts that refer to *structural opportunities* and, in particular, the discursive interpretation of the concept that looks at the positive reception of the political program, claims and goals and the ability to introduce the narrative into the mainstream discourse. Later we describe the methodological details of the conducted study, the context of the Polish social movement milieu with a particular focus on women's and feminist movements. The next section discusses in detail the outcomes of the fieldwork and presents the findings of our inductive study, which recreates the nature of women's activism in provincial Poland. This part is divided into three sections: (1) issues that we find specific to small-town activism; (2) issues that are present throughout the society, but in small towns are much more amplified; and (3) we also look at activists' strategic and tactical efforts to overcome structural challenges, in particular those connected to communicating their claims. The final sections discuss the findings and conclude the paper.

Theoretical framework

Researchers of social movements have theorized about social movements as a whole, identity formation, and social transformations (Touraine's works; Melucci 1996); investigated complex network structures in relation to strategies and identities (Diani and McAdam 2003); stressed the crucial role of organizations in mobilizing people into collective action (McCarthy and Zald 1977); and studied series of protest events from a political approach perspective (Tilly 1978, 1986; Tarrow 1989). This does not mean that scholars have completely neglected micro-level analysis, as the individual's involvement in social movements has been studied from a micro-sociological perspective (Blumer 1971; Turner and Killian 1987; Gurr 1970) by emphasizing various phases of the socialization process, pointing to protestors' "structural availability" and "cognitive frames" (McAdam 1988; 1989), or looking at the interactions between protestors, social movements activities, and public authorities (della Porta 1995). If these studies focusing

also on the individual level have used qualitative methods such as in-depth interviews and life histories (della Porta 2014a; 2014b), which provide us with an intensive understanding of the individuals involved in order to draw more generalized conclusions from the empirical findings.

The above-mentioned research, however, has in general focused on big cities activism, whether the analysis is done at the national level or at the local one. Though those studies report obstacles to micro-mobilization processes, activism was analyzed in the context of the reach of political opportunities, organizational resources, urban political milieu, big universities and generally characterized by well-articulated civil societies. Small town activists clearly face harder obstacles, but at the same time they can rely on a different set of opportunities and resources based on stronger interpersonal ties and informal relationships with targets, opponents and authorities. Moreover, with the development of ICTs and social media in particular, activists from small towns can take part in bigger campaigns, but still be challenged with the provincial characteristics of their collective action fields.

In order to stage protests, movements also need a capacity to *mobilize resources*, personal as well as economical, both within their own networks and from external actors (McAdam, McCarthy and Zald 1996, 3). Furthermore, using the concept of *frames*, it is possible to conceive of movement actors as "signifying agents, actively engaged in the production and maintenance of meaning for constituents, antagonists, and bystanders or observers" (Snow and Benford 2000, 613). Thus, frames organize experiences and guides action (Benford et al. 1986). This borders on the concept of *cognitive praxis* (Eyerman and Jamison 1991), through which social movements are seen as expressions of underlying societal tensions. Through their cognitive praxis, social movements both analyze and aim to resolve the tensions of a specific society. This often takes the form of *protest* as a way to highlight specific social tensions in conflictual forms.

For the purpose of this article, we define social movements as informal networks based on shared beliefs and solidarity, which mobilize about conflictual issues, through the frequent use of various forms of protest based on a seminal text by della Porta and Diani (2007, 16–17). The activities constituting the movement are often staged through more formal organizations as well as partly organized groups, which often make up nodes and actors within these - sometimes loose - networks. Thus, social movement research commonly studies not only contentious activities such as demonstrations or riots, but also the people, groups and organizations taking part in and shaping these activities (Melucci 1996, Graeber 2009 to mention some examples). In this regard, the Black Protests fulfill all the points of the definition and therefore should be regarded as a campaign of a social movement. However, our interviewees represent a specific cluster of the activists due to their place of residence and action.

For many of the activists, Black Monday was the first protest they participated in, and has shaped their future activism. In social movement literature, this is often dubbed a "transformative event". Transformative events are, in this theoretical framework, not only the emergence of an "innovative contentious action" (McAdam 2003, 293), but also connected to a "collective interpretation" that reads "new understandings" of changing structures through experiments in collective action (McAdam and Sewell Jr. 2001, 119–120; Sewell Jr. 2005, 244–248). The meaning of such events can over time become "relatively fixed" and act as a reference in both the staging and interpretation of similar protest events in the future, thus becoming part of a relatively stable repertoire of contention (Sewell Jr. 2005, 243). Sewell is concerned with pivotal historical moments, like the birth of a modern concept of revolution after the taking of the Bastille. Andrés Brink Pinto and Johan Pries (2017) have expanded this concept, applying it to the history of the antifascist movement in Scandinavia, and referring to the movement's memory and broadly understood political culture. We find the concept of transformative events can be analytically useful at a micro level, shaping activists' future choice of types of groups, used repertoires, and political sympathies. Apart from a few of the interviewees over 60that were active in the 1980s in the Solidarność movement (but later stopped being involved in any forms of political activism), Black Monday was the first time they went out to the streets and joined a protest.

All forms of social movement activities need to be understood in relation to the social context in which they take place, and in relation to the structural or institutional openings or closures – the *political opportunity structures* – that movements confront. The relative openness, or lack of openness, in different polities can elucidate what facilitates or constrains the emergence, expansion, composition, and possible success of social movements and collective action in general (c.f. McAdam 1996; Tarrow 1998). This can be analyzed through highlighting factors such as the closure/openness of the institutionalized system, the stability of elite alignment within the polity, the presence of elite allies and the state's capacity and propensity for repression (McAdam 1996, 27), but also more cultural structural factors (Gamson & Meyer 1996).

Since the late 1990s, more academic attention has been given to the cultural context in which movements operate. This has, for instance, resulted in the emergence of the concept of discursive opportunity structures (Koopmans and Statham 1999), which emphasize that the ideas that the broader political culture deems to be "sensible", "realistic", or "legitimate" significantly affect whether movements can get support for their "collective action framing" (Ibidem). In summary, "discursive opportunity structures reveal that cultural elements in the broader environment facilitate and constrain successful social movement framing" (McCammon 2013). When it comes to self-positioning within the political spectrum, discursive opportunities seem to have a pivotal role in the process and remain the core structural challenge

for social movements' ideological self-positioning. This seems to be a particularly important issue for social movements operating in a discursive field that is hostile to the movements (i.e. ideologically). In this case, the discursive opportunities for the movement are closed and activists face serious challenges in order to get their messages through. The activists try to strategically and tactically overcome these structural challenges, mostly by trying to impose their framing of the diagnosis of the problem and offering solutions in line with their own framing.

Using the concept of *frames*, we conceive of movement actors as "signifying agents, actively engaged in the production and maintenance of meaning for constituents, antagonists, and bystanders or observers" (Snow and Benford 2000, 613). Thus, frames organize experiences and guide actions (Benford et al. 1986). Many scholars examine carefully the processes of framing and the frames used by a movement. What we see as a novelty and an approach worth pursuing is to view culture as a set of practices, and focus on its performative aspects, which seems to be valid in collective action studies. The advantage of the anthropological approach is the empowerment of the subjects of the research that allows them the possibility to speak about themselves, instead of a constructivist approach that generates categories from the outside. In particular, we are looking at the *frame alignment* process, in which activists try to discursively link their claims with the so-called master frames that exist within a society and mainstream discourse.

Finally, some of the structural challenges are not connected to the discursive, political, cultural or economic opportunities but also stem from the nature of small towns. This purely structural (in the Marxist understanding of the term) challenge is connected to the limited number of spaces in which activists of small towns can exercise their political involvement. In social movement literature, this was conceptualized by Francesca Polletta who put an emphasis on the importance of space and spatiality and distinguished between three main areas according to their relationship with the social movements. These are: *Transmovement spaces*, which may be organizations or networks of activists that play a role in the scene, providing training for traffic, or offering their resources; *Indigenous Spaces* are spaces and places that already exist, but they are not initially involved in political activities, be it bars where activists, local groups and organizations hang out, and where they make room for lectures and meetings with people invited by the movement, as well as addressed to wider audiences; and *Prefigurative spaces* are deliberately created by the movement to express opposition to the surrounding world. This category includes, for example, squats or illegally occupied empty buildings used by activists as the centre of their activities (Polletta 1999, 9–10). Connected to this is the small scale of the so-called "scene". It describes a place where people meet, listen to music, meet other people who are not a politicized part of the movement – for example, artists sympathetic to social movements (Piotrowski 2017, 69). The distinction in terms between belonging to a scene or a

movement is problematic to define. As Leach and Haunss write: "the transition between core members and those less integrally involved is fluid, as is the transition between members and non-members. Neither the boundaries of a scene nor its membership criteria can be determined from the outside" (Leach and Haunss 2009, 259).

Methods

Empirically, our paper relies on 24 in-depth interviews conducted between July 11th and August 21st 2018 with activists that organized demonstrations and other events during the Black Protest in 2016. Organizing and staging a protest was a key characteristic as we were looking not only for people that were active in October 2016, but were also active long after (this is especially critical considering that for almost all of them, Black Monday was an entry point into political and social activism or an event that triggered their decision to return to activism). At times, in the case of "action research" and "militant ethnography" (for elaboration on these concepts, see Juris 2008), as the border between the researcher and the objects of the research becomes blurred, the deeper the understanding of the processes that take place within a social movement along with access to crucial information and data. In the case of this project, two points need to be mentioned. Firstly, one of the authors was involved in the movement and had an opportunity to meet some of the interviewees in person and learn from their experience firsthand. Secondly, it is also worth noting that the author conducting the interviews is a woman, which should reduce the bias in the interviews coming from prejudices generated by gender bias (this is a topic of academic methodological discussion since the late 1960s, see Colombotos et. al. 1968, Schaeffer et. al. 2010)

The interviewees were recruited through networks of feminist activists, during meetings and workshops organized for and by women's networks, and occasionally a snowballing technique was introduced. Due to the grassroots nature of this research project and the complete lack of funding associated with it, the research was conducted after working hours: the majority of the interviews were conducted over the phone and 5 of the interviews were conducted in person (in a total of 14 cities: Słupsk, Elbląg, Sochaczew, Węgorzewo, Gryfin, Puławy, Siemiatycze, Sanok, Czarnków, Gorzów Wielkopolski, Piła, Złotów, Sławno, Szczecinek).

To our surprise, at some point the information about this research started spreading among social networks and social media and some of the interviewees contacted us and offered their help. The women interviewed were all active and living in cities either below 50,000 inhabitants, or some bigger ones (such as Elbląg, Słupsk) for which the respondents pointed to their provincial character. Moreover, these cities were rather distanced from major towns (over 500,000 inhabitants, usually provincial capitals). Age-wise, the interviewed women ranged

from their late 20s to their late 60s. We offered anonymity to the respondents and they rejected it, although some of them mentioned living in fear because of being threatened or even physically attacked by far right-wingers or having their phones tapped by the police. Such incidents, mentioned in numerous interviews conducted, clearly show the closure of the Political Opportunity Structures available to the activists studied.

The interviews lasted between 40 minutes and over two hours and occasionally became very emotional. During the semi-structured biographical interviews, two clusters of questions were asked: one to recreate the small-town environment in which the activists functioned, and the second about how this experienced shaped their post-2016 activism. In the first cluster, we particularly asked about the interviewees' family and political backgrounds (that allowed us to implement a class analysis into the article) and asked about the features of the environment in which they were active, how the protests were received and changed the small-town environments. We also asked about the broadly understood movement's dynamics; ties and cooperation with activists from large towns; help or lack thereof and what support have the small town activists been able to count on? For the purpose of this article, we have chosen the top three most frequently recurring topics (each divided into 2-3 more precise categories) and focused on the responses that characterized the environment of small towns. This comes from the inductive research model we adapted because despite personal connections to some activists by one of the authors, the area of study – small-town and provincial activism in Poland – was unknown to us. In addition, the interview guide (see Appendix A) was not only generally constructed but also treated as an indicator of directions of the interviews rather than a survey-style question sheet.

Most of the respondents had a university degree; in terms of economic status, the situation was more complex, with some of the interviewees running their own businesses or working in the service sector, often in companies independent from local authorities. As the respondents pointed out, it was the "older" feminist activists who were employed within the NGO sector that is often tied (through financing of projects) with local authorities, causing self-censorship and deradicalization of claims and repertoires. Summarizing all the features, the interviewed activists belonged to the middle or lower-middle class, a picture that is similar to other studies of Polish social movements. However, the impact of the socio-cultural context of a Polish province might change the expression of belonging to the middle class when compared to other contexts of residence. For most of the activists, the organizing events were the first time they went out to the streets. As one of the interviewees described it, prior to 2016 she was "a couch feminist", not engaging herself in any public and political activities, although having a rather "strong, feminist worldview". As all of the interviewees continued to be active (mostly in their own communities, although some of them were also active outside of their small-town environment), Black Monday can be regarded as a "transformative event" in their

biographies. And judging by the impact on social activism in Poland (in small, provincial towns), this category can be applied to micro as well as to mezzo levels of activism. However, the impact of the 2016 protests on the entire sector of the women's and feminist movements requires more time in order to be assessed properly.

The structural context of social activism in Poland

Previous analysis of social movements and civil society, in particular during the 1990s, has presented Central and Eastern European societies (Polish included) as demobilized, passive, and depoliticized. For some of the scholars (such as Howard 2003, Grzymski 2017 for an overview), low levels of political and social engagement were a direct result of the experience of living under the communist regime. From this perspective, the people of Central and Eastern Europe were forced to join associations and groups under communist times, and, as a reaction, they have moved towards family and friendship networks that allowed them to overcome the difficulties of living in communist countries. Later conceptualizations tried to modify the "weak civil society" narrative by introducing the concept of "transactional activism" (Tarrow and Petrova 2007), according to which groups of activists and organizations focus not on massive membership, but on inter-organizational exchanges of know-how, resources, and expertise (constituting the "transactions"). The more organized and institutionalized sector became "institutionalized" and "NGO-ized" (Jacobsson 2015) and thus detached from both grassroots activities and the rest of the political society. However, an increasing amount of literature is challenging these assumptions, pointing to rich and dense activist networks and campaigns, often in previously overseen areas, such as family-related activism (Korolczuk and Hryciuk 2016), urban activism (Polanska and Piotrowski 2015, 2016; Domaradzka and Wijkstrom 2016; Pluciński 2012), and right-wing activism (Płatek and Plucienniczak 2017). To some extent, this is a result of Western-centered social movement theories (a trend criticized by Gagyi 2013) and the use of categories and analytical tools developed while studying Western European and North American social movements and Western-generated concepts of politics, civil society, and democracy. Also, the growing political polarization of the Polish society expressed in deepening cleavages clearly visible after the 2015 presidential and parliamentary elections have resulted in a vast increase of street activities of grassroots actors.

Analysis

The above-mentioned issues are combined with other (limited) resources available for small-town activists (mostly economic, but also cultural) and *opportunity structures* that are often closed for the activists, which results from a traditional perception of gender roles, acceptable forms

of political involvement. These constrictions stem from two different roots: on the one hand, there are limitations that are connected to the political reality of the activists' work; on the other hand, there is the availability (or lack thereof) of social infrastructure. Small towns are lacking the usual social infrastructure that shapes social activism: universities, social centres, squats, cafes and the like. In this sense, one can speak about the opportunity infrastructures that are available (or not) for the movement.

1.   General characteristics of small-town activism

One of the first things we asked the respondents was to characterize the social, political, and cultural environment they are active in. Without additional suggestions, nearly all of them pointed out the "provincial characteristics of their towns", mentioning their size in the first place, but also noting the changing and changed demographics, mostly the aging of the local community:

> Because if there are 28,000 people [in the city], mostly retirees, […] those young people who are still here are those who finish school, […] most of them go abroad anyway (interview 2)

Another respondent characterized her city in the following manner:

> A sad city. Unfortunately, poorly managed, dug up, everywhere [it] is difficult to reach, people are frustrated. I find myself frustrated when I think about our city. Generally, this is a city of older people, although as I said, we have older people who always come, always, are at all manifestations, but there are a few of them (interview 7).

Others pointed to the lack of the cities' infrastructure that could be used by the activists: spaces available for the movement (as presented in the typology by Polletta mentioned above), and also the smaller variety of potential targets (recipients) of their protests:

> If you are in a large city, where there is a large academic and cultural center, then it draws people to other people […] and here they grow old and the city becomes depopulated. This is a city of pensioners (interview 14).

The above quote can be linked directly to categorizations of spaces that are available for social movement activists (see Polletta 1999). The lack of such spaces is a structural challenge that cannot, however, be overcome by the framing efforts of the activists, but definitely reduces the number of resources available to the activists.

Respondents that lived in villages (but close to provincial towns) had even bigger obstacles to overcome, as one respondent characterized: "A village is a community where you do not crap in your own nest, you cannot be different. If you're different, then you're gonna crap in your own nest." (interview 3)

Quite often the respondents juxtaposed the reality of their activism with examples of their colleagues from big cities, showing their marginality versus the big city activists (in relation to the size of the movement) at times being on the verge of becoming exotic species: "I mean, people in bigger cities are probably more civically-engaged citizens, in small towns people show very poor social awareness levels." (interview 6) This is surprisingly close to the situation of blaming the local communities for the reality they are stuck with, worryingly close to the infamous "civilizational competences" that were supposed to describe people living in bankrupt state-owned farms. In this case, the lack of "civilizational competences" was supposed to be the explanation for worsening living conditions (Buchowski 2018 for an overview). On the other hand, some of our respondents were worn out by their activism and the challenges they had to face every day, so such remarks might have been the result of them simply being tired. However, the lack of a group of fellow activists was a frequently recurring theme within the interviews:

> Because it's completely different than in a large city, where you have a group, you act bravely, you're not alone. And here, you're on your own and people, who are coming for a moment, in this act of bravery, later run away from fear or are afraid of disrupting their comfort zone. (interview 10)

In a slightly similar vein, some of the respondents linked the situation in their provincial towns with general developments within Polish politics and the said growing apathy among the society:

> In small towns, it is also a matter of shame, parochialism, lack of knowledge, interest. […] People are afraid of going out on the streets because they are afraid of the consequences of living in a small town, that the neighbours will point their fingers, that the boss at work will get angry and there will be consequences. There is also a lack of knowledge of the residents of our neighbourhood regarding what is happening in Poland, because 500+[3] has so blurred the clear idea of what is happening that they are not interested in it, do not take into account that democracy is being destroyed in the country (interview 8).

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[3] A welfare program supporting the second and each subsequent child within the family with 500 zloty, introduced by the Law and Justice party and since then broadly commented on by politicians as well as citizens.

2. Close connections to local authorities and their impact on everyday life

One of the characteristics of small towns is the dense network of interconnections between people. This applies not only to the family or friendship networks, but the connections are often extrapolated to business relations. In this understanding, being an activist poses a threat when the boss is connected to the opposing political camp. This not only affects the relations with the boss, but also the functioning of entire companies, as one of the activists recalled:

> Once I was walking and a woman was sitting on a bench, a stranger, she got up and said that she works at Zakłady Azotowe and now there is fear to say anything in an anti-governmental tone, and that there is even bigger fear to come with these type of protests. She said that they cheer for me, they observe what I'm doing but they are afraid to even give a like to a post on Facebook (interview 20).

In many provincial towns, the opportunities for employment are limited and often managerial positions are political prey, as it was described by one of the interviewees:

> This is Podkarpacie, it's almost Bieszczady[4]. There are two large factories, there is the City Hall, MOPs [local social benefit and support agency] and tax office. It's all part of the budget sphere. Somehow they are dependent on the Mayor, and he is from PiS [Law and Justice party], so it is known that he has a broad range of possibilities. It may slow people down, because it has happened so many times before, that he dismissed people who did not fit into his worldview, they had a different opinion to his, or they opposed him. And people know that he can do that. And people think like this: "I have a home, I have a job, why should I stick my neck out?" (interview 12).

The above-described situation is even worse when it comes to employment in the public sector, a situation often characterized by our respondents, as one of them explained:

> The biggest problem in [name of town] is that there are even some people who want to be active, they say that they want to act, but when it comes to specific actions everyone withdraws because of fear. [...] This is a small town and if the teacher is not liked, gets fired. The lady who is a pedagogue and a school teacher told me that the Religious Education teachers are spying on them, they inform the priest, the priest goes to the mayor and tells him that this and that teacher has problems with politically incorrect thinking and that he or she must be fired (interview 6).

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[4] Both south-east regions of Poland with higher unemployment rates and lower wages than in other parts of the country.

The close connections between residents also affect private businesses who fear losing their clients over their political self-declaration. With a limited clientele, the business owners in small towns are not likely to be picky and the fear of losing customers is a potential deal breaker for them, as one of the respondents shared in her story:

> One of the co-organizers of the first protest was a colleague who has a printing house and printed banners. During the first protest, she was very much involved; in the second, she did not get involved anymore because she lost her clients. Customers came to her and said they were withdrawing their orders because she was organizing a protest. I told her that she would gain other clients but she could not be persuaded. This fear is real (interview 11).

From the aforementioned quotes, it seems that this is the case of a different configuration of political opportunities available for small-town activists. Also, in small towns Political Opportunity Structures should be analyzed more on a relational level rather than on a formal one (as it is mostly done in the literature), because of the small scale of the whole environment and due to a smaller number of people involved, networks between those people are more dense than in big cities.

3.   Lack of anonymity

The small scale of the environment brings us to another of the characteristics of small-town activism, which is a lack of anonymity. Apart from the issues described before, occasionally this becomes a burden for the activists for other reasons:

> We bear a lot of responsibility for activities in such small communities. A huge social responsibility, because you cannot go out and tell lies, because people know you and you must have a clear and consistent message: we do this and that. We must be credible. […] In such small communities, unfortunately, you cannot hide a romance; similarly you cannot hide mishaps, so you must be reliable and consistent (interview 14).

The lack of anonymity pushes people away, especially those who have exposed public functions; in smaller towns and in provincial Poland, public image is worth a lot, much more than in big towns and affects more cohorts of people than in big towns, as one respondent described:

> Everyone is afraid for their image. This is not Warsaw, everyone knows each other here. There was a protest, the judges and lawyers came out with us, but they went out quietly

so that no one would see, nowhere was it documented either in the picture or in the film (interview 5).

4. The Catholic church

As mentioned earlier, the Catholic church in Poland plays an important role in the country's life. Its role was very often stressed by the interviewees as one of the key challenges they had to face in their activism. In Poland, approximately 94% of the population is baptized and – according to a recent study by the Catholic Statistical Office – 38% attends Sunday service weekly [8]. In the context of small towns, the role of the church is even greater, reflecting the figure of a triumvirate of local authority, the priest and the local wealthy person popularized in Polish culture and literature by the text *Krótka rozmowa między panem, wójtem a plebanem* (Rej 1543). Being written as a political satire in the mid-16th century, this figure is surprisingly actual today.

The activists point to the close connections between the throne and the altar, as one – almost anecdotal – experience shared by one of the respondents:

> Here lives one PiS MP. Someone was threatening him so the police had to find him and they did not know where he was, even his parents did not know where he was. One of the policemen called the priest and he knew where he was. This connection between the throne and the altar is in [name of town] typical (interview 20).

Priests often attack the feminist activists, as their proclaimed political and ideological enemies. Although most of our respondents had cut their ties to the Catholic church, many of them were and are aware of what is being said during Masses about them. Some of the activists are personally insulted (with their names mentioned) by the priests. Due to the greater authority and influence of the Church on the daily life of residents in small towns, such a stigma has a much higher impact and power of punishment than in big cities, as one of the respondents reported:

> When Black Monday was celebrated, there was a Mass held for us. […] I have a video recorded, where one can hear that these girls that go out onto the street are Hitler's daughters, Satan's friends. […] After all these epithets in our direction, the spiritual adoption of unborn children took place […] And after this meeting comes my daughter and says: "Mom, have you heard? They were talking about you" (interview 3).

The influence of the Church is exercised not only through the clergy, but is also proxied through hardcore believers. One of our respondents has shared a rather traumatic story that happened to her in her small town:

> Elderly ladies, with rosaries, praying on the bus once said "this black rag, widow, divorcee, who celebrates the devil, wants to kill children" Something of this sort. I stood next to them, and those older ladies… you would not think that they can say something like that (interview 15).

Finally, our respondents pointed to another role of the Church in small communities that locates it – literally – in the centre of the communities, as one of our respondents noted:

> The Church is important for another reason - usually a church stands in the centre of small towns, in the central square, where of course demonstrations are also held (interview 3).

This defines what in social geography is called "geographies of resistance" (see for instance Keith and Pile 2013 for an overview), which also poses a challenge to the activists, in particular in the rather conservative setting of provincial Poland described in the points above.

5. Traditional and conservative gender roles

The final challenge that was enumerated by the respondents were the traditional gender roles stemming from the conservative setting of Polish provinces. One of the respondents was astonished by the inhabitants of the town, because:

> Women in Podlasie, it's a strange topic. I could not get used to it for a few years, because I lived here for several years and for the first few years I had a problem, because even when I was walking with a man he must walk a few steps in front of me. And it continues until now, but I say [to my partner] that either we go together or I do not go at all. However, at the beginning it was so that sometimes we even ran up, because he tried to be 2 meters ahead of me (interview 17).

In a reportage by Ryszarda Socha (2017) on small-town activism, one of the activists from Siemiatycze (15,000 inhabitants) has said that "women from small towns are not yet used to having their own opinion, different to the one of their husbands or fathers".

Within the prevailing conservative gender roles, being involved in politics (street politics included) is not an occupation for women. This was a recurring theme in the interviews, for example:

> A good woman should take care of her home more, not about politics. For example, a friend told me: "Leave the politics to men". Or another example: "I respect you very

much, but leave the politics to the guys. Why are you pushing yourself into politics?" (interview 6).

Women's and feminist activism openly challenges these gender roles. For many of our respondents, this prompts a feeling of being threatened among the men, whose gender roles are being questioned and challenged. This is why they often react in a harsher manner than expected, as one of the interviewees analysed it:

The men may have reacted worse. In general, I have the impression that as if these "real" men feel that their masculinity, strength, and their importance are being taken away, that they are always in a fight. And suddenly women take matters into their own hands and do something, do not wait for them (interview 3).

6. Ways of approaching audiences in small towns

One of the key challenges of small-town activism described by our respondents was the lack of resources, not only material but also lack of help from other activists, which connects this issue to a cluster of theories generated by social movement scholars under the common theme of resource mobilization theories. This also means that the activists need to use different methods of approaching target audiences in small towns, as most of the local media is connected to local authorities (sometimes characterized as the local "chief man" [*kacyk*]), as one of the activists said: "The city pays the local newspaper, so this local newspaper is faithful to the local government. Of course, they came to the end of the protest as there were only 5 people left, they took pictures and wrote that no one was there" (interview 12). The limitation of this resource generates an obstacle for the activists who need to rely on other resources (in this case, means of communication) than activists from big cities who have an easier access to media outlets.

Moreover, many of the potential addressees of the activists' claims belong to an older generation and use social media less but are more responsive to more conventional tools of communication. As one of our respondents characterized:

> Here if you do not go on a bike and do not hang up posters, if you do not try to break through the media wall, nobody will come because nobody knows. We are aware of the fact that older people do not sit on the Internet, so you need to share leaflets, you have to give them something on a piece of paper, hang a poster somewhere and go to the market, so there you need to inform these people (interview 9).

Other resources that are challenging small-town activists include **limited audiences**, smaller capabilities for recruiting newcomers, and smaller scale of the movement, as one of the activists described:

> When I organize a protest in [name of town] I don't know if anybody will come. Last time in front of the court [a wave of protests against judicial system reform and politicization of courts in 2017], I was there alone, because nobody showed up (interview 12).

In this case, the numerous issues mentioned above intersect with each other, combining a limited access to resources with structural obstacles that come from more structural formations of power and ownership in small towns, as well as to the aforementioned lack of anonymity. As another activist described:

> Because it's a small town of 40,000, everyone knows everyone and if someone comes, it will be noticed, because we have two internet portals and one newspaper. They will describe it, they will pay attention to who was there, there will be no way to hide. I once asked another friend, if they would go, but they work in the City Hall. She said that not really, because the city is ruled by PiS, so they think that they know how it will be received (interview 7).

The quote above points out the fear factor among citizens of small towns. The fear is connected to a lack of anonymity and the potential repercussions for the activists. Another common emotion that accompanies small-town activists is shame, often connected to fear of social reactions to the activism:

> It seems to me that the biggest problem of small towns is that people are simply afraid and ashamed to go out on the street and say their own opinion. They are ashamed of the neighbours' reactions, the family, because there are many families who have mixed up views (interview 15).

However, the small scale of the field in which the activists operate sometimes works in their favour (as in the case of informing the potential audience), as, on the one hand, it is easier for the activists to build their own social capital; and on the other, they can make use of the social position of their families within their societies. In this case, the structural opportunities of small and provincial towns work two ways: as a challenge, but also as an opening. As one activist from northern Poland has described:

> It seems to me that such an important thing and the thing that made it easier for me to operate in a small environment is that my father in 1946 opened the first photographic studio in my town. It was something unbelievable and his shop works to this day. He had a car as one of the first people in town and each of us - four sisters - we are known in [name of town], although we do not necessarily know everyone. It also changes the

attitude of people, because even if I do not know someone, the fact that I'm the daughter of this photographer gives me a green light for action (interview 3).

The small scale and lack of anonymity makes the activists in question not only known to the local public, but also often admired by this public for having skills that are valued by the local society, as one of the respondents characterized:

> The only [thing that] gals have to realize [is] that from this moment [on] they are not anonymous and certainly someone will point them out with their finger. But on the other hand, a lot of people will also admire them. It happened to me that I went to the city, and a lady accosted me, whom I completely did not knew before and said: "Mrs. [name of respondent], when will another protest be?" and hugged me. But on the other hand, you also have this dark side of power that someone will point your finger at you. And from this gals should realize that anonymity ceases to exist (interview 21).

However, this admiration is often kept secret and words of admiration are not publicized:

> And that's how I go somewhere, I hear the shout "Bravo Mrs. [name of activist]", I ask for what and they answered that for this protest in Warsaw. They are watching, from time to time they will give some feedback, but it is not that the number of incoming people will increase (interview 21).

This suggests that there is a unique nature to social networks in smaller towns that are much more embedded in kin and other types of relations, following the concepts of Marc Howard (2003), who pointed out that this is a legacy of communism – that kin and personal networks are much more prevalent than for example formal membership in organizations. This also supports our claim that opportunity structures (especially political) in small towns should be analysed on a relational, rather than a formal level.

Another interviewee pointed to a similar understanding of her role by the local community:

> Activists from small towns are perceived in the local community as sinners but not only. On principle, if there is a problem, this person [the activist] will certainly know, or tell where to find a solution, what to do. It's easier to reach people here. In the beginning, we distributed leaflets, so these were face-to-face contacts. If we protest, if we do announce it, then it is known that this protest will not disappear like in Warsaw, that there is a protest somewhere again and we do not know where, one of many protests on this day. Besides, I know people here. It also helps in a way, because as a resident, I know the specificity of this town (interview 3).

This observation is also noticed by others dealing with the topic, as Ryszarda Socha (2017) writes:

> Recognition after breaking down barriers that block activity is often an asset. Katarzyna Kotula sees how it works in Gryfino: - We are 550 km from Warsaw, it cannot be any further. Women from here, who watch protests in Warsaw on television, think that it is not their business, it's something for feminists, women who have money and drink coffee at Starbucks for PLN 15 each. If they see a protest in their city, they identify it with specific people. Earlier, they did not think about women's rights. And now they are starting to wonder.

This creates an interesting issue of the influence of the perception of feminism and activism that is proxied by mass media and later confronted with one's own experiences of involvement and engagement. In the case of our respondents, this created situations in which they developed a feeling of belonging to a broader social movement.

7. Language used in small-town activism

As we mentioned, small towns require a different language when advertising their protests. These recurring themes came out of our interview scheme. which included questions about the language used during protests in small towns. As one of our respondents told us, this is not only the language used during protests but also the type of public events held:

> In [name of town], these protests all have to take place more as a happening, an informative action and it must be distanced, more chilled out. […] I come from the position that it is a small community and you cannot go out with a large calibre, with such topics, because it is mainly a place for elderly people […] If I would go out to the streets with radical banners, then we would be just kicked out, smothered. Last year's protest on March 8, it was not hardcore, was simply a protest of disagreement with what the government is preparing for us, and the girls were very penitent, because there was a wave of hate, and that's not the point. Therefore, all actions have to be carried out more happening-like, thematically, in terms of information and education. In small towns, it causes anger, shame too, discouragement (interview 13).

Compared to their counterparts from the big cities, the small town activists had the impression they had to de-radicalize their claims and their discourse in order to reach their local audiences and make their claims visible, as one of the respondents described:

> I am aware that what is mediocre for me is difficult to accept in the local environment. I observed this with girls who are from here: they were born here, they grew up here,

they live here and they are women between 30 and 60 years old, so a significant cross-section and, in most cases, they also avoid extreme wording, statements from the space of loud voices. This is certainly the specificity of smaller towns, that we do not allow direct criticism expressed so sharply, because we know that more people are disgusted than we find allies (interview 13).

This can be interpreted as an example of a frame alignment process and can be perceived as a source of the campaign's success. By framing it as a struggle for defending human dignity and rights rather than as an ideological struggle, numerous people decided to join the protests and many of them later stayed within the movement.

Another respondent added that such a strategy not only allows the small-town feminist activists to reach local communities, but also differentiates them from their opponents, who are often radical, vulgar and aggressive:

We do not want to offend anyone. We say what we think about it, we list all the MPs who voted against us, but we do not do such drastic things as those who stand against us. [During] Black Monday, we faced a pro-life group in front of us and they were aggressive, not us. […] In a small town, you have to ease the language a bit to get to the residents, too sharp discourse will discourage them (interview 5).

It seems that the "polite" way of doing activism is one of the characteristics of small-town activism, a tactical effort to overcome a closed discursive opportunity structure. One of the respondents, when asked what she would advise other activists that would try to take up activism in provincial towns, offered:

I would advise you not to use vulgarisms, not to radicalize speeches in such small towns, because there are friends everywhere: these are people who later meet in a bank, at school, on a bus. Not to overdo it. People, however, prefer such gentle, cultural behaviour (interview 6).

Discussion

According to the journalist-research report Small City Lights (Światła Małego Miasta[4]), a smaller city is a more hermetic environment with less understanding for otherness, but with a stronger sense of locality, greater attachment to traditional values, and greater social control (even if there is a cutthroat in the society, he is under the control of residents). The control is exercised in direct contacts, on the streets, through, for example, gossiping. In the cited report, the strong position of the Church is also stressed, as are its relationships with local government on various levels, which supports our argument that political opportunity structures in small

towns should be analysed on a relational, rather than a formal level. As far as political aspects are concerned, the attitude that "this does not concern us" prevails. This confirms our observations when it comes to the characteristics of small-town environments that were described by our respondents, who pointed to the facts of social apathy and depoliticized society.

Regarding political activism, the environment of small and provincial towns overlaps with some more general trends observed in Poland. In a poll from March 2017, 58% of respondents of a CBOS study declared that they feel they should exercise self-censorship and do not feel free to express their political views [9]. This is a major change considering that after the regime transformation of 1989, only 33% of the population shared this attitude. This forms an obstacle for political activism in the streets because not only does it become a challenge for the activists, but also for potential supporters. However, as Cezary Obracht-Prondyński says (after Socha 2017): *In Warsaw, a dozen or so people no one will notice, but here it's potential, on which you can build something […] Because people get to know each other, they experience something together. Later it is easier because they know that they can count on each other.*

From this observation, there is only one step to the situation we observed in the vast majority of cases studied. As mentioned in the beginning of the article, we looked at activists who continued their engagement after 2016. Many of them became involved in local campaigns and politics, posing a serious challenge to the existing power structures that stem from the conservative environment and context. Feminist activism is only a fraction of the activities of the interviewed women: some of them are running in the 2018 local elections for mayors or to the city councils, they are getting involved in local issues (i.e. environmental), and take part in nationwide campaigns, such as struggles to improve the position of people with disabilities. All this shows that the women activists from small towns should be regarded more and more as political actors on local scenes.

Broadly speaking, Polish women's activism is challenged by closed discursive opportunity structures that are a result of the dominance of conservative discourse spread by the mainstream media. The label "feminist activist" is seen more as a challenge rather than a neutral, descriptive label. In a 2018 study for one Polish women's magazine, only 5.5% of the respondents characterized themselves as feminists and 18% admitted to knowing one. However, 9% support "all feminist claims", 21% support the majority and 42% some of feminist claims [5]. The authors of this report stress that in small and provincial towns there is even less self-identification as feminists and less support for their claims, which proves our assumption that small towns provide a different context for social activism. In the context of small towns, this is amplified by the social and cultural dynamics: the role of the Church, the entanglement of local authorities with employees and local media, and the conservative gender roles. These features force the women from small towns to change the language used in their

political activism to more moderate and occasionally make use of their social capital (stemming from their family histories or their education and skills) in order to push forward their claims.

Conclusions

The focus of our paper was to determine the key factors of the socio-cultural environment that shapes small town and provincial activism of women's and feminist activists in Poland. As described in the sections above, small town activists face numerous external challenges to the emerging movement. These are, in particular: the hostile environment and closed discursive opportunity structures; a lack of political allies on local and national levels that support the claim of closed political opportunity structures; and the domination of the conservative discourse, strictly connected to the role of the Church, which is particularly visible in small towns. This constitutes closed cultural opportunity structures. These closed opportunity structures and limited resources available for the activists – both in terms of available audiences and other resources in the understanding of Resource Mobilization Theory, but also in terms of available infrastructure, differently conceptualized by social movement scholars – constitute the characteristics of small and provincial towns. The small size of the environment in which activists operate is the most visible pattern that comes out of our study. Apart from hindering the resources available to the activists, this situation changes the perception of available opportunity structures from formal to relational. Some of the factors, such as conservative gender roles or the role and influence of the Catholic church, which are observable throughout the whole country, are amplified in small towns. One characteristic of small town activism – the lack of anonymity of the activists – plays a twofold role. On the one hand, it creates an obstacle for activists, exposing them to social criticism and the like. On the other hand, it provides an opportunity for the activists that can draw on their and their families' social capital and use it for their activism. Besides the context and the environment of small towns, the activism also seems to be different as these external factors push activists to other repertoires of action, with specific ways of communicating with the public and language used during protests and campaigns.

This article is one of the first steps to fill in a gap in social movement literature, which usually focuses on big cities and only occasionally deals with rural activism. That, however, lacks one important feature of small towns, which is the existence of a modern *agora* with a public connected to it. Due to a lack of space here, some of the issues that emerged during our study will be elaborated elsewhere. The majority of them are of a relational nature, where small-town activism is juxtaposed against activism in big cities. Small towns are usually neglected – many of them are rather distant from big cities, which makes attending demonstrations or meetings held there too time- and resource-consuming, but so are the activists. This is mostly

a result of class divisions between "old" and "new" feminists, connected to the professionalization and NGO-ization of the feminist movement (and the broader civil society) in Poland and, in particular, in big cities. This is the direction in which studying small town activism should be going, thus offering directions for future research.

[1] http://strajkkobiet.eu/co-robimy/ [07.11.2018]

[2] *Kto nie lubi „dobrej zmiany"?*. Komunikat z badań CBOS, nr 115/2017, CBOS, Warszawa 2017

[3] http://ciekaweliczby.pl/21-polakow/

[4] https://www.swiatlamalegomiasta.pl/[20/09/2018]

[5] http://www.wysokieobcasy.pl/wysokie-obcasy/7,163229,23952656,tylko-5-proc-polek-uwaza-sie-za-feministki-choc-postulaty.html?disableRedirects=true#s=BoxWyboLink [20/09/2018]

[6] https://oko.press/zdecydowana-przewaga-zwolennikow-dopuszczenia-aborcji-na-zadanie-nad-przeciwnikami-sondaz/ [13.11.2018]

[7] https://oko.press/zdecydowana-przewaga-zwolennikow-dopuszczenia-aborcji-na-zadanie-nad-przeciwnikami-sondaz/ [13.11.2018]

[8] http://www.iskk.pl/badania/religijnosc/211-praktyki-niedzielne-polakow-dominicantes [27/11/2018]

[9] *Kto nie lubi „dobrej zmiany"?*. Komunikat z badań CBOS, nr 115/2017, CBOS, Warszawa 2017

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TYTUŁ: Rozbujać małe miasteczka: aktywistki Czarnych Protestów w Polsce

ABSTRAKT: Jak to jest być aktywistką w małym lub prowincjonalnym miasteczku? Czy wyzwania strukturalne, które stoją przed aktywistkami z małych miast, są jakie same jak ich odpowiedniki z dużych miast, które zwykle są studiowane i opisywane w literaturze naukowej? Jeśli środowisko jest inne, to czy małomiasteczkowi aktywiści i aktywistki podejmują inne praktyki, aby poradzić sobie z wyzwaniami wynikającymi z różnych kontekstów, w których

działają? W artykule staramy się odpowiedzieć na niektóre z tych pytań, przyglądając się organizatorkom Czarnych Protestów z 2016 roku i późniejszego okresu w prowincjonalnych miastach Polski. Protesty te, zorganizowane w celu przeciwstawienia się planowanym zmianom w już i tak represyjnej ustawie antyaborcyjnej, nie tylko zaskoczyły wszystkich swoją skalą i intensywnością, ale także zasięgiem, ponieważ większość protestów miała miejsce w małych i prowincjonalnych miastach w Polsce. Artykuł ten ma na celu wypełnienie luki w literaturze dotyczącej ruchów społecznych między analizą aktywizmu w dużych miastach (na których buduje się większość teorii) a aktywizmem na wsi.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: feminizm, aktywizm, małomiasteczkowy aktywizm, Polska