

# WE WALK THIS PATH TOGETHER

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**D**r. Artur Kościański from the PAS Institute of Philosophy and Sociology explains how civil society works in Poland and how the Internet contributes to its development.

**ACADEMIA: The term “civil society” is one very frequently used in the public sphere, but do we know for sure what it means?**

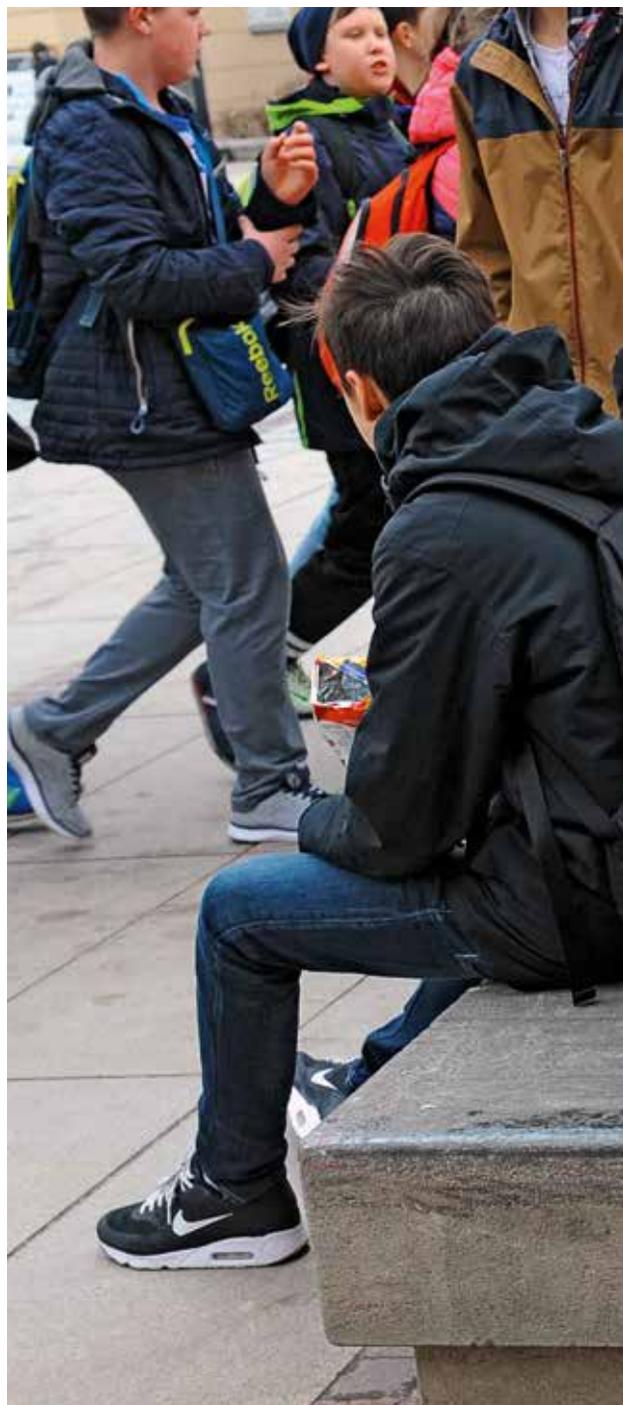
ARTUR KOŚCIAŃSKI: The notion continues to mean different things to different people. That is perhaps one of the biggest problems in social communication.

**But is it defined in any way?**

I believe that definitions should be very general. Civil society is a style of culture that attaches importance to recognized social values and a certain unique way of socialization, for example to reach the conditions of a democratic society. However, it is also a tool for holding civilized disputes concerning the important interests of citizens vis-à-vis the state. Civil society consists of three pillars: political, economic, and socio-cultural. The late Bronisław Geremek, a Polish politician and social historian, pointed this out before 1989, when he was formulating the ideological platform for what was then the anticommunist opposition. Nevertheless, he also said that political pluralism in Poland was a matter of the distant future. Unfortunately, he was right. Serious shortcomings of civil society in free Poland resulted above all from the fact that citizens didn't have enough experience with informed political engagement.

**Why did that happen?**

The founders of the Solidarity labor union understood civil society in a strictly-defined manner: as a way to fight communism and the Polish United Workers' Party (PZPR). In the opinion of many of them, civil so-



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ciety ended after 1989. They concluded it was no longer needed, because they had managed to overthrow communism through civic engagement and compromises, and so they should have a hand in governance.

Meanwhile, politics is something more than just a power struggle. Above all, it involves looking for and negotiating certain solutions that pertain to important problems that affect a specific group of people. In my opinion, civil society should be one of the architects of political solutions, for example through such grass-roots initiatives as the formation of civic parties, not

only non-government organizations. Consequently, political life could become something natural for people, something they let them knowingly participate in governance on the principles of partnership.

**Does this mean that it would be natural for representatives of civil society to take over governance if politicians failed?**

No, they are not supposed to govern. That's the job of the government, regardless of what government it is. Rather, civil society should both accept it and monitor



it in a sensible way. In an emergency situation, when the authorities overstep their powers in a glaring way, civil society should present an alternative. Civil society also means a certain channel of communication. It is a tool that citizens use to articulate their needs as a group. It may also prove necessary as a platform for dialogue with other segments of society, i.e. the government, business entities, other groups of citizens, and so on. The participation of various groups of citizens in co-governance means building positive relations. Aversion to the ruling authorities is not a good factor behind the mobilization of civil society, because it mobilizes people for a short time and may permanently set them against one another. And that means denying the very essence of citizenship, which lies in openness and respect for democratic values.

ed, even representatives of civil society, who identify either with the liberal or with the conservative variant. That's why we need dialogue. Civil society could try to create such dialogue above divisions.

#### **Let's get back to co-governance. What can we do to put it into effect?**

In Taiwan, which in 1987 went through a political reform similar to the changes in Poland, the social movements that transformed into non-government organizations now have a significant impact on the quality of life of citizens. The actions of politicians are monitored in a way that is completely unimaginable in this part of the world. Taiwan has an organization known as the Citizen Congress Watch, which is essentially a second parliament composed of citizens. Each member follows very carefully the actions of one member of parliament. Most of them are experts in social sciences and know very well how to use their knowledge for the common good.

#### **What about the situation in Poland?**

The Poles have a certain skill: they can get organized whenever the state proves to be inefficient. For that matter, such self-organization is a natural human need. The Chinese have a proverb, "Heaven is high and the emperor is far away," whereas ordinary people must arrange the space between them. Our Polish motto, in turn, is that "things will work out somehow." Civil society actions and culture may result in a situation in which we can sort out issues not just "somehow," but in a very specific way.

Poland also has civil society organizations that operate without "a badge of honor," because that's not how their participants define themselves. These are usually groups of people who live in small communities and deal with their small problems. Such groups are formed when there are reasons to mobilize, for example when it is necessary to protect areas of greenery or build a road. Once the problem is solved, they become dormant. Somewhere out there, far away in the provinces, civil society groups have a catalogue of problems that is completely different from the problems found in Warsaw.

Movements set up to protect "small homelands," or the interests of small, local communities, on the level of rural housewives' clubs or volunteer fire departments, reveal an important mechanism governing civil society. In these small communities, a certain ethos of civic participation is passed down from generation to generation.

Unfortunately, only around 16% of Poles are currently actively involved in non-government organizations. That is a very small share. At the beginning of the transition to democracy, this share stood at around 26%, with non-government organizations shooting out of the ground like mushrooms. Once the new state

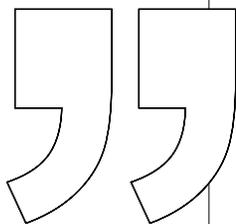
Governance should be vested in the government, regardless of what government it is. Civil society should both accept it and monitor it in a sensible way.

#### **But could aversion to a bad government not serve as a starting point for efforts to build something new?**

Definitely not, if negative emotions and aversion are what are involved. If civil society is founded on the presumption of fighting against an enemy, it renounces the attribute "civil." Citizens may engage in rivalry, but they must not define one another as enemies. This also pertains to the relationship between citizens and the government. I will firmly protest against the term civil society being used with respect to any radical group whose only goal is to annihilate another group. In a democracy, there should be no such phrase as "a bad government," because it is people who govern the country through their representatives. A government may be incapable, ineffective. In that case, however, citizens have the duty to review the actions of that government and replace it in parliamentary elections.

#### **It takes two to have dialogue.**

Strictly speaking, three. In addition to both sides being ready for discussion, we need various institutions that have the know-how to facilitate this dialogue. The trouble is that political popularity based on dialogue did not emerge in Poland after 1989. We could say that respect for the other side of a political dispute has become an empty concept. Our political forces treat their opponents as enemies. Everyone is divid-



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became established and started to regulate the self-organization of the Poles, this rate plunged to an unbelievable 9%. Sociologists have also observed a serious drop in confidence in institutionalized forms of civic engagement. The situation improved when Poland joined the EU, also because the possibility of securing foreign funding for civil society activities.

**Who belongs to this 16%?**

The research I have conducted for several years shows that civic engagement depends on the way of participating in a given group, on a person's lifestyle. There are three lifestyles that distort the ideal picture of an active citizen. Those who lead traditional lifestyles engage in more traditional forms of civic activities, such as parish organizations or volunteer fire departments. Those whose lifestyles are very modern choose less institutionalized forms. They choose the Internet and social movements as their domain. The type I would refer to as mixed is best suited to "the civic offer."

Modern individualists don't find it easy to be active members of civil society. They focus heavily on their own development, they like to take risks, and they are responsible for themselves. Civil society, in turn, also means being responsible for others. Such individuals find it hard to venture out of their own, egocentric world. Meanwhile, those with conservative views are more oriented towards the community, towards the possibility of acting in the small world of the issues they know very well. Such people sometimes form lasting alliances of a civic nature.

**What is civil disobedience?**

That is something that citizens should only use as a last resort, when the government breaks important social contracts in a way that prevents them from advancing interests that are important for the community. What lies at the core of civil disobedience is an open refusal to obey a law or a legal norm that is not fair, doing so in the name of important values and with the full readiness to be held accountable for such actions. Most importantly, this must be a decision made individually. In other words, as a citizen I deliberately upset the legal order and agree to receive the punishment, because I am convinced that this specific legal norm is not fair to me or to other citizens, for example due to unequal treatment. Unfortunately, people are often persuaded to collectively violate legal norms, because they wrongly assume that if there are a lot of them, it will not be possible bring out the big guns and hold them legally accountable. Informed citizens should be more like the famous Burmese activist Aung San Suu Kyi, who was detained under house arrest for many years for her actions.

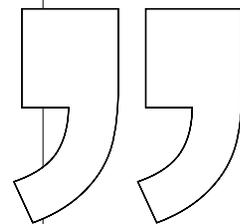
**But if such collective actions are taken in an informed manner, couldn't they prove effective?****For example, if half of the citizens stopped paying their taxes.**

That's rather impossible in the Polish social and political reality. Also, I can't imagine what the ultimate reason behind such actions could be.

**A refusal to finance the state apparatus, whose actions are unpopular among people.**

Let's imagine a situation in which the parliament of a democratic country is disbanded and replaced by one-man rule, or dictatorship. In all likelihood, very few individuals would manage to engage in civil resistance. But if we hear such opinions as "we don't like the government and the state," it's difficult to consider them as a serious argument in favor of such a serious measure. On the other hand, there was a shortage of civil disobedience in the protest against the plans to cut down trees in downtown Warsaw.

The Chinese have a proverb, "Heaven is high above and the emperor is far away," whereas ordinary people have to arrange the space between them.

**The Poles use the Internet to mobilize support for many issues. What functions does it fulfill in civil society?**

Initially, when the Internet went mainstream, it was supposed to be a medium for people, a social and grassroots initiative that was supposed to create a certain style of culture. No business, no politics. What is left from that core is the hacker culture and the "creative commons" movement. Apart from that, there is nothing left. But social media can be a very smart tool for mobilizing people. This potential to mobilize people to act is a characteristic of civil society on the Internet.

Civic activity, whether online or offline, also depends in a sense on the content. If the information proves untrue or someone knowingly manipulates true information, we become skeptical of that medium. In this case, the future of the Internet as a tool for mobilizing people may indeed look bleak. The Internet doesn't work without the reality. My studies into the lifestyles of Internet users show that although there are individuals who create alternative worlds for themselves, in most cases it is the reality that determines how people use the Internet. Those who are aware of how to use the Internet use it also for the purposes of civic engagement.

**Do those who are not so well informed let themselves be charmed by the message conveyed by civil society?**

Some do, others don't. The Internet is not a medium that one can fully trust. The Internet alone will not cause people to change their attitude and stop seeing the other side of a political dispute as an enemy. How you use the Internet is determined by your social personality type. If you react to the world's imperfections by leaving your private zone and joining the public sphere to look for solutions together with others like you, then the Internet will help you. However, if you hope that someone else will mobilize, then the Internet as a medium may reach only a small share of the group, despite the fact that surfing the Internet is easier than initiating real relations between citizens.

**least temporarily, of its plans to introduce stricter anti-abortion provisions.**

The Internet was one of the important elements of mobilization, but only after women's organizations took over the organizational aspects. At that time, the protest became a fully civic activity. Its participants managed to achieve their goal.

**Was that because that goal was clearly defined?**

Civil society actions must have a clearly defined goal. If you have a clearly defined goal, you also know what measures you should take to achieve it. If not, you will just take random steps. The goal of civil society actions should be formulated above private interests.

If, regardless of the method, we tell the government that some regulations are harmful, cause pathologies, and may prove counterproductive, we engage in dialogue. Those who take the Black Protest seriously can see that it has created a forum for substantive discussions, not merely a space for the expression of negative emotions.

**But the trouble is that politicians rely almost exclusively on emotions.**

We should blame political marketing, which is of course aimed against civil society. Elections are in a sense beauty pageants – you can never be sure what the winner will actually do. The contestants always look beautiful, but that is just makeup.

In a democracy, it is important that every group has its representatives, that no group feels discriminated against, that the government is often replaced, that the elections are fair, not fixed, and free, in the sense that people do not fear they will be repressed for how they voted and they have access to alternative sources of information and, most importantly, the right to assemble.

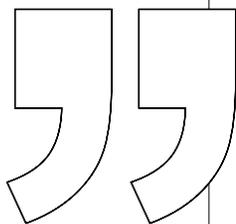
**So what is the best way to use the Internet to build civil society?**

Of course, it is necessary to introduce civic education programs that will take account of the skills needed to use the Internet resources in a responsible and civic way. Other elements that should be linked to that medium include legal education and dialogue. As for the culture of civil society, we must absorb it from other people.

**But what matters more than anything else is reason?**

Yes, it is the key to civil society.

INTERVIEW BY KATARZYNA CZARNECKA  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY JAKUB OSTAŁOWSKI



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**That's definitely true, especially as phones also offer Internet access.**

Yes. But will that act as a major wake-up call for citizens? I don't think so. Many people react very emotionally and take part in protests, spurred by what is happening in an online community. But if you ask them what they are doing, they will reply that they are protesting, because something needs to be done. But they're unable to say what needs to be done or how. If the message "the government wants to restrict our freedom" pops on your phone, you are immediately mobilized to act. However, an informed citizen will ask question. What freedom? What restrictions? How? By using the Internet, one can easily mobilize a very short-lasting or uninformed confederation of angry people. Participation in a collective event serves to satisfy the natural need for affiliation, instead of providing a way to find a solution to what can be very difficult social problems. Using the Internet to inform citizens about issues that affect them directly, key issues related to their local communities, is more effective. Major social issues are usually discussed in very general terms. The Internet sometimes reduces their seriousness.

**However, rapid mobilization brought actual benefits in the case of Poland's "Black Protest" on 3 October 2016, staged by throngs of women clad in black. The government backed out, at**

This is the English translation of an article that was approved by the author in its Polish version.