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**CIVIL SOCIETY AS A THREAT TO DEMOCRACY:
ORGANIZATIONAL BASES OF THE
POPULIST COUNTERREVOLUTION IN POLAND**

by:
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Abstract

A distinctive trajectory of civil society transformation in Poland has provided organizational foundations for the cultural and political polarization and facilitated country's recent turn towards authoritarianism. Developments in Poland suggest that the reigning notion of the inherent virtuousness of civil society, its unquestionably beneficial role in strengthening democracy and assumed liberal preferences of civil society actors need to be reassessed. Consequently, I argue that the particular organizational configuration of civil society, its sectoral composition, normative orientation of its actors and prevailing cleavages can either strengthen or undermine democracy. Since country's transition to democracy in 1989, Polish civil society has evolved into an organizational form that can be described as "pillarized civil society." While historically pillarization of civil society was considered to be a peculiar phenomenon in the Low Countries in the XIX century, this form of civil society organization has become increasingly common in contemporary democratic societies with dividing boundaries shaped by identity-based cleavages (religious, ethnic, political). The presence of vertically segmented civil society enables extreme cultural and political polarization and facilitated mobilization of far-right, nationalist and conservative religious movements. In Poland, pillarized civil society affect electoral fortune of liberal parties, provides support for anti-liberal and anti-European policies of the current Polish government dominated by the Law and Justice party as well as defines political conflicts and protest politics.

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In this paper, I explore a distinctive trajectory of civil society transformations that has provided organizational foundations for cultural and political polarization and the current turn to authoritarianism in Poland.¹ Regime transitions either towards democracy or authoritarianism are not elite affairs or coercive impositions. They involve a significant level of popular support and collective action by ordinary people, social movements and civil society organizations. In this process, a particular organizational structure of civil society, its sectoral composition and prevailing cleavages can facilitate both the transition and consolidation of a new regime. So, the reigning idea of the mutually beneficial relations between civil society and democracy and inherent virtuousness and a prevailing liberal orientation of civil society actors needs to be reassessed. The historically existing civil societies, depending on their organizational characteristics and general normative orientation of their actors can strengthen or undermine liberal democracy. One of discernible organizational forms of civil society that may endanger democracy is a “pillarized civil society.” While historically it was considered to be a peculiar phenomenon in the Low Countries in the XIX century, this form of civil society has become increasingly common in contemporary societies.

In my view, pillarized civil society has emerged in Poland since country’s transition to democracy in 1989. This vertically divided civil society has enabled extreme cultural and political polarization of Polish society, facilitated mobilization of far-right, nationalist and conservative religious movements and recently provided support for anti-liberal and anti-European policies of the Polish government dominated by the Law and Justice Party. While my analysis points to the crucial role of the associational sphere and its specific organizational characteristics in the U-turn toward authoritarianism unfolding in Poland, I also suggest that this is a more general phenomenon in contemporary societies both democratic and authoritarian. Today in many

¹ This paper has benefited from the ongoing research project on the development of civil society in Poland, co-directed by Grzegorz Ekiert and Jan Kubik. Some of the early results of our work have been published in Ekiert and Kubik 1999, Ekiert and Kubik 2014, and Ekiert, Kubik and Wenzel 2017. It is a revised and expanded version of the essay that was published in Polish in *Almanach* – a publication prepared for the first meeting of Concilium Civitas in Warsaw in July 2019. I would also like to thank Bart Bonikowski, Emmanuel Gerard, Peter Hall, Bart Pattyn and fellows from the project on Democracy at the University of Leuven for their comments on the early drafts of this paper.

countries around the world civil society or rather a significant part of civil society supports political extremism and anti-liberal policies and increasingly becomes an obstacle for political liberalization or a threat to democracy. Pillarized civil societies tend to emerge in countries characterized by societies deeply divided along ethnic, religious, ideological, cultural or economic cleavages. In turn, pillarization of civil society reinforces dominant cleavages and transform politics into a zero-sum game.

The idea of civil society was reintroduced into both political and academic discourse in the late 1970s to describe two parallel political developments (see Keane 1988). First, there was the emergence of new opposition movements that challenged communist rule in East–Central Europe. Their leaders rejected Marxist revisionism and advocated reviving a pluralist associational sphere and building autonomous social networks (a parallel *polis*) as a strategy by which to defy the totalitarian state. Organizations such as the Workers’ Defence Committee (KOR) in Poland and the Czechoslovak Charter 77 demanded respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. They also developed a new discourse centered on the notion of inalienable rights, societal self-organization and unequivocal support for liberal democracy and the rule of law. In their activities they espoused transparency, public debate, non-violence and reforms based on negotiations and compromise. They defined their mission as non-political, rejected utopianism and political maximalism, and endorsed the simple ethical postulate of ‘living in truth’ proposed by Vaclav Havel. In Poland, they also urged broad, inclusive alliances across traditional class and political divisions, including those between the church and the left, and between the workers and intellectuals. The Solidarity movement in Poland embodied all these principles in its challenge to the Polish party-state in 1980–1.²

Second, political ferment in East–Central Europe was preceded by a period of intense social and political activism within Western democracies. New social movements emerging at the end of

² See, for example, Ash 2002, Ekiert and Kubik 1999, Kubik 1994, Touraine 1983

the 1960s and 1970s challenged paternalistic welfare states and criticized the encroachment of bureaucracies and markets into the public domain and private lives. They protested the shallow nature of Western democracies and championed excluded groups and minorities. They also sought to reconstitute a pluralist public realm where citizens would be free to debate critical issues, pursue their passions and interests, and reassert their individual and collective identities.³

Despite their different intellectual origins, political concerns and ideological optics, these two political currents converged around the idea that the independent public sphere, with its associational domain and individual autonomy, needed to be defended from rampant commodification and bureaucratization in the West and from the totalitarian ambitions of the communist state in the East. The concept of civil society provided a good frame for understanding these concerns, goals and political practices, since it was articulated by thinkers who were concerned by threats to liberty and were searching for the optimal model of relations between states, markets and societies. These theorists range from the philosophers of the Scottish Enlightenment to Tocqueville, Gramsci, Habermas and Gellner. They shared normative concerns emphasizing liberty, freedom, justice, equality, tolerance, individualism and pluralism.⁴

In the 1980s and especially during the 1990s, the idea of civil society acquired a rarely challenged positive connotation. Social scientists and policy makers assigned civil society a key role in driving progressive social, political and economic transformation. Robust civil society was considered a panacea against a wide variety of social and political ills. Its quality, density and strength became a major yardstick for assessing the condition of a democratic system. It was widely believed that without a system of associations mediating between kinship groups, markets and the state, individuals would be less effective in articulating their common interests and identities, and society would remain politically stagnant and vulnerable to corruption and authoritarianism.

³ See, for example, Kriesi et al 1995

⁴ For the review of various traditions and theories of civil society see, for example, Hall 1995, Seligman 1992, Kaviraj and Khilnani 2001, Alexander 2006, Perez-Diaz 2011, Ekiert 2019.

Vibrant civil society was seen not only as a guarantor and defender of freedom, equality and justice, but also as a mechanism for improving the institutional performance of democracy. As Robert Putnam (1993: 182) put it, 'Tocqueville was right: democratic government is strengthened, not weakened, when it faces a vigorous civil society'. As a result, Tocqueville's apotheosis of American associational life as a shield against tyranny replaced Karl Marx's critique of capitalism as the self-evident truth guiding change-oriented political activism. Paradoxically, this belief in the inherent virtue of a robust associational life based on voluntary participation and solidarity came to be shared by the political right and left, by liberals as well as the foes of liberal politics, and also by politicians and intellectuals. President George H.W. Bush, in his speech to the Republican Convention in 1988, compared America's voluntary associations to 'a brilliant diversity spread like stars, like a thousand points of light on a broad and peaceful sky'. In the social science literature that followed, civil society emerged as the main driver of democratic transformation, a source of high-quality democratic performance and an indispensable actor in disaster relief, poverty reduction, welfare provision and the fight against political corruption.

Reflecting this consensus on the beneficial role of civil society organizations in political and social life, Larry Diamond (1994: 7–11) listed a number of specific functions that make them essential in strengthening and protecting democracy: they limit state power and make politicians accountable; provide alternative channels for political participation; increase citizens' political skills and efficacy; promote a better understanding of the rights and obligations that constitute democratic life; foster the development and communication of democratic norms; provide channels for articulation, aggregation and representation of different interests and identities; mitigate political conflicts; provide training and experience for future political leaders; facilitate non-biased monitoring of political activities and government policies; advance the development and provision of information; and help build political coalitions and improve the functioning of the state. No wonder that civil society has become a focus of scholarly attention, and its strengthening around the world – an urgent priority.

Consequently, in recent decades foundations, states and international organizations have spent billions of dollars on building civil society and supporting its projects. The promotion of civil society has become a crucial aspect of development aid for countries recovering from civil wars and decades of authoritarian rule. And it has been considered the best hope for introducing and consolidating liberal political institutions, fighting poverty and protecting human rights. Since the 1990s, Western governments have significantly increased their support for domestic and international NGOs, promoting the expansion of their role and institutionalizing a formal partnership between civil society organizations and the state in the provision of social services. An increasing amount of official development aid has been dispensed through NGOs. Private foundations supporting liberal causes have strengthened the capacity of watchdog organizations monitoring governments. Transnational NGOs have become formally recognized consultative partners to all international and multilateral organizations, in the process emerging as influential political actors in their own right that support progressive causes around the world (Keck and Sikkink 1998).

In turn, authoritarian rulers of various stripes have become increasingly concerned about the growing influence of Western-backed NGOs and have reacted by imposing an array of new regulations and constraints designed to limit their role and access to resources, or else banned them altogether. They have also actively promoted the top-down process of building alternative civil society organizations and movements supportive of government policies.⁵ Thus, the civil society arena has become a domain of intensifying political competition and struggle. Paradoxically, the authoritarian rulers' fear of civil society organizations, coupled with efforts to restrict their activities, has reinforced the general belief in their unquestioned role in promoting and protecting democracy.

Yet the neo-Tocquevillian, overly affirmative views of civil society's role and impact have not been universally shared nor its potentially harmful impact on democracy entirely ignored. Nancy Bermeo (2003) rightly noted that the previous generation of political scientists viewed active civil

⁵ See, for example, Ekiert, Perry and Yan 2020.

society as posing a threat to democracy rather than a support for it, especially in countries with weak political institutions. In his influential book *Political Order in Changing Societies* (1968: 87), Samuel Huntington noted that 'societies which have high levels of middle-class participation have strong tendencies towards instability'. From this perspective, robust civil society and its actions may not always be beneficial or supportive of democratic outcomes, but may also destabilize and endanger democracy, precipitating an authoritarian takeover. In fact, a number of important historical cases exemplify such an outcome.

Sheri Berman (1997), for example, argues that organizationally robust and politically divided civil society exerting pressure on the deficient political structures of the Weimar Republic after World War I might have been one of the important preconditions for the Nazi takeover. Similarly, Dylan Riley (2010) shows that development of robust civil societies in Italy, Spain and Romania in the early XXth century not only did not produce stable democracy but instead undermined their nascent liberal regimes and facilitated the rise of fascism. Arguing against Robert Putnam's conclusions about the benefits of dense social capital and strong civil society, Riley demonstrates that some regions of Northern Italy that had dense social capital became hotbeds of Italian fascism. Finally, examining European experiences, Bermeo and Nord point out that 'burgeoning civil society translated into a democratization of public life in certain instances but by no means always'. Moreover, 'civic activism may well be the bedrock of democratic life, but not all civil societies, however dense and vibrant, give birth to democratic polities' (2000: xv–xvi).

All these arguments belong to what can be called a neo-Huntingtonian perspective whose basic premise is that in places where political institutions are not able to accommodate a proliferation of voluntary associations, nor to translate popular demands via democratic channels of interest articulation, nor find remedies for civil society's politicization and polarization, the development of a strong and mobilized civil society may give rise to authoritarianism or fascism. Thus, there is a dark side to the strength of civil society and its activity. In specific political contexts, civil society actors may even facilitate the demise of democracy and contribute to an authoritarian takeover.

In fact, authoritarian leaders often ride on the back of a robust and mobilized civil society and maintain their power with its support.

Neo-Huntingtonian arguments emphasize the structural/institutional deficiencies of political institutions and party systems that make the actions of civil society actors potentially destructive to democracy. Yet, there is another set of arguments focusing on the specific features of particular civil societies that may have a potential toxic impact on democracy. Such arguments emphasize the organizational characteristics of civil society and the normative orientations of its actors. The prevalence of certain types of organizations within civil society (representing plutocratic elites, large corporate actors, fundamentalist religious organizations, extremist political movements) may increase the risk of an authoritarian takeover as well as providing stability to authoritarian rule.

Similarly, illiberal and exclusionary ideologies may provide fuel to civil society activities that not only accelerate political polarization but also endanger the stability and the very existence of democracy. As Stanley Hoffmann once quipped when commenting on Robert Putnam's ideas of social capital, 'it is not important how many choral societies a country has but what kind of songs they sing'. In fact, in the past many civil society organizations supported anti-liberal and anti-democratic agendas, advocated exclusionary national and religious identities and endorsed violent tactics to accomplish extremist political goals.⁶ Chambers and Kopstein (2001) label such organizations in the contemporary US as 'bad civil society'. Kopecky and Mudde (2003) call them 'uncivil society' and Richard Youngs and his co-authors (2019: 11) define them as 'conservative civil society'. As they argue, 'the rise of conservative civil society poses serious challenges to liberal democracy', since 'conservative activism is the search for protection – protection from change, from outside economic pressures, from new kinds of identities and moral norms. Curiously, these groups generally want a stronger state and more robust government intervention to provide this protection.'

⁶ As Philip Nord (2000: XXV) pointed out, in the context of the XIX century European democratization, "Catholics riposted to the secularizing policies of a dominant liberalism entrenching themselves in a formidable associational bulwark."

Such groups and organizations are a part of the civil society landscape in all contemporary societies. In specific places and times, especially with the support of governments having authoritarian ambitions, uncivil or illiberal parts of civil society may grow and expand from the margins of associational life to colonize the domains of public space surrendered by other actors. Protected and supported by the government or other powerful social actors, they monopolize civil society activities. In extreme cases, this leads to profound cultural and subsequently political polarization and to the emergence of ‘pillarized’ civil societies that Phillippe Schmitter (1997)⁷ diagnosed as a potential threat to democracy. Pillarization is the vertical segregation of civil society into distinct compartments with limited interaction across a dividing boundary (be it religious, ethnic, political). This creates the potential for social conflicts, contentious mobilization and political instability. In fact, the recent rise of populism can be traced to the emergence of pillarized civil societies across the world. In the 1980s and 1990s the so-called ‘culture wars’ became common in many countries. Cultural polarization should be considered a precursor and a necessary condition conducive to the populist political movements and parties we see today. As Youngs (2019: 7) observed, ‘in many countries in the developing and postcommunist worlds, as well as in long-established Western democracies, conservative forms of civic activism have been multiplying and gaining traction. In some cases, new conservative civic movements and groups are closely associated with illiberal political actors and appear to be an integral part of the well-chronicled global pushback against Western liberal democratic norms’.

Moreover, the collapse of traditional democratic media regimes (Williams and Delli Carpini 2011) and the technological and digital revolution plays an important part in this growing polarization and in facilitating the emergence of the illiberal pillar of civil society. A fragmented media landscape and the expanding social media scene facilitate the pillarization process by enabling

⁷ The concept of “pillarized civil society” has its roots in the XIX century experiences of Belgium and the Netherlands. See, for example, Ertman 2000 and Aerts 2010.

smaller groups and movements to mobilize and communicate by building separate cultural silos with their own narratives, symbols, and 'alternative facts'. The combination of grassroots illiberal organizations and radical social media platforms provides increasing mobilizational capacity overcoming the traditional collective action problems. Bennet and Segerberg (2012) describe this new capacity as 'connective-collective' action network model. Thus, social media can be as much a tool of liberalization as a facilitator of cultural wars and of the pillarization of civil society (Tucker et al. 2017).

The emergence of pillarized civil societies has crucial political consequences. Their actors, driven by a zero-sum vision of politics, fuel cultural and political polarization and undermine centrist political parties. They are the source of radicalization, political instability and electoral backlash against liberal values and the affiliated political forces. They provide foot soldiers for protests against liberal elites and in support of emerging populist parties. In turn, illiberal and conservative pillars benefit from the electoral successes of such radical populist parties. Where populist parties take over the government, liberal pillars are constrained and starved of resources, while public funds are allocated exclusively to the organizations belonging to conservative and illiberal pillar of civil society. Moreover, the legal framework regulating civil society activities is purposefully altered to restrict the liberal pillar and to expand opportunities for illiberal movements and organizations.

The playbook for governments with authoritarian ambitions includes: licensing NGOs by tightening registration procedures and reporting requirements; starving them of resources by prohibiting foreign funding; centralizing resources for civil society activities under state control and changing funding priorities; stigmatizing liberal NGOs through, for example, introducing so-called foreign agent laws; aggressively favoring organizations that are ideologically aligned with the government by providing additional funding and friendly regulations; escalating repression and intimidation of civil society activists from the liberal pillar and shielding activists from the illiberal pillar from prosecution for illegal and violent acts; restricting the rights of assembly and protest by imposing cumbersome regulations; introducing censorship and controls on media and

the internet; bringing civil society organizations under state control and expanding the domain of ersatz social movements and government-organized NGOs (GONGOs). All these actions can be described as *re-etatisation* of the illiberal pillar of civil society. Such re-etatisation results in the hardening of boundaries between the pillars of civil society and deepens its ideological polarization, fueling political conflicts and divisions in the short run. In the long run, it may provide the organizational and cultural foundations for an authoritarian takeover.

Nowhere is the Schmitterian dilemma of pillarized and polarized civil society more apparent than in contemporary Poland. After 1989, Polish civil society was reconstituted with considerable speed and determination as the result of four distinct and overlapping processes. First, the initial years of transition witnessed the process of *reconstitution* and *recombination* in which the dense network of social organizations inherited from the old regimes adapted itself to new democratic conditions (Manger 2015: 55-61) and a large number of new organizations and social initiatives sprung up across the country. In parallel, a process of *de-etatisation* was underway, with the state relinquishing or losing control over professional and social organizations. Polish civil society also experienced *de-corporatization*, a process in which large professional organizations and trade unions lost their privileged role in civil society and in politics, along with their influence on policy-making. Thus, during the first two decades of post-communist transformation, Polish civil society grew rapidly. Its center of gravity shifted from large, formal membership-based organizations, such as trade unions and professional associations (mostly inherited from the old regime), to a highly varied sector of small, professionalized NGOs that rely on voluntary involvement and diversified, decentralized funding that is both public and private. Their activities spanned the entire range of services, objectives, goals and styles of action similar to those present in developed democratic societies. And these organizations had a decidedly liberal and pro-European orientation. Finally, during the first two decades of the 21st century, civil society has become increasingly professionalized, resulting in the emergence of tens of thousands of highly specialized NGOs and foundations. These mostly small organizations are run by professional staff

and rely on public funding, fundraising and volunteers. They focus on a wide range of local and national issues and initiatives and operate in a well-structured and (until 2016) friendly legal environment (Ekiert and Kubik 2014).

Poland's accession to the European Union in 2004 led to the internationalization of its civil society. This process had both symbolic significance and tangible economic consequences. It signaled to civil society organizations the possibility of transcending national boundaries, forming links with like-minded partners in other EU countries and supporting transnational causes. The process of Europeanization changed both the structure and institutional culture of numerous organizations. It also opened significant funding opportunities (both from official EU sources and Western civil society partners) for different initiatives and projects (Ekiert, Kubik and Wenzel 2017).

Based on the sheer number of newly registered organizations, the growth of Polish civil society since 1989 has been remarkable. Up to the year 2000, the rate of new registrations was exceptional, and since then it has stabilized at a relatively high level of around 5,000 organizations and 800 foundations per year with no major declines. By 2018 the Klon/Jawor Association, an infrastructural NGO, had some 140,000 new civil society organizations in its database. New NGOs have emerged in all sectors of civil society and in all types of localities. At the same time, the survival rate of associations from the old regime has also been very high. These two trends together produce a relatively dense and consistently growing civil society. Moreover, the number of Poles who have participated in voluntary and charitable activities has expanded considerably. In recent years, over 20 per cent of Poles declare they have volunteered and over 50 per cent of them have donated money to charitable causes. This is on par with levels registered in some established Western democracies.

Yet, since the early 2000s, Polish civil society has experienced increasing organizational and ideological pillarization as a result of the emergence and institutionalization of far-right, conservative, nationalistic, anti-liberal and religion-based networks of organizations. They have their own national and local media, social networks, symbolic frames of reference, political

narratives and resources provided by the Catholic Church, right-wing political parties, conservative foundations and individuals, and increasingly by the Polish state after it was taken over by the Law and Justice Party (PiS) following its win in the 2015 elections. The PiS government considers the civil society domain to be an important battle ground to dominate country politics. Consequently, it tries to alter the composition of Poland's civil society by throwing its weight behind its allied organizations within civil society.

The illiberal, nationalistic pillar of civil society was a late arrival in the development of civil society in Poland. Although nationalist and extreme right-wing organizations and movements were marginal and weak during the first decade of the post-communist transition, the clerical sector of the illiberal pillar was gradually gaining strength and resources. The single most important organization of this segment of civil society – Radio Maryja – was founded as a local radio station in 1991 and quickly spawned a dense network of organizations across the country. By the end of 1990s it had a weekly audience of 5,500,000 and a large network of organizations called Family of Radio Maryja. The Lux Veritas Foundation, founded in 1996, was the first significant supporter of extremist religious and nationalist organizations and initiatives. The debate and referendum on the new Polish constitution in 1997 became a pivotal moment that galvanized anti-liberal and anti-European forces and movements in support of traditional values, Polish Catholicism and nationalism.

Churches and religious institutions have become a significant factor in sustaining the faith-based pillar of civil society. Both the Catholic Church and other denominations have created networks of organizations tied to churches (Manger 2015: 63-67). They have formed a diverse system of national, regional and local organizations that are controlled to a varying degree by the church hierarchy. These grassroots organizations usually have small, informal memberships. The most popular types are prayer and charitable groups, as well as groups organizing sport and leisure activities. They are usually created jointly by parish priests and lay people. The Catholic Church Statistical Institute reported that in 1998, there were already some 40,000 such organizations with over 2 million members in total. By 2008, their number had increased to over 60,000 and membership reached nearly 2.7 million. The Polish Main Statistical Office

(2017: 148-46) estimated that 9 percent of Poles are active in religious organizations that is almost as many as in all other (non-religious) civil society organizations.

These organizations not only focused on local activities but have been increasingly present in the country's politics. They were able to initiate and coordinate spectacular nationwide campaigns, such as collecting some 7 million signatures for a petition in support of Radio Maryja in the late 1990s, organizing a get-together of Radio Maryja families in Częstochowa in 2005 with some half a million participants, or the Rosary to the Borders event in 2017. The latter brought together one million Polish Catholics who took part in a massive collective prayer organized in 4,000 prayer zones along the full length of the Polish border, including the beaches of the Baltic Sea and at international airports, to fend off immigrants (see Kotwas and Kubik 2019).

The institutionalization of the clerical sector belonging to the illiberal pillar of Polish civil society was followed by the emergence of a whole plethora of movements (skinheads, soccer hooligans, far-right extremists), right-wing organizations and media outlets representing nationalist, xenophobic and homophobic ideas. They declare support for traditional family values and fundamentalist Catholicism and represent themselves as heirs of the traditional Polish extreme right from the inter-war period. Since the early 2000s, this set of loosely connected newspapers, clubs and associations institutionalized a dense network of relations, enhanced their media presence and developed political alliances with right-wing political parties and moderated its activities (Platek and Plucienniczak 2017). The growth of this extreme right-wing sector of Polish civil society has been fueled by the migration crisis in Europe, which has not affected Poland directly, but has engendered anxiety further exacerbated by anti-migrant rhetoric often utilizing traditional anti-Semitic tropes. The intensification of nationalist and anti-liberal sentiments has been facilitated also by the prolonged legitimacy crisis of the EU and its institutions. As a result, illiberal and nationalistic forces have become visible in protest politics, and their quest for 'xenophobic normality' (Graff 2009) has been increasingly successful, especially during the first PiS government in 2005-2007 and after return of PiS to power in 2015. This is most vividly illustrated by the Independence Marches organized by

extremist organizations to mark anniversary of Poland's independence. Dubbed by European media as the largest 'neo-fascist' events in Europe (some 200,000 participants in 2018), marches symbols and slogans revolve around the theme of 'Poland for the Poles, Poles for Poland.' and are increasingly supported by the Polish government that decision to join forces with extreme right organizations in the Independence March in 2018 (Cayton 2020, Kotwas and Kubik 2019).

The institutionalization of the illiberal/nationalist pillar of Poland's civil society took yet another crucial turn in 2015 with the presidential and parliamentary elections in which the right-wing, populist PiS won the country's presidency and the parliamentary majority. The new nationalistic government fomented a constitutional crisis by failing to observe the decisions of the Constitutional Tribunal and by engaging in a controversial partisan takeover of the public media, other public institutions and boards of state-owned companies. It also launched a crusade against liberal values and organizations and institutions that supported such values. As PiS leader Jarosław Kaczyński recently stated, liberal ideas 'threaten Polish identity as well as survival of the Polish nation and of the Polish state'. Since in his view these ideas have nothing to do with Polish national identity (Polishness) and they are imported from the West, Polish society must be grounded in the teachings of the Catholic Church, and 'questioning the church's fundamental role in Poland is unpatriotic' (Baylin 2019). Thus, the 2015 presidential and parliamentary elections exacerbated existing cultural-ideological divisions between the two pillars of Polish civil society. On the one hand, elections legitimized and reinforced the nationalist-religious-populist camp now associated with the new government, and on the other, they galvanized the liberal, pro-European opposition which resulted in spectacular protests against government policies. In turn, these protests spawned a large number of counter-protests in support of the PiS government. Both pillars have deep and wide roots in society and their media networks, which is reflected, for instance, in their ability to mobilize large groups of people for protests, demonstrations, and participation in elections. They also actively support self-organization of citizens and their involvement in politics.

After its 2015 election victory, the PiS government took over the public media and lent its full political and economic support to the illiberal pillar of civil society. In December 2016 Poland's vice-premier Piotr Gliński, speaking to *Gazeta Polska* clubs (organizations associated with one of the most militant nationalist newspapers)⁸, declared: 'You are the true Polish civil society. Thanks to your efforts Poland is changing and the Polish government is able to preside over the country's responsible and stable development'. Government-controlled resources have started to flow to such organizations as well. State-owned companies have been directed to place their advertising only in the illiberal/nationalist media. At the same time, foundations run by these companies started limiting their support almost exclusively to organizations and initiatives belonging to the illiberal pillar of civil society. As recent data on advertising in the print media by state-owned companies shows, their support for the right-wing media has increased substantially since PiS came to power. For example, *Gazeta Polska* had received 91,000 zlotys from such advertising in 2015. This increased to 8.8 million in 2018. Similarly, while advertising from state-owned companies provides only 0.37 per cent of the liberal weekly *Polityka* revenues, it provides 44.85 per cent for *Gazeta Polska* and 39.77 per cent for the weekly *Sieci Prawdy* – the two most important publications of the illiberal camp. Thus, the pillarization of Polish civil society was followed and reinforced by the *re-etatisation* of its illiberal pillar through the active involvement of the government in supporting illiberal organizations and initiatives. This in turn reinvigorated liberal advocacy groups and media and gave rise to new NGOs, such as the Committee for the Defence of Democracy (KOD). Since 2015, Poland's liberal organizations and movements have successfully mobilized thousands of people to show their opposition to PiS policies and to defend the rule of law in Poland. Yet, their ability to defend the liberal order has been weakened by the solidifying alliance of the state, church and illiberal civil society. This is the alliance whose interests are well protected in a system in which democratic checks and balances have already been seriously undermined.

⁸ The idea of creating clubs emerged in 2005 and by 2016 there were some 400 clubs (including 70 abroad) with some 10 000 members and thousands more sympathizers and participants in meetings. They have played active role organizing monthly demonstrations in Warsaw to commemorate the crash of presidential plane in Smolensk in 2010 blamed on Russia and liberal Polish government of the day.

The process of *re-etatisation*, which was designed to benefit and strengthen the illiberal pillar of civil society, has political, legal and economic dimensions. First, the various sources of funding for civil society organizations and initiatives have been centralized under the newly established National Institute of Freedom, which has been formally charged with supporting nationalist causes and 'patriotic' civil society organizations. As a result, long-standing public support for various liberal organizations, cultural institutions, campaigns and artistic events has been significantly reduced. Many civil society organizations have been forced to replace state funding with private donations to continue their work. The government also created the Polish National Foundation funded by 17 biggest state own companies to the tune of 100 million zloty per year to support educational, academic and cultural activities aimed at preservation and nurturing of the Polish national tradition, dissemination of the knowledge of the modern Polish history and popularization of 'martyrology and heroism' of the Polish nation.

The legal framework regulating civil society activities has also been altered. For example, the new law on public gatherings favors organizations associated with the government and the church over citizen movements associated with the political opposition. Increasingly, activists of liberal movements and organizations, as well as journalists from the liberal media, have been intimidated and harassed by the security forces and by public prosecutors to deter them from pursuing investigations and expressing critical views of the government and its policies. Meanwhile, members of xenophobic and neo-fascist organizations involved in illegal activities and violent acts are shielded by state-appointed prosecutors who delay investigations or refuse to press charges.

Thus, after three decades of democratic transformation, Polish civil society has evolved into a deeply divided and polarized entity with two distinct organizational pillars representing antithetical value systems, visions of politics and scenarios for Poland's future development. Moreover, the unholy alliance between the state with its authoritarian ambitions and the illiberal/nationalist pillar of civil society has created new opportunities for far-right extremism

to flourish, intensified Poland's culture wars and changed the underlying structure of Polish politics. As a result, Poland is drifting towards right-wing political extremism, authoritarianism, Catholic fundamentalism and away from European democratic values. The escalating conflict over the rule of law in Poland threatens the decision-making process within the EU and has become a major challenge to the EU.

Jaroslav Kurski, editor of *Gazeta Wyborcza* and a leading critic of the Polish government, stated during the hearing in the European Parliament in 2018 that "in today's Poland a full-fledged nationalist revolution is under way. Its casualties include the legal foundations of the state, democratic procedures and open society." I suggested in this paper that illiberal civil society that emerged in Poland after 1989 provides the organizational foundation and shock troops for this revolution. The alliance of this part of civil society with right wing political parties threatens the future of liberal democracy in Poland and country's membership in the European Union. Poland is not alone in this predicament. Cultural and political pillarization of civil society has become a distinct feature of the contemporary political landscape across the world. Pillarized civil societies fuel cultural and political polarization, radicalization, xenophobia and nationalism. Poland may well be a crucial testing ground for political consequences of deeply divided civil societies and may offer ideas of how such divisions can be overcome.

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