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Game of the City Re-negotiated: the Polish Urban Re-generation Movement as an Emerging Actor in a Strategic Action Field

Abstract: In recent years, many Polish cities have become the sites where a new urban movement emerges, shaped in the meeting between the engagement of neighborhood activists around what Mergler (2008) has called a “concrete narrative” of particular space and everyday needs, and the inspiration of internationally connected “norm entrepreneurs” (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998). As part of the movement formation, a number of small groups and local associations have become important in the process of linking local issues to the global dispute over quality of life in urban areas. Although the process is multi-faceted and the involved actors diverse in nature, we claim that it can be described and analyzed by using the recently developed framework of Strategic Action Fields (Fligstein and McAdam 2011, 2012). We illustrate how this new group of civil society actors have become important in the “game of the city” in Poland—thus re-negotiating the public–private divide, which is a crucial part of the urban policy field in-between a retreating city-level public sector and the entrance of corporate actors.

Keywords: urban re-generation movement, right to the city movement, civil society, strategic action field, field theory, norm entrepreneurs.

Introduction

Since 2008 we have observed the intensification of grassroots’ neighborhood activism in a number of Polish major cities. The increased activism has gained energy with the popularization of the Lefebvre’s ideas of the “right to the city” and “urban democracy” among the local urban activists and their organizations (Lefebvre 1967, Harvey 2012). At the same time urban grassroots activism became an important and visible part of the Polish civil society, while remaining strongly embedded in the specific context of big cities and the problems of their inhabitants (Domaradzka 2015a, Jacobsson 2015). Although the scale of social activity in Poland is still relatively low (according to Social Diagnosis data from 2003–2013 participation in voluntary organizations stagnated around 12–15%), we can talk about slow but steady growth in the community involvement during the last decade (Czapieński and Panek 2013, Domaradzka 2015a). Also, as World Value Survey data shows, social activity at the local or neighborhood level has increased in Polish cities during the last ten years (Domaradzka 2015b). Even if this engagement remains local and often has a form of “bubbles of new” in the “sea of old” (Praszkier and Nowak 2011: 54) it can be seen as a sign of a growing willingness of residents to more actively engage in the future

development of the city instead of remaining passive “consumers” of what the city offers (Domaradzka and Matysiak 2015).

As we argue here, the synergy of all the mushrooming neighborhood activity resulted in an emergence of new organizational initiatives, forming the core of a broader new urban social movement, which quickly has become an important player in “the game of the city” or—in other words—an actor in the strategic action field of Polish urban policy.

The article discusses both the genesis of the neighborhood movement in Polish cities and the context of its development, when, due to the weakening of the earlier welfare state structures, neither local nor central government seems to be able to satisfy the changing needs and interests of different social groups in the urban setting. In these circumstances, local civil society actors, like neighborhood associations and community groups, play an increasingly important role in-between the retreating city administration and the recently expanding corporate actors. In this position, movement activists are able to participate in the negotiations of the future of the urban development by both symbolically and politically challenging certain features and consequences of the new, emerging urban landscape and its re-drawn borders (see also Polanska and Piotrowski 2015; Polanska 2013; Mayer, Thörn and Thörn 2016).

These actors contribute, firstly, by providing practical examples of what these groups consider better and more efficient solutions for local problems and, secondly, by developing and strengthening local democratic mechanisms at the city level. Therefore, we argue, these actors also function as the providers and powerhouses of new ideas, norms and models for how to shape the future of urban areas in Poland.

For the sake of this paper, we focus on actors in a particular field of Polish urban policy, ones that we researched in detail using Warsaw and Poznań as case studies of grassroots’ initiatives as well as the centers for national urban activist networks. We argue that changes in this particular field are emerging at least partly as a result of an earlier exogenous shock brought on by the shift from the earlier communist regime to a more recent capitalistic paradigm in Poland as well as changes brought into play by European Union integration policies. Consequently, we show how the emergence of a new Polish urban movement can be interpreted as a sign of social transition in terms of values and collective behavior, some 25 years after the crumble of the Soviet bloc and the fall of the communist regime (see also Siemieńska and Domaradzka 2016, Domaradzka 2015a).

Theoretical Framework

While analyzing the development and role of the Polish urban re-generation movement¹ we use the framework of Fligstein and McAdam’s (2011, 2012) theory of strategic action fields

¹ In this paper we use the “urban re-generation movement” concept to describe the highly diverse environment of grassroots urban initiatives representing residents claims for higher quality of life and control over public space. In this way, we want to underline the practical dimension of this social phenomenon, which is usually described by more general catch-all concept of “urban movement” fitting it into the New Social Movements theoretical framework. By using the “re-generation” idea we want to acknowledge the existence and importance of a “past” as a reference point to described processes of urban change and the challenging new ideas brought in by the movement.

(SAFs) as well as the writing by Finnemore and Sikkink (1998) on norm entrepreneurs, to allow for better understanding of this new phenomena and speculate about its future development. We also refer to Lefebvre's idea of right to the city as "a transformed and renewed right to urban life" (1996: 158), with the aim of putting an end to the urban segregation through democratization of urban strategy based on "an integrated theory of the city and urban society" (*ibid.*).

According to the field theory approach, organizational field is defined by the relationships and interactions between actors who share a common understanding of the field, its rules and purposes, although they do not have to share the same values or ambitions. On the contrary, the organizational field is often a field of contestation or conflict of different actors involved. They do, however, agree on who the relevant players are, what the stakes of the game are, and they also have a shared understanding (although not necessarily acceptance) of the rules of engagement. Along one of the most promising (Martin 2003) lines in field theory, Fligstein and McAdam (2012) consider the field as a game, struggle or even a battle with a particular set of rules. They define this "Strategic Action Field" (SAF) as a "constructed mesolevel social order in which actors (who can be individual or collective) are attuned to and interact with one another on the basis of shared (which is not to say consensual) understandings about the purposes of the field, relationships to others in the field (including who has power and why), and the rules governing legitimate action in the field" (Fligstein and McAdam 2012: 9). In this way they solve one of the classical challenges of "understanding the field's ability to provide goals while being the site for conflict" (Martin 2003: 31). It is important to note that "the struggle is both over and within the rules," thus opening up not only for rule-obedience in the field, but also for processes of rule-alterations or even challenges: "When patterns of conduct are recognized by actors as forms of regularity, conformity or nonconformity to the pattern, whatever advantages or disadvantages may also follow, has semiotic import [...] Like a poet breaking meter for emphasis, players break the rules precisely because they are rules" (Martin 2003: 31).

The particular Strategic Action Field approach developed by Fligstein and McAdam also allows for an analysis of multiple or overlapping fields influencing each other, which we consider a particular strength for our analysis. The embeddedness of SAFs is one of the central insights brought forward by the authors in their writing:

Fields do not exist in a vacuum. They have relations with other strategic action fields and these relations powerfully shape the developmental history of the field. [...] The relations between strategic action fields are of three types: unconnected, hierarchical or dependent and reciprocal or interdependent" (Fligstein and McAdam 2012: 59).

According to the authors, one particularly important type of field is the state field, or rather the approach to view the state as a system of strategic action fields. The state and its capacity to claim and exercise sovereignty gives it a huge potential to shape the prospects and possibilities for change as well as stability, although "the stability of even the most powerful state depends at least in part on the support it derives from incumbents that control certain key nonstate fields" (Fligstein and McAdam 2012: 67).

Finally, central to this particular strand of field theory stands the idea of the Internal Governance Units (IGUs). This is a special type of actor "charged with overseeing compli-

ance with field rules and, in general, facilitating the overall smooth functioning and reproduction of the system” (Fligstein and McAdam 2012: 13–14). These units are internal to the particular field and thus distinct from, for example, external state or government structures that hold jurisdiction over all types of SAFs. In overseeing the system, IGUs free the dominating actors, the incumbents, from the kind of overall field management and leadership that they necessarily exercise themselves during the emergence or entrepreneurial phase of a field. In this, they “ensure the routine stability and order of the strategic action field” (*ibid.*: 77). The sole existence of these units also serves to legitimize the rules of the field at the same time as they are standardizing and providing information about the field and its actors. Finally, they often act as the liaison between the SAF in case and other, adjacent or external, fields.

In the writings of Fligstein and McAdam, the concept of “challenger” is used for the kind of actor that brings system dynamics, change or even rupture to the field. However, we consider this type of norm-enhancement or provision so central in our case, that we prefer a special term for this type of challenger. We borrow the ideas of “norm entrepreneur” and “organizational platform” from Finnemore and Sikkink (1998) in their wider concept of “norm life cycle” to complement the breaking-the-rules possibility stressed by Martin (2003), with a changing-the-rules strategy in the more general model suggested by Fligstein and McAdam (2012). In our view, the norm approach provided by Finnemore and Sikkink in-itself adds substantially to the analysis of the field dynamics that we can observe, where the frames and rules of the game are transformed or at least challenged. According to this approach each of the “norm life cycle” stages has its unique origin and conditions under which norms will influence politics as well as its own mechanisms of influence. Although developed originally for international relations analysis, we consider the life-cycle model suggested by Finnemore and Sikkink suitable also for other types of situations where new norms develop and change the rules of the game.

Both the theories put forth by Fligstein and McAdam (2012) and Finnemore and Sikkink (1998) stress the capacity to deal with social change and dynamics. In the case of the latter theory, the first stage—which is the one we claim of most relevance for our analysis—is termed *norm emergence*. This is the phase when norm entrepreneurs are motivated to adopt and promote a new norm, either by altruism, empathy, or ideational commitment. These entrepreneurs often use organizations or networks as tools to promote the new norms, either engaging already existing ones or new organizations (or organizational platforms, to speak with Finnemore and Sikkink 1998) that have been created specifically for this cause, to persuade other actors (often governmental agencies or other public sector actors) to adopt and promote the new norms. Finnemore and Sikkink (1998) argue:

Whatever their platform, norm entrepreneurs and the organizations they inhabit usually need to secure the support of state actors to endorse their norms and make norm socialization a part of their agenda, and different organizational platforms provide different kinds of tools for entrepreneurs to do this. (*ibid.*: 900).

These organizations are themselves rarely able to coerce the other actors into adopting a norm—they have to engage in processes of negotiation or persuasion. Before being able

to move onto next stage, the relevant norms must be institutionalized into rules or organizations.

Once enough actors have adopted the norm, however, the stage of *norm cascade* will occur, during which actors are motivated by a desire to adopt a norm in order to enhance their own legitimacy or reputation. At this stage, new actors are motivated more by other external actors than by local pressure groups led by local norm entrepreneurs. When a growing number of relevant actors in the field in question adopt the new norm, this creates cognitive dissonance between behavior and identity in non-conforming actors. To retain one's identity as a relevant player, then, one must adapt to the new norm, if the norm cascading is successful and strong enough. The final stage of the "norm life cycle" is called *internalization*, where the legal system, various forms of professional training, and bureaucratic procedures will incorporate and acknowledge the norm. Any remaining non-conforming actors at this stage adopt it simply to conform. At this stage, the norm is now so institutionalized that it becomes a matter of habit and is taken for granted. It becomes part of common knowledge and is fused to the established rules of the game. Here, Finnemore and Sikkink concept has much in common with the core ideas of the institutional isomorphism theory developed by Powell and Di Maggio (1983), where they speak about normative, mimicking, and coercive powers in the institutionalization process, but with the important concept of timing added.

This institutionalization, however, does not mean that only one possible way forward exists. On the contrary:

Actors may face varied and conflicting rules and norms all making claims for different courses of action. Indeed, most significant political choices are significant and difficult precisely because they involve two or more conflicting claims for action on a decision maker. Actors must choose which rules or norms to follow and which obligations to meet at the expense of others in a given situation, and doing so may involve sophisticated reasoning processes (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998: 914).

In their SAF approach, Fligstein and McAdam place emphasis on various types of collective actors in the field, the dynamics for how different fields change, as well as on the broader inter-field environment and the importance of over-lapping or adjacent fields. On the question of how fields develop, they highlight both the importance of the interactions within the incumbent-challenger relationship and the relevance of exogenous shocks. As a result, their theory embraces a process approach to change, according to which a SAF might be found in three different states: in formation, stability or crisis.

In our opinion, the dynamic approach offered by field theory fits well the task of describing and analyzing the changes in the broadly defined urban policy field in Poland, with the focus on the last ten years, when new civil society actor entered the field. Through combining the SAF approach with the norm entrepreneur concept we aim at better understanding the sources of urban re-generation movement and its impact on the practical as well as normative dimensions of the urban policy field. We believe those two perspectives fit well together, adding strength to each other through highlighting entrepreneurial processes in transformative phases of field development, thus allowing for better understanding of the field dynamics and its possible future direction.

Method

For our research, we use qualitative and longitudinal data from field observations, combined with documents analysis and extensive in-depth interviews with urban activists from Warsaw and Poznań, as well as with experts in the field of civil society. During the first phase of research in 2012 and 2013, individual interviews were conducted with representatives of grassroots groups (in total 32 interviews) as well as with Urban Movements Congress leaders (3 interviews). During the second phase of the project in 2014 and 2015 these interviews were supplemented with expert interviews (3 interviews with specialists in the Polish civil society field) and additional interviews with urban activists (4 formal and several informal interviews) and city office representatives (3 formal and several informal interviews) after the local elections in November 2014. In addition to field work, an extensive discourse analysis was performed, including both urban activists' and urban researchers' publications, materials from web pages (including blogs and social media fanpages), official documents, analysis and reports, as well as transcripts from the meetings of the municipal committees concerning urban development.

The collected data is used to examine and analyze the processes and politics that shape the new and emerging urban re-generation movement and its early development in Poland. Presented results are based on the in-depth study of selected neighborhood initiatives in Warsaw² and—as secondary data—several Poznań cases described in a book concerning what the authors have defined as “battles for space” (Mergler, Pobłocki, Wudarski 2013). The Warsaw case studies were selected in a targeted manner, so as to represent different districts, social environment, space organization and quality of the city. Several variables describing the demographic and social structure of the population were also taken into consideration, e.g., the degree of residents' rootedness, neighborhood relations and the intensity of social problems.

Another significant source of data has been participatory observations at three Urban Movements Congresses (in 2012, 2013 and 2015, gathering between 100 to 300 urban activists from all over Poland), subsequent urban activists meetings as well as conferences and workshops concerning National Urban Policy and urban development organized both on governmental level (Ministry of Regional Development), as well as on local level (City of Warsaw Office, City of Poznań Office) between 2013 and 2015. Additional materials were gathered at a number of conferences organized by professional networks like Association of Polish Architects (SARP), Society of Polish Town Planners (TUP) or Polish Association of Developers (PZFD). Resulting 4 informal interviews with city planners as well as developers together with minutes from meetings were finally used to re-construct the perspective of different actors.

² Data was gathered in the framework of the project “City revival—from urban planning to grassroots initiatives”, financed by National Science Centre, DEC-2013/09/D/HS6/02968.

Background: the Withdrawing “Welfare City” and the Rise of an Urban Re-generation Movement

As a result of the 1999 administrative reform in Poland, the new system transferred welfare responsibilities to the local and self-governing bodies, with the explicit ambition to ensure better embeddedness of services within the population, but also with the aim to lower the cost of the implementation of centralized policies (Siemieńska and Domaradzka 2009, 2016). Sixteen years after this administrative reform, and in the context of a rapidly urbanizing Polish society, we can argue that the decentralization of welfare responsibilities translated into the creation of more local and differentiated welfare regimes, dependent on the economic as well as political situation of the city (Siemieńska, Domaradzka, Matysiak 2011). Most of the Polish cities, it has been argued, did however not manage to bridge the gap between the withdrawing welfare model on the state level and the arising needs of the urban residents (Nawratek 2014, Sepioł et al. 2014).

On a more general level, theorists and practitioners alike (Harvey 2012, Nawratek 2012, Krier 2009) emphasize that when city governments started to withdraw from their role as main investor in the cities, this role was taken over either by local private commercial investors or by international corporations whose main objective is to maximize their financial profits. Because of the supra-national nature and often short-term character of global capital, these latter investors have no significant linkages to the local or domestic community, and thus do not in particular care about potential long-term social effects of their investments, focusing instead on the immediate financial returns. Meanwhile, the existing local city governments instead assumed the role of managers of cities as “engines of growth” (van Vliet 2002), investing mainly in infrastructure projects and services that would attract multinational investors and developers. As some of the social activists now argue, the result of this business-centered policy was the neglect of the needs of the local residents as primary users of the city.

As some Polish academics (Nawratek 2014, Pluciński 2013, Kurnicki 2013) have argued, various grassroots urban initiatives emerged as a reaction to the “investment boom” of the last decade, on the wave of city development that violated both the “urban tissue” and existing social relations. Analyses conducted by the scholars in the field have been supported by interviewed activists’ statements, underlining that this new type of grassroots organizations—neither political parties nor highly formalized NGOs (Mergler, Pobłocki, Wudarski 2013)—brought people together primarily around the need to protect material interests of cities’ residents, whose quality of life was threatened by what has been understood as the combined consequences of the growing dominance of commercial actors and the lack of strategic thinking by public authorities about city development.

One could further point to the impact of Poland’s accession into the European Union in 2004 on both infrastructural and economical development of Polish cities. While EU funds facilitated (sometimes inordinate) public investments and the entrance of new commercial actors, it also strongly influenced both the urban policy field and the civil society evolution. One of the examples is the “Leipzig Charter on Sustainable European Cities” (2007) that obliged all European Union Member States to involve economic actors and stakeholders as well as the general public in introducing the integrated urban development policy,

taking into account “local conditions and needs as well as subsidiarity” (2007: 2). At the same time, several external funds and programs (European, but also American) focused on strengthening the civil society involvement and democratic mechanisms on the local level to help promote the idea of inclusive, democratic and livable cities. The circulation of resulting ideas and funds fueled the growing dissatisfaction of urban residents all over Poland.

Our Study: the Emergence of a New Civil Society Actor in the Urban Policy Field

While the quality and accessibility of urban space deteriorated all over Poland with the withdrawal of earlier public sector actors, dispersed neighborhood groups and local residents’ associations mobilized to take care of their problems themselves, without waiting for either public institutions or private corporations to provide appropriate solutions. Those new ways and novel civil society practices of expressing what has been called “urban resistance” (Wybieralski 2014) initially often took the form of small-scale local and neighborhood groups or initiatives, directly focused on improving quality of life in a given area of the city, without necessarily having a substantial amount of inter-organizational activities between or among the groups.

If we take into account the scope of the grassroots mobilization and its geographical dispersion, we can however understand these different local initiatives as being part of a broader new social movement (the urban re-generation movement). Here, we define the emerging movement as a synergy of diverse forms of civic engagement in the cities and about the cities, focused both on representing the rights and interests of residents as well as on catering for their concrete needs. The movement’s main distinctive feature is that the individual initiatives often are very local and practical, focused on specific problems or needs of local communities. One of the local movement leaders refers to it as the “involvement of the residents of the city promoting their own essential needs and interests, as belonging to the residents of the city, carried out in the city and through the city” (Mergler 2008: 15).

The Two Faces of Civil Society: Expression of Voice Versus the Provision of Service

In this context, several grassroots civil society initiatives also became an important voice, advocating for the needs of the residents as well as an alternative for insufficient public policies. Many of these actors thus combined the voice and service dimensions often found in civil society (Wijkström 2011) in one and the same organization; acting both as norm entrepreneurs and small-scale service providers at the same time. Different initiatives first started as sporadic and very local collective actions, usually limited to a single neighborhood, street or even building. They progressively became more numerous and more widespread in their scope. The turnaround came around 2008, when the self-organization of local urban actions into a more consolidated social movement begun, creating a nationwide interest group, acting not only on the city level, but also recognized on the national level. The main manifestation of this process was the Urban Movement’s Congress, established in 2011. As an earlier study by Kowalewski (2013) indicates, the Congress was an important tool for shaping a common movement ideology.

The main aim of the Congress was to achieve a real change in urban policy, through lobbying for more democracy in urban decision-making processes. As a new organizational platform (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998), the Urban Movement's Congress helped strengthening the lobbying abilities of urban activists in different cities, through building a wide support network of activists as well as experts on different urban issues. Overcoming the dispersion of the urban initiatives and organizations created the opportunity for organized efforts to press for a real change in legislation as well as practices of municipalities. It was, in a way, a manifestation of strength of urban local activists and their organizational platforms, which made them visible to both local (city) and national government.

For several years already, those new civil society actors have been active in a renewed negotiation of the future of the city and—in different ways and with various methods—opening up the discussion about the rules and principles for future urban development. In the wider theoretical context developed for our analysis, we understand the combined forces of the emerging urban re-generation movement in Poland as a new actor entering the field of urban policy as a kind of challenger, who—by the introduction of new norms and by breaking some of the existing ones—is striving to alter the rules of the “game of the city.”

As interviewed activists are arguing, an important factor strengthening the challenger character of urban initiatives is their independence from public funding, which also distinguishes these actors from many civil society organizations active in Polish cities. In this, the urban re-generation movement goes against the trend of NGO-ization and co-optation of civil society by public sector actors, a development that has been observed by several researchers in recent years (Nowak and Nowosielski 2006, Korolczuk 2011, Domaradzka 2011, Jacobsson and Saxonberg 2013). At the core of the urban movement remained instead independent grassroots initiatives directly representing interests of specific resident groups, often critical toward existing urban policy practices and priorities:

... for some reason, in a given time and in case of certain issue, some residents, motivated by a sense of responsibility for their city become engaged in a dispute with the city administration in the name of the future of the city. The starting point being their critical evaluation of the substantial part of the administration's concept about how the city should be organized, and the fact that the administration didn't try to consult their ideas with residents to a satisfactory degree. (Mergler 2008: 15)

From the perspective of the public administration, the urban activists became a visible lobbying group, focused on critical assessment of local policies and spatial processes. Their engagement has been met with different types of response, depending on the city (and often personal orientation of the public servants) and the particular issue at stake. In some cases activists' interventions were met with an invitation to participate in the discussion on solving the given issue or even incorporation of the movement's ideas into the political or administrative agenda. In others, however, the public officials of the city administration focused on preserving the status quo, making clear that they considered urban activists lacked the skills or knowledge to become a formal part of the decision-making process. Some civil servants in their response even underlined that different neighborhood initiatives represent the private interests of residents rather than public goals and therefore should be treated with caution, as any other type of lobbying. The urban initiatives stemming from these groups were also described as serving political goals and ambitions of some of their

members rather than the public good. In its most common form, the attitude of the public servants can be summarized with a quote from one of the interviews:

I understand that there are difficulties [concerning public development projects], but they accuse us of so many different things and it is so shallow, and I do not understand it. If those people want to criticize, they should do it in a constructive way. And what I think is important in the modern times is the new type of leadership of large cities. (...) This new leader has to create the conditions so that people can do things themselves. And these are things related to social activities, scientific activities, but also business. The leader has to create conditions for business, so it would develop better here in Warsaw. And the business will build the other buildings, and it will bring the money to strengthen the infrastructure. (Interview with a City of Warsaw's official, 2014)

Despite a certain level of distrust on both sides, we could however observe a visible shift in the practices of the city administration in recent years, often led by the internal “silent innovators” and civil servants bringing their activist experiences into the administrative practices of the city.

The Emergence of New Organizational Platforms—from Local Protests to an Urban Movements Congress and Urban Movements Coalition

As our qualitative data show, spontaneous initiatives all over Poland were usually emerging as protests against local authorities, after they announced some type of unwanted development, usually at the price of some of the residents' comfort. When the protest began, many of the active residents realized that they had no way to influence municipal decisions, and they started to form local coalitions and networks to support their claims. In many studied local initiatives we can observe the development around the stages described below, although some of them remained small scale, informal and focused on the neighborhood level. Most of them, however, developed along similar lines—from a local particular goal (to fix the street, build the playground, clean the graffiti, create a neighborhood garden, stop the unwanted investment, etc.) they moved to a more generalized goal or set of values (caring about the immediate urban environment, generating social capital, building local community, promoting urban residents' wellbeing) and finally express a political goal, establishing the new set of norms for the city development. In case of the urban re-generation movement those political postulates include reclaiming the public space as well as access to decision-making and city planning.

A breakthrough for the early phase of movement was the organization of the first Urban Movements Congress in 2011, which was solely devoted to networking and sharing of experience between local initiatives. At that moment, a group of pragmatic local activists also started to work closely with a group of intellectuals and academics. Some of these, we argue, played an important role as “norm entrepreneurs” (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998) at that stage, introducing the ideas and the concepts of the “right to the city” (Lefebvre 1967, Harvey 2012), “uneven development” (Smith 2010) and “deep democracy” (Appadurai 2001) to the discussion. From the practitioners' side, the idea of the “concrete narrative” introduced by Mergler (2008) became a shared motto, readily repeated and used to frame their actions.³ Those different conceptual slogans became part of the shared discourse within the emerging movement, which—as one important consequence—resulted

³ Concrete narrative, as proposed by Mergler (2012), is what makes it possible to act together in a situation of conflicting interests. It describes how through focusing on a certain concrete component of the common space,

in several publications (see e.g. Poblócki 2010; Poblócki and Mergler 2010a, 2010b; Kusiak 2011; Celiński 2012; Erbel 2012; Kubicki 2012; Leder 2013, Pluciński 2014). More specifically, these normative agendas were also part of the formulation of the *Nine City Theses* (2011) formulated during the very first Congress, including the core postulates for the democratization and decommercialization of the development strategies of Polish cities.

In 2012 the Polish national government initiated works on the National Urban Policy, a document that would regulate the field of urban development, touching on issues like quality of life, spatial planning, social participation, transport and mobility, energy efficiency, revitalization, investments policy, economic development, environment protection, demographics and urban management (Ministry of Infrastructure and Development 2014). A very first draft of this policy was discussed during the second Urban Movement Congress in 2012, during which the activists prepared their own proposition of the document tenets. At the beginning of 2013, the government established an entirely new Department of Spatial Development Policy, which, using the words of Fligstein and McAdam, started to play the role of an Internal Governance Unit in the field of Polish urban policy.⁴ The main task of the Department was to prepare the new project of National Urban Policy, including the handling of input from different actors in the emerging field—local administration representatives (e.g. Union of Polish Metropolises, Association of Polish Cities), different types of experts in urban planning, transport or environmental issues, and—last but not least—the urban activists and leaders of various residents’ initiatives.

At the same time, activists within the urban re-generation movement were lobbying for their cause through their own publications, social media and staged events focusing on the problems of the cities and democratic representation at the local level. As a result of this constant social and media pressure, the head of the Department of Spatial Development Policy at the third Congress in 2013 presented the state of affairs in respect to the works included in the National Urban Policy. The participants were invited to take part in a series of workshops where key topics of the document were discussed. This was in agreement with the focus of the Third Congress on the issues of further lobbying for legal solutions that would strengthen the voice of the citizens at the local level.

The visibility of the urban re-generation movement was also strengthened by a series of local referenda organized in several Polish cities, aiming to overthrow city presidents who had lost social and public support, but managed to stay in power due to the national political parties’ strong influence on local politics. Although most of the referenda were unsuccessful from the point of view of the organizers, they still were a significant manifestation of power as well as of mobilization potential of “angry residents groups.”

Important recent development in the movement history concerns the local elections of November 2014. While we could already observe local activists running for elections

which requires intervention or protection, even a highly diverse group of people can build the idea of common interests around it. Focusing on a specific matter (protection of a square, cleaning of a dirty backyard, etc.) allows for joint action of persons representing different and often conflicting interests.

⁴ Department of Spatial Development Policy was established in 2013 within the Ministry of Infrastructure and Development (previously Ministry of Regional Development) and is in charge of matters related to spatial management and urban policy, including these aiming at their integration with regional planning. One of its main tasks was to formulate the National Urban Policy document, which first draft, prepared after several stages of consultations, was published in 2014 (Ministry of Infrastructure and Development 2014).

in 2010, at this later time they even managed to become serious alternative to the ruling political parties in several cities.

In July 2014 a new election committee called Urban Movements Coalition was publicly announced. Grassroots candidates for local councils from eleven different cities⁵ decided to create this joint political initiative to further support candidates all over Poland in their attempts to be elected. Notably, many of the Coalition members appeared as political alternatives to the sitting local governments in several Polish cities and in four of them they even succeeded in securing a seat in the local government structures. At the same time, several urban activists decided to take up jobs in the city halls (e.g. in Warsaw, Łódź, Poznań and Gorzów), bringing some of the ideas of the movement into the city administration.

Apart from this growing political engagement, urban movement activities still revolve around urban policy tenets and introducing legal changes in favor of democratization and sustainable urban development. On the local level, they continue a daily struggle for “every bush and tree, square, school and kindergarten, tram, municipal building, a street, not to mention bigger things—airports, housing, urban highways, incinerators” (Mergler 2008). Those three main notions—political engagement, lobbying for legal changes, and spatial interventions – intertwine and are supported by the intellectual and ideological discussions about urban issues that take place in media and during the numerous meetings in academic as well as practitioners circles.

The Cascading of New Norms: the Congress Assumes Weight

At this point of the Polish urban policy field transformation, we argue, one can talk about a phase of norm cascading, facilitated by the emerging Urban Movement Congress lobbying on the national level, as well as the import and diffusion of crucial parts of the movement narrative by local politicians and civil servants into their own story-telling. One of the very tangible results—and victories—of the efforts of the Congress was the implementation of the second of its theses (the introduction of participatory budgeting) in many cities across Poland in 2013. Although, as Bendyk (2013) or Miessen (2013) point out, participatory budgeting is more of a safety valve protecting the status quo than a tool of real democratization, it has a strong pedagogical aspect while it allows for the expression of needs and preferences of the residents, at the same time as it has the potential to mobilize people to engage locally in decisions concerning the overall development of the city. Another proof of the growing impact of the urban re-generation movement is the popularity of the recent book published by some key activists in the movement (Mergler, Pobłocki, Wudarski 2013). The book has gained the character of a “local activist handbook”⁶ listing several

⁵ Urban Movement Coalition grouped the representatives of eleven local election committees: Gdańsk Obywatelski (Gdańsk), Gliwice To My (Gliwice), Ludzie dla Miasta (Gorzów Wielkopolski), Kraków Przeciw Igrzyskom (Kraków), Prawo do Miasta (Poznań), Razem dla Opola (Opole), Samorządni.pl (Płock), RSS Nasze Miasto (Racibórz), Świdnickie Forum Rozwoju (Świdnica), Czas Mieszkańców (Toruń) and Miasto jest Nasze (Warszawa) (see also <http://ruchymiejskie.pl>).

⁶ In the first weeks after the publication, over 500 free paper copies were sent out to 85 cities, while the electronic version was downloaded by a much wider audience. After the publication, authors were invited to present the book during seminars and conferences organized all over Poland (Mergler and Nowak 2014).

“battles for space” and describing legal tools available for citizens who want to influence city planning and decision-making processes (Mergler and Nowak 2014).

As our research shows, all over Poland those “battles for space” were crucial for the emergence of urban grassroots initiatives. From the interviewed activists’ point of view, the common space constitutes a specific point of reference and a context for fulfillment of everyday needs of the residents, uniting them in a very practical manner—the necessity to share the common space turns it almost automatically into a common good and a shared value. Thus, space can here be understood in terms of a classical “common-pool resource,” in the sense Elinor Ostrom (1990, 2009) uses to describe items as groundwater pools, forests, fisheries or grazing lands. It also constitutes the “concrete narrative” of everyday reality, allowing people to focus on solving a real and shared problem of local residents, thus avoiding discussions of an ideological or symbolic nature that would usually hinder cooperation (Mergler 2012).

The initial focus on the activity of the neighbors around a single problem or initiative is often translated into further actions, particularly if the cooperation so far has brought some measurable effect. The feeling of effectiveness provides the group with a sense of direction and it often also serves as a basis for building group identity through the shared story of successful activities. Moreover, defining of quality of a given space as a common good, which one may re-shape and reconfigure, results in a transformation of the informal initiative into a specific group of interest. Although we could expect that after a given problem is solved or a threat is eliminated, the group would become inactive, instead it usually turns out that there are many other matters worth taking care of together (Henzler 2009, Domaradzka 2014). Thus, both social trust and feeling of a collective efficacy (Sampson 2012) resulting from initial protests builds the potential for residents’ future engagement in community revival or development.

Conclusions

In this article, we posit that a number of citizens’ initiatives in Warsaw as well as other cities in Poland should be understood as part of a larger, possibly transnational, (re)emerging social movement for urban renewal and re-generation. We argue that these initiatives should be understood as a new form of citizens’ struggle for increased influence over their urban environment, a struggle in a particular strategic action field (Fligstein and McAdam 2012) where a variety of actors take part—public sector actors (both local and central government as well as administration), for-profit corporations (urban developers as well as retail capital), different experts (urban planners, architects, etc.) and civil society (urban activist initiatives and formal associations)—which have different interests in the “game of the city” (Domaradzka 2015b). Not only are these initiatives part of a wider movement, we also find some of them at the center of a process where old boundaries and previous understandings are renegotiated and where it is “the changing contours of common knowledge that are the object of the game” (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998: 911). We analyze these initiatives as a form of “norm entrepreneurs” in what we view as an emerging or at least renegotiated strategic action field, to speak with Fligstein and McAdam (2011; 2012).

It has been claimed that a new “right to the city” movement develops in Poland (Pobłocki 2010), and although we can agree with this line of reasoning being one of the intellectual influences for some of the initiatives and some of the activists, in our analysis we cast the net wider and show that the phenomena of new urban unrest and the ambitions and initiatives to re-generate the city are more complex and multi-faceted. We thus use the broader definition for our analysis, viewing urban re-generation movement as a coalition of many different actors and interests, rather than putting all of its complexity into one particular frame, that of the right to the city movement (see also Mayer 2009).

As we have showed, the new urban re-generation movement develops rapidly in Poland in the shadow of a growing marketization of the major cities as well as a result of intensifying migration to the cities and an increased individualization of the Polish society. The accelerated urban development that took place since the shift to market economy, strengthened by European Union structural funds, was characterized by the lack of long-term planning and reflection on the changing and future needs of the residents. The main reason for this lack of vision on the city—as claimed by activists, urban planners, or journalists alike (Buczek 2006, Kosiewski and Przybylski 2012, Domaradzki 2013, Mergler et al. 2013)—is that local authorities abandoned the primary role of investor in the cities; instead city development is mostly governed by market actors and forces. One of the main results of such a market-driven city development is a decline in the quality of life in many urban areas (shrinking or deteriorating public space, ghettoization, suburbanization, fencing). In this context, grassroots activists argue that the changing nature of cities requires an open discussion and urgent intervention, involving city residents in the decision-making processes, as they are the primary “users” of the city.

At the same time we can observe a gradual adaptation of the public administration to the new EU policies as well as increasing expectations from residents for more participatory governance. Those learning processes (Olejniczak et al. 2014) are led both by internal innovators and activists employed in the public sector as well as by politicians brought to action by the bottom-up pressure of their electorates. For some, greater engagement of these grassroots actors allows for shifting the responsibility from public to civil sector, for others it remains an expression of private interests that must be moderated. However, as the learning processes on the both sides are progressing, some new platforms for discussion and participation emerge, changing the norms for how to run the city along with the “rules of the game.”

Using qualitative data on the urban initiatives and networks as well as existing analyses of this emerging phenomena, we therefore claim that Polish urban policy can be viewed as a distinct field, as defined by Fligstein and McAdam (2012), where the involved actors interact around a set of more or less distinct rules, in a social landscape that has formed and developed at the intersection of, as well as by the tensions generated by, a number of earlier and more established fields. We further argue that presently we can observe the process of field re-negotiation, with a number of already well-established main actors or incumbents (public administration, experts, as well as business representatives) being forced to reframe both the norms as well as the practices by the emerging civil society actor as a challenger to existing power structures. As new common definitions are emerging, and new practices are being introduced, the change itself is far from being institutionalized. Clear tensions

between different actors within this rather heterogeneous field can be understood as an on-going negotiation of the boundaries as well as the core of the field.

From our perspective, one of the most central contours or borders now being re-negotiated by these civil society groups is where the boundary between the private and the public should be re-drawn in the new social contract of the city. One of our over-arching questions or concerns has thus been whether this should be understood primarily as a transformation towards a more semi-public or a more semi-private state of the affairs than before. New paths and recently opened fields emerge in the social urban landscape, offering new spaces for old as well as emerging actors. At the same time previous paths and openings become overgrown, forcing some of the residents to change their living patterns or strategies.

In the light of a slowly retreating public city administration in combination with a steadily growing interest from commercial developers, the new urban borderland between the public and the private sphere is currently being re-negotiated in a growing number of Polish cities, potentially with a number of much smaller and more recent civil society initiatives appearing at the center of those negotiations. The strategic behavior of these new actors, and their capacity to form alliances and strike bargains, has the potential to affect the development, in particular where the accepted new borders are being laid down. In this approach we follow Finnemore and Sikkink (1998: 911) in their conviction that “processes of social construction and strategic bargaining are deeply intertwined.”

While this article focuses on the Polish context, we would argue that the ideas present in the national field of urban unrest are also a part of a wider global urban re-generation movement. Based on the available data, we could observe how the postulates of for example “reclaiming the city”—both in terms of public space and political debate—were popularized in Poland by a group of “norm entrepreneurs,” active through existing international networks of urban researchers and activists and their efforts to translate (Sahlin and Wedlin 2008) the core arguments of the global movement and debate into a Polish context and reality (Pobłocki 2010, Mergler et al. 2013). Thus, both the theoretical framework and the empirical conclusions create a good starting point for analyzing the wider international development of what we may suspect to be a new or possibly altered strategic action field of urban unrest and citizen activism.

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