

## SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

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### Rural Social Movements (RSM) in Poland

*Abstract:* The terms “rural social movement” or “peasant movement” are used in many different senses and there is a need to systematize the theoretical concept of rural social movements (RSM) in the European, and especially post-communist context in order to understand the protest activity of agrarian communities. RSM have been present throughout the post-transition period in Poland, but the concept is applicable in other European contexts as well. This paper is an account of the origins and development of RSM in Poland. The focus is on Agrounia [Agrounion], understood as a social movement with distinct characteristics. Protest Event Analysis is used to collect information of rural protests in 2012–2022 and results are presented. Analyses indicate that there is a continuity in RSM goals, tactics and social base and Agrounia replicates the model adopted by Samoobrona [Self-Defence] in the 1990s. RSM are also considered as a political actors. They operate outside of the main established political blocs and avoid the cultural-historical cleavages determining Polish politics.

*Keywords:* rural social movement, peasant mobilization, Agrounia, protest event analysis

### Introduction

The terms “rural social movement” or “peasant movement” are not often used to describe modern industrial or post-industrial society, and the term has several denotations: it can refer to radical farmers’ movements, as well as to groups preserving the cultural heritage of villages or even to environmentalists (Woods 2003). On the other hand, rural social movements are discussed in literature of the global south (Deere 2003; Edelman 1999). However, they operate there under different social and economic conditions. Therefore, there is a need to systematize the theoretical concept of rural social movements (RSM) in the European, and especially post-communist context in order to understand the protest activity of agrarian communities. RSM have been present throughout the post-transition period in Poland, but the concept is applicable in other European contexts as well. This paper is an empirical analysis of the dynamics of mobilization of RSM in 2012–2022. In particular, it deals with the origin and activity of Agrounia [Agrounion], a social movement with distinct characteristics.

The paper is divided into three parts. First part is a short conceptualization of RSM. They are operationalized in terms of their membership base, goals and methods. Moreover, stages in their development are enumerated. Their emergence in Poland is illustrated by *Samoobrona* [Self-Defence], the strongest rural movement in the initial period of systemic transformation. Second part is the application of the concept for empirical analysis. It contains selected findings from the research project on rural protest in

2012–2022 using Protest Event Analysis. Information on collective protest events in rural areas and on events pertaining to rural issues was collected with a standardized tool and the results are presented. This section documents the dynamics of the development of RSM. Third part is a case study: a discussion of a major rural movement, Agrounia, as a political actor. RSM operate outside of the main established political blocs and avoid the cultural-historical cleavages determining Polish politics.

### Conceptualization of RSM

The term rural social movement is used in literature quite extensively, but in this paper a narrow definition is proposed. A lot of the discussion of peasant protests is concerned with the global south, in particular Latin America (e.g. Rosset & Martínez-Torres 2012; Deere 2003; Edelman 1999), where a number of economic differences compared to Europe (higher inequalities, disputes over land ownership), as well as different historical legacies (the role of the rights of indigenous populations) limit the possibilities for comparison. The peasants act in different socio-economic contexts.

In the Central and East European context, the term rural movement can refer to legacy structures that transformed after the 1989 transition, or were created top-down after transformation. Mamonova and Visser (2014) call them state marionettes. State-formed organizations or established structures with stable cadres may be social movements in name only, but lack defining attributes of spontaneous mobilization.

Taking into account the variety of uses, a specific narrow meaning of the term RSM is proposed here, in which peasant movements are understood in contrast to old and new movements. RSM do not fit neatly into linear processes occurring in the developed world after World War II. In European sociology, NSM are a commonly used concept (Buechler 1995). They are in opposition to “old” or traditional movements (Offe 1985). This distinction describes the forms of mobilization accompanying broader ideological changes in economically developed countries. RSM can be conceptualized against the backdrop of these developments: they are on the opposite end of the spectrum to NSM, reflecting socio-economic interests marginalized by the emerging urban elite.

Rural movements do not originate in social, political and economic vacuum and are affected by global, national and local transformations, even if they contest these changes. Social movements are spontaneous, weakly institutionalized expressions of collective contestation (Diani 1992). Not all activities of rural collective actors can be classified as RSM. For instance, we do not treat rural religious groups as RSM because they are not involved in contesting the system. For the same reason, we do not include groups that cultivate folk traditions. Although environmental organizations are social movements, they are typical examples of NSM, i.e. urban movements of the middle class—as a result of which environmentalists regularly come into conflict with rural local communities, e.g. over logging, hunting or farming.

Rural mobilization may have economic and non-economic reasons. Broadly categorizing, RSM tend to fall within the first category and NSM in the latter. Aversion to consequences of agricultural modernization and competition from imports also play a role.

The protection of hunting activities has been an issue. The protection of the countryside in relation to, for example, wind farms in Britain and the Netherlands are clear cases in which rural coalitions of non-farmers took the lead in the protests. Woods (2003) describes a number of factors which changed the balance of power in rural regions and contributed to a conflict of interest between the resident and in-migrant population:

Traditional power structures have been undermined from within rural society, as a more mobile and educated population, boosted and recomposed by disproportionately middle class in-migration, and with few ties to agriculture, has become increasingly reluctant to accept the authority of established elites. At the same time, the blurring of urban and rural space has combined with the assertion of new discourses rooted in environmentalism, animal rights and radical citizenship, to extend the 'legitimate' scope of state regulation in rural society into areas such as hunting and land management (Woods 2003: 312).

RSM are conceived here as an economic expression of social forces marginalized in the processes of industrialization, the emergence of post-industrial economy, and additionally (in Central and Eastern Europe) of post-communist transformation. They are voices of people who were (subjectively) abandoned by elites. These groups are dependent on state policy (subsidies to production and social welfare), but are marginalized from political decision-making process. Moreover, they may be culturally marginalized by urban elites who do not understand either agriculture as economic activity or the rural lifestyle. Such cultural conflicts are expressed by clashes of incoming urban residents and local people over the use of natural resources. These conditions may give rise to RSM, provided an opportunity structure appears (Foryś 2023).

The "old" social movements emerged in the 19th–20th centuries as a result of the industrial revolution. They followed a typical trajectory from spontaneous mobilization, through institutionalization into trade unions, to political activity in political parties. Their social foundations were clearly defined—they represented workers in industrial plants. The emergence of new social movements (NSM) is associated with the worldview change described by Inglehart (2018) as a transition from the material to the post-material stage of the development of collective consciousness. His view holds that the satisfaction of basic material needs (biological survival, satisfaction of the most important consumption needs) activates the resources of time and attention that allow for the satisfaction of other needs. These subsequent goals are related to the change of the value system—post-material values emerge, such as the need for belonging, expression and orientation towards the quality of life. These observations concern the macro level, i.e. phenomena at the mass level. NSM emerged in the context of these macro-trends. The institutionalization of NSM resulted from the fact that the cultural orientation accompanying the emergence of NSM entered into the practice of functioning of public institutions and private companies: the generation that formed the NSM (sometimes called the generation '68) became the ruling elite. In this way, it changed from being contestants to the existing order into its pillar. Characteristic features of "new" social movements are: a new type of participants, new forms of action, and a change in attitude towards modernization (Klandermans, Tarrow 1988). Discontent expressed by NSM is socially constructed, rather than structural (Klandermans 1992). Typical examples of NSM are: student, ecological, pacifist and women's movements. RSM, on the other hand, represent the rural settled communities involved in farming, or having economic or cultural links to farming or peasant identity. Their grievances are structurally conditioned.

NSM are rooted in the middle class (Kriesi 1989) and include urban movements dealing with ecology and spatial order in cities (Castells 1983). Thus, they may be in opposition to the traditional working class, but also to the peasant stratum (whether it is considered a class or not). The goals promoted by the elite may either run counter to the aspirations of people lower on the social ladder or be irrelevant for them. Several such dilemmas include: the contradiction between environmental protection and the preservation or creation of jobs in environmentally harmful industries; dilemmas related to globalization, e.g. protection of jobs for employees vs. acceptance of migration as an element of social and cultural change; a transport policy geared to the needs of residents of dispersed settlements or city centres.

### **Defining Attributes of RSM**

In the discussion of European RSM, the term is sometimes used with the use of NSM theory, treating RSM as a subset of NSM. Woods (2003) uses the term RSM to describe various groups active in rural areas which bear characteristics of NSM, as commonly understood in literature. Mooney (2000) and Gorlach et al. (2008) ground the understanding of rural mobilization in this literature. Our understanding is different. NSM, such as environmentalists or alternative-lifestyle communities acting in the rural areas, are indeed social movements, but should be analytically differentiated from peasant movements in terms of membership, goals and tactics. RSM are, in some ways, the rural counterpart of the workers' movement and a mirror reflection of NSM in terms of membership and goals.

In the article, RSM are conceptualized using social categories of participants (their structural location), as well as their goals and methods. The definition is narrow in order to clearly define socio-economic groups and link them to typical goals and tactics.

### *Social base*

If the social base is considered, NSM and RSM are polar opposites: on the one hand, urban movements organized by (future) elites; on the other, movements of the disadvantaged inhabitants of the periphery (see Bilewicz et al. 2022). The countryside can be a setting for the competition between RSM and NSM. For instance, environmentalist groups may seek the extension of national parks and local RSM may oppose such moves as harmful for economic interests of local populations dependent on farming and logging.

RSM represent, primarily, farmers; secondly, they are the voice of people professionally involved in agricultural production (food processing, trade in foodstuffs); thirdly, they represent rural population in general; fourthly, they group residents of small towns resembling villages. Rural and agricultural interests are the main area of their activity. In these movements, farmers, small-scale agricultural entrepreneurs and traders of agricultural products stand against large international corporations and state-owned companies. In addition to these main groups, i.e. farmers and agricultural entrepreneurs, RSM represent the people dissatisfied with economic transformation (Raciborski 2003).

### *Objectives*

The overarching goal of RSM is social justice (Gorlach, Foryś 2023). This general goal translates into a number of specific demands related primarily to agricultural policy. Policy is understood broadly here: the goals encompass both changes in state policy and the actions of lower-level authorities. The national goals concern not only agricultural policy, but also other areas, such as state finances. Political goals on the local level are related to the performance of individual companies. For instance, retail chains are called out for selling foreign food instead of sourcing locally. State agencies are challenged for nepotism and inefficiency, or political capture. Economic arguments are related to low prices of agricultural products (obtained by producers in purchasing) and high prices of investment products (e.g. fertilizers).

### *Methods of action*

Methods of protest are closely related to the social profile of the activists and the goals of the RSM. The tactics are designed to maximize the effectiveness of achieving these goals. The most commonly used method of protest are road blockades. Other methods include pickets, occupations of public institutions and demonstrations. Compared to other protests, peasant actions relatively often lead to the disturbance of public order (Foryś, Gorlach 2015). These disturbances may be non-violent (traffic stoppages) or violent (altercations, verbal and physical violence against officials).

### **Growth of RSM in Poland**

In Poland, the beginnings of RSM in its modern version can be found in the early phase of the economic transformation, i.e. in the beginning of the 1990s. Socio-economic circumstances caused the agricultural protests to gain widespread support in the Polish countryside in the 1990s. The years 1988–1992 are considered the most difficult period for Polish farmers. During this period, the real income of farming families decreased significantly, and the implementation of free market mechanisms resulted in a radical increase in the interest on loans, opening the market to imported food products with a simultaneous decrease in exports to the countries of the USSR, an increase in the costs of agricultural production, and liquidation of state-owned farms and the collapse of many industrial plants, which led to the decrease in living standards of farmers and peasant-workers (small farmers working in industry) (Foryś 2008: 121–124).

Mass agricultural protests started in 1990. The beginnings of *Samoobrona* [Self-Defence] movement date back to 1991, when Andrzej Lepper together with local farmers organized their first protest in Darłowo. Several farmers from the surrounding villages struggled with the repayment of their loans, and additional losses were caused by the flood and flooding of their farms; Farmers' Self-Defence Committee was established (Gorlach 2000: 287). Over time, groups from other regions, struggling with similar problems, joined. On January 10 1992, the Agricultural Trade Union *Samoobrona* was registered (Piskorski 2010: 53), which soon began nationwide protest activities.

The first period of Samoobrona is an evolution from a sectoral trade union with narrow economic focus towards an organized political force, extending its electoral appeal to new social groups. Initially, Samoobrona was formed through micromobilization, consisting in actions triggered by information about other protests, and then it developed into a centralized and organized structure. Gradually, the dominant position of Samoobrona among agricultural trade union movements was consolidated, and it replaced Farmers' Solidarity as the strongest protest organizer (Gorlach 2000: 294). Methods of farmers' protest actions, introduced by Andrzej Lepper gradually changed as well. They became increasingly more disruptive and radical. Additionally, they carried political demands, often with anti-state overtones (Gorlach 2000: 298–301).

In 1998, agricultural protests led by Samoobrona intensified. It cooperated with other agricultural trade unions, including *Famers' Solidarity*. During this period, the participants in the protest actions were largely agricultural producers, whose condition was directly related to the business cycles on the agricultural market. The drastic deterioration of the economic situation led to a radical decline in social sentiment in the countryside, which was reflected in public acceptance of protest goals, accompanied by rejection of radical methods (Roguska 1998).

At the turn of 1999 and 2000, Samoobrona made efforts to create a broad political alliance, which was intended to be a permanent formula of cooperation between all groups united by opposition to the policy of Jerzy Buzek's government. It was supposed to be an element of building a broad national-peasant bloc (*Rzeczpospolita*, December 6, 1999). Andrzej Lepper's increasing focus on party and political activities led at the beginning of 2001 to the departure of some activists from the structures of Samoobrona union. They decided to create a new union structure, *Ojczyzna* (Fatherland), which accepted the possibility of cooperation with other political parties, primarily PSL (Krok-Paszkowska 2003). Samoobrona entered the Sejm in the 2001–2005 term and again in 2005–2007. The apex of its political power was the participation in coalition governments led by Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (PiS) [Law and Justice] politicians Kazimierz Marcinkiewicz and Jarosław Kaczyński. Andrzej Lepper was deputy prime minister for a little over a year, from 5.05.2006 to 9.07.2007.

After the death of Lepper in 2011, Samoobrona continued to exist, but reduced its activities. Agricultural protests decreased in number in the beginning of the 2000s. This may be associated with the improvement in living conditions of the rural population, linked to EU subsidies and the general improvement in living standards: in 2014 there were no significant differences in living standards between urban and rural areas, which can be attributed to the positive impact of EU funds in rural areas (Sompolska-Rzechuła, Oleńczuk-Paszal 2017: 93).

In the period after PiS [Law and Justice] took power in 2015, the most active organizer of rural protest has been Agrounia, which was established as a result of the dissatisfaction of rural population with the policy of the PiS government. Agrounia was founded on the basis of a group called Vegetable and Potato Union in 2018<sup>1</sup> by Michał Kołodziejczak.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.agrofakt.pl/rolniczy-protest-produccenci-ziemniakow-pomidorow-hodowcy-swin-protestuja/>, Access: 26.05.2023.

Its initial activities indicates the sectoral nature of the association—representatives of potato and vegetable producers joined the protest of representatives of other agricultural sectors. Moreover, the demands put forward during the early protests indicate a search for a wider social base among farmers, not limited only to vegetable producers. There are also broader demands, such as: a change of the minister of agriculture, changes in grain imports, equalization of EU subsidies to the level of Western Europe, and normalization of diplomatic relations with Russia. The name “Agrounia” first appears on November 21, 2018<sup>2</sup>. In March 2022, the political party Agrounia was registered. Since 2019, it has been organized protests related to various aspects of the government’s agricultural policy.

These two are the prominent examples of RSM which covered the trajectory from spontaneous protest activity to a fully institutionalized political actor. Other RSM emerged which performed only some of the roles, i.e. without engaging with political goals and building political structures.

### **RSM in Poland, 2012–2022**

The goal of the empirical part of the article is the application of the concept of RSM to analyse the emergence and development of RSM in 2012–2022. Protest Event Analysis (PEA) is used to quantify the data.

### **Methodology**

Protest Event Analysis (PEA) is a method (Koopmans and Rucht 2002; Olzak 1989) which provides a solid empirical basis for observing protest actions in large geographic areas at significant intervals. It allows the quantification of many properties of a protest, such as frequency, duration, location, demands, as well as consequences and reactions (e.g. police intervention, counter-protests). With the PEA, details of the occurrence of protest events are recorded, which can be analysed independently or can be used as correlates of other social, political or economic events. In this article, we use the tested PEA coding scheme developed by Ekiert and Kubik (1999), where data collection procedure and protocol are described. The research scheme follows the methodological tradition of Tilly (1978) and Tarrow (1998). In order to code the protests, a standardized questionnaire was used to register the features of all protest events for which information was available in selected public domain sources. These features include: the scope of the protest, the number of participants, time and place of the event, socio-demographic categories of participants, organizers, targets and consequences of the protest action. Contextual data on the response to the protest, both from the authorities and other actors of civil society, is also included. Both numeric data and qualitative information were recorded.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.cenyrolnicze.pl/wiadomosci/wiesci-rolnicze/160-pozostale-wiesci-rolnicze/14432-blokada-a2-zakonczona-rolnicy-czekaja-na-ruch-ministra-ardanowskiego>, Access: 26.05.2023.

### *Rural protest and RSM*

RSM are operationalized in this section as occurrences of collective acts of rural protest. Rural is defined as either 1. occurring within a rural area; or 2. involving rural actors (groups or organizations based in rural communities; or 3. pertaining to issues specific to the countryside, rural life, rural issues, agriculture or the natural environment. Not all protests recorded as rural are the expression of RSM. For instance, environmental campaigns are rural events, but are not classified as a work of RSM. Neither are events such as strikes or strike alerts in village schools or events organized by urban activists outside of towns. The research contains a catalogue of all publicly registered rural collective protests events in 2012–2022—a universe.

### *Collective public protest*

“Public” is understood to mean an action which is reported in at least one source. “Collective” is an action undertaken by at least three people. A collective public event is an act of protest if it is undertaken to articulate certain specified demands and is not a routine or legally prescribed behaviour of a social or political organization and whose form deviates from the routinely accepted way of voicing demands. Demands are “articulated” when the participants (whether organized or not) turn to institutions, organizations and enterprises, both public and private, and: express demands addressed at the public. A single protest event may include the activity of several separate groups or organizations.

### *Sources*

The methodology was used to collect information from sectoral (agricultural) and local sources. The sources of information are media which focus their reporting on rural affairs and the countryside. Their content was stored by and commissioned from a specialized company. All information used to code the protest events originated from these sources. The unit of analysis combines information derived from a series of articles from all the analysed publications dealing with one particular protest event or with a series of activities which can be defined as a single collective public protest event. The full list of the queried sources is in the Appendix.

### *Data processing and analysis*

The information on protest events was coded with a standardized data protocol. As a result, an electronic database of all rural protest events in 2012–2022 was created. It contains both numeric data and extensive in-depth description of each case. The analysis presented in part 2 and part 3 is based on this database. Part 2 is based on the analysis of the quantitative material, while part 3 is qualitative.



### Rural Protests in 2012–2022: a Statistical Overview

The initial analysis consist in the overview of rural collective protest event intensity and attributes. **Table 1** shows the absolute number of protest events as defined in the section on methodology, aggregated annually. In the period under study, the annual number gradually increased, from 39 in 2012 to over 80 a year in the period between 2019 and 2022. The proportion of protests in which farmers participated as the main or supporting group was slightly less than half of the total in the period 2012–2022. The number of protests in which Agrounia participated, either as the main organizer or a supporter, rose rapidly after 2018. The protests in which Agrounia participated is a subset of the number of protests organized by peasants/farmers (the words are used interchangeably). The estimated number for 2022 is based on the extrapolation of the period Jan 1–April 15. In 2023 the activity is even stronger according to the preliminary analysis of available sources, gathered in another wave of the project; however, strict comparison is not possible so far.

Table 1  
Rural protest events in 2012–2022

	No. of protests			
	All	Farmers	Agrounia <sup>a</sup>	Farmers' protests as % of total
2012	39	16		41%
2013	60	30		50%
2014	46	33		72%
2015	50	27		54%
2016	65	14		22%
2017	24	5		21%
2018	48	32	7	67%
2019	87	33	19	38%
2020	88	44	22	50%
2021	83	47	31	57%
2022 (est.) <sup>b</sup>	102	67	42	66%

<sup>a</sup>Including Vegetable and Potato Union, predecessor of Agrounia, also led by M. Kołodziejczak.

<sup>b</sup>Data for 2022 are estimates based on results for Jan.–Apr. 2022.

**Table 2** shows the distribution of rural protests in terms of organizational structure and professional category of participants. In 15% of all recorded events, Agrounia was the main or supporting organizer. Samoobrona featured in 1%, and other farmers' organizations were active in 19%. They were a variety of actors: both large-scale and well-established, such as Farmers' Solidarity, as well as local and sectoral groups (e.g. the union of orchard owners). Overall, farmers (as a professional category) were represented in 48% of events.

The other main organizer of protest events were environmentalist groups. Their participation will not be discussed in this article, as it is beyond its scope. In almost half of registered events, other organizers were recorded. This group constituted a large selection

Table 2  
**Organizers of rural protests and professional category of participants, 2012–2022**

Organizers	Number	% of all rural protests
Agrounia	91	15%
Samoobrona	8	1%
Other farmers' organizations	117	19%
Ecological	129	21%
Parties (not Agrounia)	4	1%
Other	283	46%
Protesting categories		
farmers	300	48%

of actors, among them professional groups (e.g. teachers) and local associations. Their activity is not classified as RSM.

Most events were local in scope (table 3). This means their grievances were restricted to the immediate vicinity of the locality where they occurred. Almost one-fifth of all events had national-level goals. Farmers' protests in general and Agrounia events in particular had a similar distribution: most protests concerned local affairs, but a substantial number expressed grievances that concerned the national level. There were also farmers' protests with transnational goals. Some of them involved a joint action between Polish fur producers and a Dutch group. It can be classified as RSM action, though it did not involve Agrounia.

Table 3  
**Scope of rural protests**

Scope	All events		Farmers		Agrounia	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
local	415	67%	181	60%	63	69%
county or subregional	22	4%	13	4%	1	1%
regional	49	8%	41	14%	2	2%
national	115	19%	57	19%	25	27%
transnational	16	3%	7	2%		0%

The protest size is the number of participants at the moment of highest intensity, as recorded in the sources. Table 4 gives the distribution of events by size. They tend to be small-scale. For most events for which data is available, the size was up to 200 participants. Many protests were micro-gatherings which involved up to 20 participants. Farmers' protests (including Agrounia's) were, by and large, small-scale events of up to 200 people.

Protesters often use a number of different methods, both disruptive and non-disruptive. The disruptive methods are more effective in attracting public attention to protesters' goals, but may at the same time delegitimize the protest and create backlash. The most common form of protest (both overall and for farmers' protests, including Agrounia) is a road

Table 4  
Protest size

No. of participants	All events		Farmers		Agrounia	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
0–20	100	16%	54	18%	40	44%
21–200	178	29%	112	37%	22	24%
201–500	37	6%	16	5%	2	2%
501–1000	14	2%	3	1%	1	1%
1001–2000	23	4%	9	3%	4	4%
2001–10,000	31	5%	13	4%	7	8%
over 10,000	6	1%	1	0%	0	0%
Data unavailable	230	37%	92	31%	15	16%

Table 5  
Methods of protest

Methods (main)	All events		Farmers		Agrounia	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Blockade of road, picket	232	37%	146	49%	44	48%
Demonstration, march, rally	170	27%	84	28%	22	24%
Open letters, statements and appeals	82	13%	23	8%	7	8%

blockade, an action that causes severe disruption to order if held over a prolonged period of time (table 5).

The conceptualization of RSM used here assumes the primary importance of economic motives for rural mobilization. However, rural protests are not exclusively economic (table 6). About half of the events expressed various economic grievances, but a sizable proportion of about a quarter were organized around ecological issues. Almost one-fifth were related to the worldview divisions which are the dominant cleavage in Polish society. Farmers' protests (including events organized by Agrounia) were motivated almost exclusively by economic interests, usually related to the agricultural sector. This confirms the initial assumption.

Table 6  
Goals of protesters

Goals	All events		Farmers		Agrounia	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Economic, related to agriculture	288	47%	262	87%	79	87%
Economic, unrelated to agriculture	21	3%	5	2%	0	0%
Ecological	168	27%	2	1%	0	0%
Worldview	108	17%	24	8%	10	11%
Political	11	2%	7	2%	2	2%

The object of a protest is the actor serving as the addressee of grievances. The direct object of a protest action is a person or a one-person authority, an institution or an organization, who is addressed by protestors. The ultimate target of protest action is the person, institution, or organization which is to respond or react to the demands and grievances of the protestors. In case of the rural protests overall, most commonly it was the management (e.g. school directors), followed by ministers, central government in general and local government. Farmers' protests (and Agrounia events especially so) were most commonly addressed at the central government in general or individual ministries (table 7). However, farmers' protests were directed at all levels of authority, including local and provincial government and parliament.

Table 7  
Objects to whom demands were addressed

Object	All events		Farmers		Agrounia	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Management	93	15%	35	12%	8	9%
Ministers and/or ministries	74	12%	37	12%	13	14%
Central government	69	11%	50	17%	24	26%
Local government	57	9%	11	4%		
Parliament	32	5%	15	5%	5	5%
Provincial government	32	5%	26	9%	3	3%
Political parties	20	3%	15	5%	8	9%
International institutions	15	2%	7	2%		
President	9	1%	5	2%	3	3%
Members of Parliament	7	1%	7	2%	4	4%

### Modus Operandi: RSM as Political Actors

RSM pass a trajectory from spontaneous actions organized by local activists, via institution-ization as an interest-based group, to a political party. As such, they have to be considered as a part of the party system and located on the axes determining party policies.

The divisions inherited from the former system had a structural character spanning both the political elites and the mass society. In Poland, they were a defining characteristic of political competition and a source of identity. Thus, they could be called a socio-political cleavage: Grabowska (2005) called it the 'post-communist cleavage'. This view sees the divisions originating in late communism as durable and persistent, outliving the circumstances that brought them to life. The strong version of "post-communist cleavage" operated in the 1990s, and later it weakened. In the 1990s–early 2000s, the determinants of the right and left identity were primarily cultural and historical. Research conducted at that time (Pankowski 1997; Szawiel 2002; Raciborski 2003) showed that the most important issues were related to the attitude to the former system and value orientation. The left wing was associated with positive evaluation of the Communist system and relative secularism.

The right wing was characterized by frequent religious practice and support for policies advocated by the Church. The economic dimension was not a significant predictor of left-right orientation. Divisions within society overlapped with the structuration of the party system in the 1990s: the two main blocks, left-wing and right-wing were catch-all coalitions including a broad range of civil society actors and trade unions. After 2005 the blocks went through a reconfiguration. However, the cultural-symbolic dimension retained its salience in the XXI century. In addition, European integration gained salience in organizing the left-right axis (Radkiewicz 2017).

RSM are not typically located on either side of such a cleavage. They consciously avoid self-identifying as left or right. This was noted by Antoszewski (2007) in case of Samoobrona, which appealed to losers of systemic transformation, regardless of their ideological orientation. Raciborski (2003) claimed that Samoobrona could be considered a class-based grouping, but only in a broadly Weberian sense, if groups dissatisfied with the transformation could be considered as a class. Piskorski (2010) described the politics of Samoobrona as “the third way.”

Agrounia, likewise, is an interest-based grouping which operates across the main political division, which is cultural. Kołodziejczak put it in the following words after the 12th anniversary of the Smoleńsk crash: “It has been 13 years since the catastrophe that first united Poles, and then divided and divides to this day. May the history never separate us again.”<sup>3</sup> The strategic focus and tactical actions are discussed here using a case study, which is a series of collective protest events related to the introduction of the amendment to the law on the protection of animals. It is one of the events included in the quantitative part of the paper, here analysed in-depth.

#### ***Background: amendment dividing the government and opposition***

Since 2015, the government was formed by PiS [Law and Justice], a right-wing party. It governs with smaller coalition partners. The party was re-elected in 2019 with a reduced majority. The opposition was composed of the *Koalicja Obywatelska* (KO) [Civic Coalition], a liberal grouping, the *Left*, and *Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe* (PSL) [Polish People’s Party]. Another small opposition group is the far-right *Konfederacja* [Confederation]. Broadly speaking, the ruling coalition is strongest in the East and Southeast and in rural area throughout the country, while the left-liberal opposition is strongest in the West, North and in main urban centers. The office of the president was held by Andrzej Duda, the candidate supported by PiS. Farmers are the core electorate of PiS.

On 18 September 2020, The amendment to the Animal Protection Act passed by the Sejm introduced a ban on breeding animals for fur and the use of animals for entertainment purposes, limited ritual slaughter only to the needs of local religious associations, increased the competences of non-governmental organizations, introduced more frequent inspections of shelters and prohibited keeping dogs on short leashes. The law was commonly called “five laws for animals,” or “the Kaczyński five,” after the name of PiS leader. The law was introduced by the ruling PiS. The vote divided both the coalition and opposition: while the

<sup>3</sup> Facebook profile of Agrounia, [access: 13.04.2023]

majority of PiS voted for, a sizeable minority of its MPs (including all members of the far-right coalition partner Solidary Poland) voted against. They included the minister of agriculture. On the side of the opposition, all the Left and most KO MPs supported the law, but the PSL and Confederation were against. Thus, the proposed law crossed the partisan lines. Immediately after the vote, protests were announced by the groups opposed to the law. They led to a significant event on Wednesday, 30 September 2020 and in the following weeks.

### *Economic goals*

On 30 Sept., according to estimates, over 10,000 people participated in the demonstration. The protest started in central Warsaw and then moved to the parliament square, where speeches were held. Representatives of the protesters were received by president Andrzej Duda. A number of symbolic objects were used during the demonstration. Prominently at its head, the figure of Death featured as a symbol of Polish agriculture, followed by the participants carrying two coffins symbolizing the death of Polish agriculture, as they explained themselves. The Agrounia logo was flown next to the national flag. Colours of other farming associations were also flown. The banners featured slogans related to the proposed law and farming in general, e.g. : “We will defend the Polish countryside,” “The Kaczyński five will murder every farmer.” However, in subsequent demonstrations chants were also directed at the “useless opposition” for collaboration with the government or inability to stop the law.

The demonstration was followed by road blockades in several areas of Poland in the following weeks. On October 7 road blockades were organized in more than 100 locations around Poland. On October 21 roads were blocked in several towns in northern Poland (Kujawy and Pomorze) and in Łódź region, and there were pickets in front of MP offices; manure was poured in front of the home of one of PiS MPs. On October 28, a demonstration of farmers in Warsaw was organized by Agrounia. There were also smaller-scale events (pickets and blockades) in other regions throughout October. All these events were caused by the proposed law.

Farmers opposed both the content of the act and the procedure. They demanded that the law be rescinded, either by accepting Senate amendments or presidential veto. They expressed dissatisfaction with PiS government because they felt betrayed by the introduction of the law.

### *Cross-partisan coalition*

The organizer was the an umbrella strike committee. It consisted of nearly 50 organizations, led by Agrounia, The protest was supported by several political organizations. The dominant role was played by Michał Kołodziejczak. On location there were also party leaders of Konfederacja (its agriculture spokesman and one of the paramount leaders) and the leader of PSL. Representatives of both of the national trade union federations were present: chairman of the agricultural branch of OPZZ (All-Poland Trade Unions Association) and chairwoman of Farmers’ ‘Solidarity.’ Her presence was a political statement, as she was a PiS MP at that time, and by participating she openly defied party leadership over this issue.

A delegation of protesters met Andrzej Duda, the President of the Republic of Poland. His reaction was ambivalent. He expressed sympathy for the protesters, but did not explicitly promise to veto the bill. On the PiS side, the reaction of leaders was negative. The minister of agriculture, who had opposed the law, was dismissed. However, a number of its politicians supported the protest. Positive reaction was voiced by the Farmers' 'Solidarity' leader.

The parliamentary opposition was divided in its reactions. The minor groups, PSL and Konfederacja, strongly supported the protests, while KO and the Left are not reported in the sources as expressing a view on them. These parties had supported the proposed amendment, while being the main opposition to PiS.

### *Consequences: freezing of the amendment*

On 14 October 2020, the Senate adopted an amendment to the Animal Protection Act, but introduced further amendments. The transitional period for introducing the act was extended until July 31, 2023 for breeders of fur animals and until December 31, 2025 in the case of ritual slaughter of cattle. According to the legislative procedure, the Sejm should vote on the Senate amendments, and in case of acceptance, the president has the veto power. As of July 2023, the Sejm had not considered the amendments of the upper house of parliament. The law was effectively frozen.

The protest was unequivocally a success. It exposed the rifts within the governing coalition, but failed to unify the opposition. The supporters of the law included a number of NSM (environmentalist and animal rights NGOs), which found themselves on the same side of the conflict as the governing party, a highly unusual situation. The past support for the amendment on the part of PiS politicians was an effective rhetorical tactic used by Agrounia in later years. For instance, when a minister of agriculture was nominated in April 2023, his support for the amendment was cited by Agrounia as evidence of his inadequacy for the role.<sup>4</sup> The success in blocking the amendment to the Animal Protection Act is perhaps an example of such an unusual restructuring of alliances: on one side of conflict there were the majority of PiS, PO and the Lewica (supported by environmentalist NGOs), and on the other side there were Agrounia, PSL, Konfederacja and a minority of PiS. Think-tank leaders claim (Trudnowski 2021) that there is a possibility of a durable change in the structuring of political divisions.

## **Conclusion**

The paper applies the narrowed-down concept of RSM to civil society in Poland. In this respect, it has both theoretical goals (testing the concept) and empirical ones (detecting the dynamics of RSM development).

Both earlier empirical studies of peasant protests in Poland and the original study presented here indicate the continuity in the development of RSM in Poland after transformation. RSM

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.wrp.pl/kto-powinien-byc-nowym-ministrem-rolnictwa-michal-kolodziejczak-wskazuje/>. Access: 21.07.2023.

are distinct: they have identifiable structures consisting of active members and supporters, they advocate consistent goals (e.g. agricultural protectionism) and advance their grievances at targets (the state as regulator). They use identifiable tactics (blockades, disruptive demonstrations). They operate within a political opportunity structure (Della Porta 2013) by forming opportunistic coalitions not motivated by genealogy and common worldview, but by interests and ad hoc goals. RSM are social movements, rather than legacy state structures. They are formed spontaneously, but become institutionalized as parties and trade unions.

The continuity in RSM activism is also in the symbolic sphere. The deliberate replication of Samoobrona tactics and strategies by Agrounia include neutrality in cultural-symbolic dimension. RSM do not engage in broad ideological debates. For instance, during the Animal Protection Act debate they did not take position on ethical (animals' rights) issues raised by some NSM, but acted within their strategic goals. RSM are the anti-elite, against elites from both sides of the political cleavage, which evolves, but remains cultural, rather than economic. Foryś (2015) wrote that peasant protest groups, over time, increasingly abandoned religious frames but stuck to the national and professional identities. These collective action frames are still used as cultural reference for the articulation of demands. Therefore, RSM seek to support and build alliances based on expected economic benefits.

Let us conclude the article with possible avenues for further research. First, the concept of RSM is not applicable to the Polish or Central and East European context only. Poland is particularly interesting in this respect because of the delayed economic development, and hence larger agricultural sector and stronger peasant identity, but the defining characteristics of RSM can be detected in West European countries as well, and a comparative approach will be productive in identifying commonality (some initial results already obtained are not presented here). The peasant mobilization in the Netherlands after 2019 offers interesting comparative material due both to similarities in goals and tactics, and also the organizational links between Polish and Dutch farmers. Netherlands has a long tradition of peasant protests (Strijker, Terluin 2015) and the 2019–2022 protests linked activists of the Dutch farmers and the Polish protesting groups. In both countries RSM originated in opposition to policies detrimental to their social base and were formed outside of the established institutional structures (trade associations and political parties), which were perceived as either unwilling or unable to challenge the existing political consensus. We may tentatively hypothesize that RSM emerge in rejection of economic globalization in different socio-economic contexts.

The other direction for future research is the class dimension of RSM. RSM have aims framed as social justice (Gorlach, Foryś 2023), but face adversity from, among others, large multinationals. The conflict is reinforced by symbolic exclusion. For instance, Agrounia is faced with negative representation in the media (Bilewicz et al. 2022). Thus, RSM should be studied as disruptors of hegemony (in Gramscian sense) of educated urban elites over the public discourse.

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