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Between domestic politics and ecological crises: (De)legitimization of Polish environmentalism

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ABSTRACT

While political environmentalism played an important role in social mobilization against communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe before 1989, throughout the 1990s and early 2000s conservationism appeared to be in decline across the region, and external pressure from European institutions and Western donors influenced environmental policy. What explains the effectiveness of protest since the environmental movement emerged in the 1980s? We trace the emergence and evolution of Polish political environmentalism, looking at three levels of the environmental movement's legitimacy: the level of practices, societal support, and discourse. Each phase identified between 1980s and 2017 saw shifts on different levels of legitimacy, and each ended with a spectacular environmental protest or a decision, bearing implications for the following phase. Since 2010, we see a deep polarization of Polish politics, limiting the effectiveness of environmental protest despite the movement's regained triple legitimacy in large parts of the society.

KEYWORDS Poland; Central and Eastern Europe; environmental movement; European Union; protest; nuclear energy; air quality; Białowieża forest

Over a decade since the European Union's (EU) Eastern Enlargement, 'conditionality' is no longer a relevant mechanism of policy diffusion and political change in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). While formal compliance with the EU *acquis* has been achieved, state-society relations and the way different political conflicts linked to environmental issues play out in the region after 2004–2007 are visibly related to domestic factors. These include both momentary political games, protest mobilization, and the way structural contexts unfold in a longer historical perspective, transcending the symbolic fall of communism. In Poland, the difference between the outcome of the Rospuda river conflict in 2006–2007 and the protests against the logging of the Białowieża forest, where the government could for a long time afford to ignore both EU pressure and domestic activism, are a case in

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point. To understand the effectiveness of environmental protest and its limits in Poland, we need to pay closer attention to the political power and legitimacy of the movement itself.

The surprising demise of a mass environmental protest movement in Poland after its heyday in the late 1980s has already drawn significant scholarly attention (Gliński and Koziarek 2007, Szulecki *et al.* 2015, van Eeden 2018). A lot of research has also addressed the process of the ‘NGO-ization’ of civil society in post-communist contexts (Jacobsson and Saxonberg 2016), and the role of pre-accession EU conditionality and ‘Europeanization’ in re-shaping Poland’s legislative and ideational landscape related to environmental protection (Börzel and Buzogány 2010, Szulecka and Szulecki 2013, Cent *et al.* 2014). Here, we attempt to put all those dispersed arguments together under one analytical narrative, tracing the evolution of Polish political environmentalism through the fall of communism, transformation, EU accession and the post-accession period and accounting for its societal legitimacy which translates into potential influence and effectiveness of protest actions and policy proposals. We trace the (*de*) *legitimization* of Polish political environmentalism on three levels: of societal reach, practice, and discourse.

A unifying theoretical frame allows us to meaningfully compare the different phases of the movement’s evolution: from its emergence in late socialist 1980s, through the transformation of the 1990s, the pre- and post-accession phase until today. Legitimacy at these levels helps explain the movement’s political power, visibility and the politicization of environmental protection. We argue, however, that legitimacy is a function of internal features of the movement as well as the social and material context in which it operates. The deepening polarization of Polish politics creates a situation in which the environmental movement can increase its legitimacy among parts of the society, while losing it elsewhere, despite the looming environmental crisis. This is clearly visible in our analysis of three contemporary issue areas: nuclear energy, air quality and the Białowieża forest.

Theoretical framework: tripartite legitimacy and social context

The history of the civil society in CEE, and visibly – the Polish environmental movement – is fragmented and suffers from conceptual mismatches leading to divergent, even contradictory diagnoses. Although much Western scholarship was devoted to the study of Polish dissent as an important example of ‘civil society’, for some reason it was concluded that after the transition to democracy that same civil society was very weak. Our analysis of the environmental movement under transition shows that it was not the case, and that in fact Poland ‘inherited a comprehensive and solidly institutionalized association sphere’ (Ekiert and Kubik 2014, p. 4).

Three separate literatures have thus far touched upon the political significance of environmentalism in Poland: the one of social movements and dissent, the broad field of civil society studies and the political science literature on Europeanization. The first, rooted in social history and sociology, focused on the period before 1989, and if it looked beyond that date, it was to analyze offshoots of the movement without a broader socio-political context. The second, in turn, tended to focus on post-1989 developments and used different methods and indicators, favoring organized forms of social activism. Finally, ‘Europeanists’ displayed a transnational gaze, emphasizing the outside-in vector of political change. We draw on all three, in an attempt of grafting their findings and insights onto a common analytical narrative. In this we not only seek to describe the evolution of the environmental movement, but more importantly trace the fluctuation of its politicization and explain why it appeared to be successful in some cases, while failed to make its political mark in others.

To do this we propose a unified theoretical framework built around the concept of *legitimacy* as proposed by Max Weber and operationalized by Patrick Jackson. Legitimacy is not a fixed feature of political actors, but rather the outcome of continuous interaction between these actors and their social and material environment. It thus helps us merge the insights of agency-driven social movement studies with more macro-sociological and historical approaches, and crucially for political environmentalism – the ‘natural’ environment.

Weber suggested that the position of political associations, as social actors, ‘rests on the prestige bestowed on them’ and the ‘legitimacy of that social action which is ordered and regulated by them’ (1968, p. 903–904). Legitimacy shapes social action by ‘rendering some activities permissible while ruling others out of order’ (Jackson 2002, p. 451). It is a relational concept, and the limits of what bounds acceptable action depend on the particular situation: and so, what is deemed legitimate changes, and legitimacy is inherently non-normative (Jackson 2002, p. 449). To be an actor means to have the capacity and authority to act, hence a social actor, e.g. a social movement is ‘the result of a successful process of legitimation’ (Jackson 2002, p. 455).

We conceptualize the legitimacy of social movements as functioning at three important levels. Firstly, a movement is seen as legitimate if it maintains a strong and visible *link with a wider societal base* – either through membership or mobilizing capacity. Secondly, its *instruments and methods* of action can be seen as acceptable and appropriate or not. The limits of what is acceptable are ‘fixed by a specific type of legitimacy, and this can reduce the possibility of “unacceptable” actions ... inasmuch as there is no legitimate way to justify them’ (Jackson 2002, p. 452). Finally, on the level of *discourse and ideas*, the relationship between those which the movement represents

and how it frames its main arguments can resonate or clash with the dominant discourses of the society. Delegitimation at all these levels results in a situation similar to what Jürgen Habermas calls a legitimation crisis, when a particular institution or political movement can no longer achieve its goals even if it maintains physical and institutional continuity. Legitimacy is also linked to the ability of keeping environmental issues politicized.

As legitimacy is part of the realm of social context, it is a factor shaping actions indirectly by 'changing the contours of the social environment into which action arises' (Ibidem: 452). Apart from the political, social and economic context, a key 'exogenous' factor that is rarely addressed in the research on CEE environmentalism is the actual state of the 'natural' environment and the idea of an environmental *crisis*. While scholars studying environmental movements of the 1980s have repeated after natural science experts and the activists themselves that their political action was a response to an ecological crisis, the environment later seems absent from analyses of the further development of the movement. Turning to Bruno Latour's definition of political ecology as a current emerging 'not so much from a crisis of ecological objects as the constitutive crisis touching all things' (Latour 2009, p. 42), we suggest to look at the practices of environmental movements to understand the conditions in which waging political environmentalism is set, and to draw conclusions from the fact that we do not confront an unchangeable nature existing 'out there' but rather a blend of human and non-human factors. This helps us understand the fluctuating politicization of the environment by the environmental movement, but also the ways in which the movement is itself entangled in political processes. An important notion here is *environmentality*, which Arun Agrawal understands as a 'framework of understanding in which technologies of self and power are involved in the creation of new subjects concerned about the environment' (2005, p. 166), a merger of Foucauldian governmentality with the environment, aimed at capturing the political dimension of knowledge/power generation on 'nature'. In this paper, the environmental movement is entangled in the shift from a 'communist environmentality' (Snajdr 2008; also Schwartz 1999), which it directly challenged towards some hybrid 'post-communist environmentality', which it co-creates. All this means that environmental political practices occur within a landscape shaped by ideological, technological and infrastructural legacies of Communism, interacting with other local traditions, as well as visions of the environment 'imported' from the West together with cultural emulation, civil society aid, or formal EU *aquis*, and no less importantly by changes in the environment at local, national and global scale (compare Schwartz 2005, p. 294).

(De)legitimation, understood as the mechanism or process of 'drawing and (re)establishing boundaries, ruling some courses of action acceptable and others unacceptable' (Jackson 2002, p. 453-4), can help us explain the

actual outcome – which is the environmental movement’s ability to influence policy and decisions on important issues. What factors influence legitimacy on these three levels? In this paper, we go quite far back to trace the changes in the political sphere as well as changes in dominant societal values. We see these as pools of dispositional factors, which can be activated in different conjunctures. Within a modern industrial society in ‘Europe’ there will always be a traceable tradition of protecting the environment, as well as important discourses which overwrite environmental concerns (see Szulecki 2011). There will always be a tradition of more confrontational resistance as well as legality or consensual decision-making. The question is rather why are these particular dispositions activated in particular moments and how do they influence socio-political orders.

In our analysis, we draw on a wide review of existing secondary literature of the Polish green movement and environmental protest, as well as that relating to the evolution of Poland’s civil society after 1990. We also use archival and media sources to reconstruct some important events and the way they were reported at the time. For more in depth opinions on the evolution of the movement we rely on interviews. This is combined with an analysis of different public opinion surveys relating to environmental values and attitudes towards nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), politicians and levels of trust.

Triple legitimacy: Polish political environmentalism 1980-1988

The communist environmentality envisaged two major roles for nature: as a resource and as a decoration (Snajdr 2008). Consequently, nature was depoliticized, unless the quality of the environment directly impacted livability or health. That minimal understanding of environmentalism was a base on which environmental movements could build. First independent environmental organizations in Poland emerged in the early 1980s (most importantly the *Polish Ecological Club* – PKE), while a new generation of dissent after 1985 was instrumental in organizing wider protest – with the leading role of the *Freedom and Peace* (WiP) movement (for a more detailed historical analysis see: Hicks 1996, Žuk 2001; Szulecka and Szulecki 2017, pp. 5–8).

In the mid-1980s, a number of factors converged in Poland leading to the politicization of environmental issues. Firstly, the state of the environment was alarming. Clark and Cole (1998) suggest that while communism may have been the dirtiest social order ever constructed ... People’s Poland was ‘perhaps the dirtiest of communist countries’. In 1988, 75.8% of the rivers were classified as excessively polluted (GUS 1990 in: Millard 1998), and some areas were declared ‘zones of environmental catastrophe’ due to soil pollution. One third of the population lived in areas where all permissible air or water pollution standards were violated. Already in 1980, 43% of the Poles

declared dissatisfaction with the state of the environment (Kimla 2016, p. 465).

The nascent Polish environmental movement managed to mobilize different cohorts of the society compared to the mainstream opposition (though it built on some of its organizational structures), introduced novel repertoire of contention and brought issues that were not within the mainstream public discourse. An important boost for environmental protection and health concerns followed the Chernobyl catastrophe and fueled domestic anti-nuclear protests against the Żarnowiec nuclear plant (Piotrowski 2015, Szulecki *et al.* 2015).

In that initial phase, the environmental movement boasted a triple legitimacy, making it a very strong challenger to the regime and an important representative of societal dissatisfaction. It had a *firm societal base* and both the number of environmental groups and their membership flourished in the 1980s. Estimates vary between 135 to 200 groups and organizations (Gliński 1998b, Millard 1998, p. 152), with PKE alone reporting 2000–4500 members (Ostolski 2009, p. 403). Furthermore, protest actions drew large crowds, exceeding actual organizational membership manifold, e.g. a protest march in Wrocław in September 1988 gathered ten thousand protesters, making it the largest demonstration there since the ‘Solidarity’ May Day march in 1982. The ‘social referendum’ in the Gdansk region saw over a million ballots cast, with 86% voting against the construction of a nuclear power plant at Żarnowiec (Borewicz *et al.* 2019).

Accustomed to and approving of civil disobedience, the society accepted environmentalist protest and its flamboyance. Much of the innovation in protest repertoire during the last years of communism came from WiP and other green protesters (Kenney 2002). Bystanders would protect individual protest leaders or lone oppositionists, not allowing the police to arrest them.¹ It is safe to say that until the end of the 1980s, environmental protest based on civil disobedience was also seen as a highly legitimate form of dealing with the official authorities (Ostolski 2009, p. 404).

Finally, the movement displayed strong legitimacy on the level of discourse – environmentalist message resonated widely, even though the challenge to communist environmentality was often superficial. References to health, especially of children, made this much easier. Environmental protest was publicized by Western-based media, like Radio Free Europe, as well as Poland’s massive ‘second circulation’ (*samizdat*) press (Szulecki 2019, p. 195), further legitimizing the cause, and perhaps blowing the scale of their efforts slightly out of proportion.² Support from the Catholic Church, and the emergence as well as engagement of eco-activists in Catholic meetings also played a role.³ An additional factor was that while many supporters used environmental protest means to achieve anti-communist ends, environmental activism transcended the Manichean division between the evil regime and

the 'nation'.⁴ Political environmentalism offered some ideas for democratization that went beyond bringing communism down (Corry 2014, p. 318).

From Żarnowiec to Czorsztyn: delegitimized protest and limited base, 1989-92

Despite earlier popularity, and largely because societal attention was turning to the high politics of regime transition, the environmental and anti-nuclear protest entered the phase of exhaustion driven by two complementary mechanisms: *radicalization* and *institutionalization* (Tarrow 2011, p. 206–7, Piotrowski 2015, p. 256). While a large part of environmental activists looked for political and career opportunities on the democratized political scene, in public administration, formal organizations and business, the radicals contested the conciliatory path, demanding more and deeper 'democracy' (Borewicz *et al.* 2019, p. 97). From the perspective of the emerging new political system, cast around the idea of representative rather than participatory democracy, this was understood as 'refusing to take part in politics' (Gliński 1994). In fact, the opposite could be said: the radicals refused to allow environmental protest to be de-politicized and politics reduced to (then still semi-free) elections. Underpinning this was also a critical environmentality grounded in deep ecology, skeptical of technocratic power associated with communism but visibly taking over in the former opposition camp (Borewicz *et al.* 2019, p. 98).

Both the radical strategy and the expansion of more moderate conservationists in mainstream (non)governmental institutions led to important successes but had limits (Szulecka and Szulecki 2017, p. 12). Within the radical wing of the movement, a new cohort of activists dubbed the '1988 generation' (Gliński 1994, Kenney 2002) took over what was left of WiP and the wider green movement – not shying away from confrontational tactics. The radicals attracted both the anti-communist right and the anti-systemic, counter-cultural left, setting the protesters in stark opposition to the 'Solidarity' mainstream and the government of Tadeusz Mazowiecki elected in the semi-democratic ballot of 1989.

Poland's nuclear ambitions were upheld after the 1989 semi-free elections, citing sunk costs and with significant lobbying from the Belgian, German and French nuclear industry. In late 1989 and early 1990, some very desperate measures were needed, including a long hunger strike and siege of the site, plus a large dose of transnational campaigning to actually force the new government to resign from the idea of developing domestic nuclear capacity (Szulecki *et al.* 2015, p. 42–43, Piotrowski 2015, p. 236, Borewicz *et al.* 2019, p. 119-*passim*). Żarnowiec illustrated that much of the support the green protesters enjoyed in the 1980s was momentary. Chernobyl became a symbol of risk associated with the communist regime

and a dysfunctional unsovereign state. Economic transition led to closing down much of the polluting heavy industry, and air and water quality improved visibly, removing some of the rationale to support the environmentalists (Ostolski 2009, p. 416).

Moderate environmentalists were no less active, relying on expert practices but also offering a very different vision of 'nature' articulated in the eco-development (*eko-rozwoj*) discourse Poland's localization of sustainable development. In late 1988, the Commission for the Protection of the Environment and Natural Resources emerged within the 'Solidarity's Civic Committee, headed by Stefan Kozłowski, an environmentalist from PKE. At the Round Table talks there was an environmental sub-table where the opposition was represented by experts, but also leaders of the protest movement (Radosław Gawlik of WiP and Wojciech Kłosowski of the Green Alternative). According to Kozłowski, the negotiations 'opened a new era in Poland's environmental policy',⁵ overthrowing the socialist production paradigm and replacing it with eco-development, which was to be integrated into public policy.

After the first democratic elections, the environmental expert community populated administrative and political institutions and led to many important environmental policies, some visibly innovative (Szulecka and Szulecki 2017, pp. 11–12). The transfer of State Forests (*Lasy Państwowe*) from the Ministry of Agriculture to the Ministry of Environment meant that 28% of Poland's territory shifted to a different management paradigm (Gawlik in Tygodnik Powszechny 2014; see also Szulecka *et al.* 2014). In 1991, four important new laws were introduced, regulating environmental protection, state environmental inspection, national parks, and forestry. A system of environmental charges fed money into national and regional environmental funds. Environmental 'danger zones' were mapped, and the 'polluter pays' principle institutionalized. Thus emerged the three elements of effective governance: good law, effective enforcement, and funding (Józefiak 2014).

The environmental movement, which throughout the 1980s boasted a triple legitimacy, by 1992, became visibly split. As the regime transition unfolded between 1988 and 1990, 'Solidarity' elites were seeking a pragmatic platform for negotiating with the reformist communists. For that, they needed to tame and delegitimize radical anti-systemic protest. By 1989 and further into the 1990s, contentious forms of politics – strikes, civil disobedience and mass demonstrations – were increasingly delegitimized by the liberal elite and mainstream media as a counterproductive activity undermining democratization (Ost 2005, p. 103), claiming that 'democracy of protest turns into a dictatorship' (Kołodziejczyk 2000, p. 3).

As societal protest became 'symbolically illegitimate' (Ostolski 2009, p. 414), green radicals found their actions increasingly scorned, and their societal base dwindling. Public understanding of the implications of

environmental degradation remained low despite the fact that the polls were showing large support for environmental values. This proved decisive in the first important protest actions in the ‘transition era’ that occurred in 1990–92 around the dam near Czorsztyn, involving local gatherings and blockades. Despite the support of many experts and green-leaning politicians, it became obvious that radical environmentalists were politically alienated (Ostolski 2009, p. 409, Gliński 1998b, p. 6). Local police could pressure them (134 *criminal* cases against them only in 1991) and resort to violence, understanding that a group building on conviction not interest, lacks broader societal resonance.

We should not, however, interpret the Czorsztyn defeat as decline of the environmental movement. ‘If anything, a real movement had only started after 1989, prior to that we had dispersed protests lead by a small number of activists’ – claims Gawlik.⁶ The years 1991–92 saw an explosion of institutionalized environmentalism – reaching 700 new organizations (Gliński 1998b, p. 3; Gliński and Koziarek 2007, p. 195–6; see also, Ekiert and Kubik 2017, p. 41). Experts achieved important advances in environmental policy integration, but their societal base was by definition small. Overall, the only element, which kept full legitimacy, was the environmental discourse – even the mainstream media questioned not the *content* but the *form* of protest (Gliński 1998b, p. 7). Confrontation was increasingly replaced with milder campaigns as environmental issues became gradually depoliticized in the new democratic realities (Gliński and Koziarek 2007).

Professional NGOs and protest margins, 1993–99

In the 1990s, some of the organizations established earlier were unable to continue to function for structural reasons, i.e. lack of financial and human resources (Kozuchowska 2007). Environmental organizations became growingly professionalized, as long-term civil society activism became more costly,⁷ and required more specialized expertise. Professionalization led to societal alienation: many organizations would no longer expand membership, concentrating on fundraising (Gliński and Koziarek 2007, p. 204), growingly dependent on foreign funding, moving from a *bottom-up* to *outside-in* model (Waller 2010).

Professionalization can also be perceived as ‘maturation’ towards well-organized environmental NGOs (Gliński 1998a, p. 199), building capacity through self-education (1998b, p. 3), and increasing visibility of environmental organizations (Gliński and Koziarek 2007, p. 193). In 1995, there were some 100 periodicals appearing across the country (Ostolski 2009, p. 411). Western influence is also seen as assistance leading to increased capacity, a stronger position of the ‘third sector’, promoting new forms of ‘volunteerism’. The quality of NGO expertise in some areas surpassed that of public

administration, especially in nature conservation, renewable energy, transport, energy efficiency, water and waste management (Karaczun 2014). While it made environmental think-tanks and NGOs important actors in environmental policymaking in Poland and Central Europe broadly, it also created a new line of tension with the government and public administration (Börzel and Buzogány 2010, p. 710).

Within Poland's nascent under-institutionalized party system (Gwiazda 2009, p. 361), Green parties were very weak, although two of them – the Polish Greens' Party (*Polska Partia Zielonych*) and the Polish Ecological Party – the Greens (*Polska Partia Ekologiczna – Zieloni*) – had some successes in local level elections (Szulecka and Szulecki 2017, p. 15). Mainstream parties paid little attention to environmental issues and public concerns were dedicated mostly to economic issues (Millard 1998). The exception was the Ecological Faction of the center-liberal Democratic Union (UD), later turned into the Ecological Forum of the Freedom Union (UW). The most important achievement of this grouping was the 'Ecology in the Constitution' initiative, successfully integrating environmental elements into the newly drafted Constitution of 1997, e.g. 'sustainable development' as a foundational principle of the Republic. At the time, laws on animal protection were enforced and an exceptional funding system consisting of national and provincial environmental funds created.⁸

Recognizing the need to influence parliamentary politics, the Electoral Coalition of Environmentalist Leaders emerged to run in the 1997 elections from UW lists (Gliński and Koziarek 2007, p. 197, Ostolski 2009, p. 417). That decision led to a deep split within the environmental camp, with some of the radical deep-ecological groups treating it as an unforgivable mistake. The Coalition failed, and the Ecological Forum had little influence on the policy of a government in which UW was a junior partner, although Gawlik was appointed deputy to the conservative Solidarity Electoral Alliance environmental minister Jan Szyszko⁹ (van Eeden 2018).

The split over strategies for environmental political action became apparent when radical groups began a campaign at Mount St. Anne (Fałkowski *et al.* 2008), protesting a motorway planned to cut through a landscape park near Opole. The Mt. St. Anne Defense Coalition was a loose network of individuals affiliated with deep ecological groups calling for 'direct action' to stop the construction. After a month of camping in tree houses and chaining to trees, the police forcefully removed the environmentalists, and construction workers and private security guards beat them up several times.

The time between the 1997 electoral defeat and the end of the Mt. St. Anne campaign is perhaps the darkest hour of Polish political environmentalism. The movement was deeply divided: radical protesters would not talk to the 'liberal environmentalists' from the Ministry that came to visit Mt. St. Anne, while professional ENGOS were reluctant what they saw

as a futile and misguided protest. The *ad hoc* protest coalition was weak, sometimes struggling to have any activists on site maintaining the blockade.¹⁰ The use of private security guards against the activists, despite media presence, illustrated that public support for such contentious actions was nonexistent and the local population was visibly hostile. So were the national, even liberal and left-wing media, calling the protesters ‘ecomaniacs’ and for the first time scaremongering about the rise of ‘ecoterrorism’ (Grzeszak 1998). With the distinction between democratic and populist forms and causes of protest blurred, the environmental movement clearly reached the bottom in terms of de-legitimization of its protest strategies as well as political involvement. Environmental issues remained important only to some one-third of the society, mostly highly educated, reasonably affluent urban dwellers (Burger and Sadowski 1994 in Millard 1998), and the emerging post-communist environmentality blended the hegemonic neoliberal discourse on political economy with the remnants of an anthropocentric modernization discourse inherited from the past regime. Szyszko’s ‘first and foremost – humans’ approach (Olczyk 2018), and internal weakening of the Ministry of Environment, which until 1997 was a stronghold of eco-developmental discourse, countering productionist paradigms in the economy and agriculture, illustrated that dwindling appeal of deep ecology.

Before and after EU accession: 2000-2009

Professionalization visibly transformed ‘civil society’ organizations into hierarchical, corporate, specialized and centralized entities (Börzel and Buzogány 2010, p. 718, Jacobsson and Saxonberg 2016, p. 6), capable of managing support in the form of project grants (Hicks 2004). This helped to establish a common paradigm and increased consistency, but led to donor dependency, following the priorities of grant-givers rather than responding to societal problems (Gliński 1998b).¹¹ A new development was the increasing power and visibility of branches of foreign and international organizations. While participation figures were among the lowest in the EU, the apparent apathy among Poles did not stem only from economic realities, but also from the political elite’s efforts to discourage mass mobilization and channel social activism into NGOs, marginalizing other forms of political engagement (Jacobsson and Korolczuk 2017, p. 13).

However, the focus on NGOs, dominant in both public debate and civil society research, does not record popular local ‘self-organized’ civic activism without the involvement of any organization (Jacobsson and Korolczuk 2017, p. 7). Environmentalists were also pioneers among internet users – for mobilization and information. Mass petitions allowed to reach out to broader constituencies with only volunteer-based resources. While the

European Social Survey 2010 data show only 2.1% of Poles have taken part in lawful public demonstration, and only 0.2% in an illegal protest, and protest magnitude visibly fell in the 2000s (Ekiert and Kubik 2017, p. 52), 11.1% of Poles have signed petitions, which were seen as an efficient tool for protest and a first step towards civic legislative initiatives (Jacobsson and Saxonberg 2016, p. 13)

The impetus to join the EU helped set high environmental policy standards already in the 1990s (Millard 1998, p. 160). An important and relatively understudied area of EU influence is expanding participatory governance procedures (Cianciara 2015), unlocking communicative channels, and dismantling the strongest barrier for ENGOs impact on policy – ‘the authorities’ dislike for public consultations’ (Gliński and Koziarek 2007, p. 207). Europeanization of Polish environmental law resulted in the diffusion of Environmental Impact Assessments and public consultations, increasing opportunities of ENGO involvement in policy making (Cent *et al.* 2014, p. 97).

However, there was a flip side to that imposed participatory governance mode. An important blow to environmentalism, threatening its complete political delegitimization, was the emergence of the ‘eco-terrorist’ label. For years, exploiting the EIA procedures, a handful of organizations, hiding behind green window-dressing, have used a strategy of blocking investments through ‘eco-extortion’ (*eko-haracz*). Blackmailing investors with postponing the construction permit procedure almost indefinitely, they were able to make money on settlements (Kozuchowska 2007, Kassenberg 2014). Though ENGOs were quick to act, developing an ‘ethical charter of environmentalists’ and reporting malpractice to the police,¹² these groups have influenced the reputation of the entire environmental movement. The ‘eco-terrorist’ label, denoting uncooperative protest against the interest of the wider public (Kołodziejczyk 2000), had delegitimizing effects on the level of discourse. This was coupled with an important ideational shift. As the Polish society was becoming increasingly (though unevenly) wealthier, it was also becoming more materialist. Post-materialist values including environmentalism, strong in the 1980s and 1990s, now fell down popular priority lists, although public support for the development of national parks and reserves, for recreation but also biodiversity conservation was still strong (Millard 1998, p. 147).

Europeanization of policies and governance cultures met in the process of drawing up Natura 2000 areas (Börzel and Buzogány 2010, Blicharska *et al.* 2011). Faced with looming EU sanctions the government reached out to the environmentalists and used their Shadow List to design the Natura 2000 site network (Börzel and Buzogány 2010, p. 722, Cent *et al.* 2013). The overall process can be summarized as a ‘mixture of strictly top-down and emerging deliberative decision-making’ (Cent *et al.* 2014, p. 98).

Natura 2000 design resulted in a spectacular protest campaign – the largest since Żarnowiec. Opposing the construction of a motorway through the protected Rospuda river valley environmental groups launched a nation-wide campaign in its defense in 2006–2007 (Szulecka and Szulecki 2013). Unlike the earlier, unsuccessful protests, it combined local, national and transnational components, with the unprecedented involvement of international NGOs and European Union representatives, as well as the continued support of nation-wide media. Long blockade of the site was supported by demonstrations in Warsaw and other major cities, a petition signed by over 150 000 people leading to a momentary protest hype.

As the conservative government promoted a pro-developmental and anti-environmental agenda, it provoked a broad protest coalition on an anti-governmental platform, which framed environmental protection in terms of European identity, societal progress, liberty and democracy. The ‘Solidarity’ legacy and symbols were even appropriated by the environmentalists in the campaign. Crucially, civil disobedience and societal protest were suddenly re-legitimized, as liberal elites found themselves in opposition to a conservative-populist government. Environmentalism regained its triple legitimacy – in growing popular support, acceptance of the message and once again, the full spectrum of methods. However, re-politicization came at a cost. Expanding the movement’s base and gaining acceptance for radical direct action among the liberal groups and media, opened the possibility of framing political environmentalism in partisan terms, and that would soon become very important. ‘Paradoxically, PiS did a great job here. But the liberals have also changed [since the Mount St. Anne] and have been growingly aware of the environment since Rospuda’ – claimed one of the leaders of the nation-wide mobilization, Adam Wajrak.¹³ Although a sway towards pro-environmental values and EU influence was important (Ziemińska and Szulecki 2010), it soon became clear that the 2007 snap elections were pivotal, won by the liberal Civic Platform and bringing the environmentalist veteran Maciej Nowicki to the MoE (Szulecka and Szulecki 2013).

Political environmentalism in a divided society: 2010-2018

Recent indicators suggest that Poland’s civil society has changed from perceived weakness to levels above EU average (Ekiert and Kubik 2017, p. 46). The undeniable strength of Polish civil society lies in myriad individual initiatives and efforts, overcoming impersonal and institutional relationships, with members, volunteers, organizations, political actors (Jacobsson 2017, p. 101). This can be better understood as recombining ‘new’ and ‘old’ organizational forms and types of engagement (Jacobsson and Korolczuk 2017).

Meanwhile, the 2010 plane crash near Smolensk, which took the life of the president Lech Kaczyński and 95 other people on board, mostly political and military elite, initiated a process of increased politicization of all aspects of public life. The party system, highly volatile throughout the 1990s (Gwiazda 2009), finally reached visible structural stabilization and (quasi)institutionalization with the struggle of two dominant parties – the liberal-conservative Civic Platform (PO) and right-wing populist Law and Justice (PiS). PO's record eight-year tenure between 2007 and 2015 was a time of growing partisan entrenchment and the development of parallel public spheres with 'media bubbles' and divergent value systems. By 2014, sociological research began to show that this split is also influencing perceptions of environmental issues,¹⁴ with environmental concerns associated with left and liberal mindsets, while conservative and nationalist voters growingly skeptical of problems such as climate change, air quality and biodiversity. This plays out differently in different environmental issue areas, e.g. in climate policy Marcinkiewicz and Tosun (2015) show that there was neither a clear left-right nor a government-opposition divide and a 'rejectionist stance on climate protection' linked to the negative economic consequences and the coal industry is today present in all parliamentary factions. At the same time, value and public opinion surveys consistently show that overall, environmental issues were becoming less important for a majority of Poles (TNS 2015). Western influence in terms of diffusing post-materialist values and emulating life-styles experienced abroad has also become an important factor shaping the agendas and practices of some milieus, including environmental activists – a feature lamented by a green veteran as previously 'unimaginable' for the locally rooted Polish environmentalism (Ostolski 2009, p. 421, van Eeden 2018).

Ekiert and Kubik argue that contention, previously marginalized, has become a constant feature of civil society activity (2018). It is then no surprise that the remainder of this section discusses three case studies of new environmental campaigns, signaling re-legitimization of green protest on all three levels, and the politicization of three important issues: energy, air quality/public health and biodiversity protection.

Nuclear energy again: regaining grassroots outreach

After 2005, the conservative and liberal governments began to return to nuclear energy as an option for the Polish energy sector. Understanding its controversial nature, the authorities focused much resources on public relations campaigns and 'security' (Szulecki and Kuszniir 2017, p. 135–6). Fears of anti-nuclear campaigners mobilizing were not unfounded. Already in 2010, representatives of 71 organizations and environmental movements issued a joint memo criticizing the direction of Polish energy strategy and

calling for ‘abandoning the plans of introducing nuclear energy and public spending on its promotion’.¹⁵ Nation-wide as well as international NGOs like Greenpeace became very active in different protest and contestation activities. Interestingly, the ultra-conservative outlets like the Catholic TV Trwam and Radio Maryja were also instrumental in disseminating anti-nuclear messages, allowing the campaigners to reach new audiences.¹⁶

Governmental administration visibly feared the Żarnowiec scenario: ‘the most fundamental risk is . . . stopping the nuclear project at a very advanced stage, the way we’ve seen it in Żarnowiec, where large sums of money was spent and the local population was left disappointed.’¹⁷ In fact, local communities were not consulted before their towns were put on the list of proposed localizations in 2011, and learned about it only from the media.¹⁸ Societal mobilisation was strongest precisely on the local level, around the proposed localization of future plants. Sceptical locals began to self-organize in civic committees for resistance, and united in July 2012, forming the civic coalition ‘Pomerania without Nuclear’ (Borewicz *et al.* 2019, p. 200). In the clearest example of grassroots dissatisfaction, a societal referendum in Mielno, 94% voted against the plant or any other nuclear-related infrastructure (with a 57% turnout) (IAR 2012). Though not legally binding, the result influenced the decision of the governmental administration to cancel the localization decision. However, PGE – the investor, – was unimpressed, suggesting that the vote was based on ‘incomplete information’ and that the local community was inadequately active in the dialogue process organized by the company (Borewicz *et al.* 2019, p. 201).

The PO/PSL government pulled back and only Żarnowiec was left on the list of potential localities, as the interest in constructing a nuclear power plant has risen and fallen again several times. The networks of protest mobilization, combined with transnational pressure, however, have made the Żarnowiec 2.0 scenario increasingly probable, and it seems that the environmental movement has regained vital grassroots structures with the 2011–2012 mobilization campaign. Similar patterns of collaboration between local inhabitants, environmental activists and NGOs from Poland and abroad occurred in campaigns against shale gas exploration, leading e.g. to blocking a site operated by Chevron (Lis and Stankiewicz 2017). Bringing together legal expertise, readiness to mobilize locally and nationally, and grassroots support proved very effective in stopping governmental plans for expanding lignite surface mining in several localities, leading a governmental representative to conclude that no new strip mines can be built in the face of such organized opposition.¹⁹

Smog: public health back on the agenda

While air quality in Poland had improved once large industrial plants were closed after 1989 and new regulations introduced, there were also new

sources of pollution growing since the 1990s – most importantly individual car ownership and household heating based on lignite, bad quality coal products, as well as wood biomass and even plastic waste. A nation-wide air pollution monitoring scheme from 2001 implemented the EU 96/62 Directive (Bogucka *et al.* 2004). Though air quality consciousness was one of the least explored public opinion areas (TNS 2015), monitoring led to increased awareness as the situation deteriorated. Poland now has the worst air quality levels in the EU, the European Commission estimates that some 43 000 people die prematurely due to air pollution (Holland 2014, p. 48), many cities see alarming pollution levels for more than half the days per year, and norms were continuously broken for the past decade. The reaction of the Ministry of Environment in 2012 was to increase the alarm level for coarse particulate matter PM10 from 200 to 300 µg/m³.

The inaction of the authorities at all governance levels, and at times their motivation to deny that the problem even existed, provided the spark that ignited a wave of societal mobilization. In December 2012, the Krakow Smog Alarm (KAS) was established after years of dispersed protests against the scandalous levels of air quality in Poland's historic capital. 'We decided to take matters into our own hands and begin to raise awareness among the inhabitants. We knew that only civic pressure would force the city and regional authorities to take action' (KAS 2017). Awareness was indeed key for making this issue a nation-wide problem, as KAS estimates showed that 65% of the citizens felt they did not have enough information and 70% would like to have direct access to air quality data (KAS 2017, p. 5). In June 2014 a meeting of citizens, NGO representatives, businessmen, academics and experts at the Ekocentrum in Wroclaw resulted in the establishment of the Lower Silesian Smog Alarm (DAS), an 'apolitical civic initiative' interested in improving air quality in the entire Lower Silesian voivodship (south-western Poland) (DAS 2017). Both initiatives became institutionalized as associations. Other regional and municipal Smog Alarms emerged in Jelenia Góra, Opole, Silesia, Podhale and Warsaw, together forming the Polish Smog Alarm in February 2015 (Jakubowski 2015).

Awareness raising actions began to bear fruit, especially once they were combined with mass access to air pollution data through smartphone apps and websites. The problem dominated media outlets especially in the winter times between 2015 and 2017. Bottom-up pressure began to have visible results. In September 2015, the outgoing parliament novelized the Environmental Law with an anti-smog bill, giving local and regional governments concrete tools for fighting air pollution, but also visibly pushing the issue down the governance ladder. The bill does not force local authorities to act, only gives them space to do so and decide on municipal and regional emission limits, reduction targets and fuel bans. The municipal authorities in Krakow used that opportunity to introduce a very ambitious plan, including

a ban on all coal and biomass individual heating in the city by 2019. The number of polluting furnaces fell from 23,854 in 2015 to 14,991 in 2017 (Ogórek 2017). In Wrocław, the city started working together with the National Fund for Nature Protection and Water Resources to spend PLN 20 million, but that only meant replacing some 1000 furnaces, while the estimated number of those needing replacing is 40–50,000. Additionally, the Voivodship Council proposed a ban on coal fired furnaces from 2014, while the president of Wrocław suggested that this was too radical and wanted to see the period extended to 2028. Gawlik, now a leader of DAS, pointed out that the proposed legislation was ‘anything but radical’, and if the authorities wanted to imitate the pace of reform seen in Kraków the phase out should occur by 2021 and include biomass (quoted in *Gazeta Wrocławska* 2017). In October 2017 the Masovian Voivodship Parliament, passed an anti-smog bill for the region including Warsaw, imposing a ban on worst quality fuels by 2018 and a gradual phase out of old and polluting furnaces from 2022 to 2027.

The central government in Warsaw remained reluctant to act, however. The PiS health minister belittled the problem of air pollution, claiming that unhealthy lifestyles and cigarettes had a greater effect on public health (Makowski 2017). While Polish air quality norms are incredibly permissive (300 as compared to 50 $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$ in Finland or 80 in France), the Ministry of Environment rejected a plea of experts and doctors to decrease alarm levels, suggesting that ‘it would mean the need to signal the alarm very often’ (Fejfer 2017). A ministerial committee issued a set of recommendations in January 2017, aiming at containing the problem of smog but in fact very vague, and not banning the sales of lowest quality fuels. ‘Let us not fool the public, these regulations change nothing. The government does not want new norms because they protect the coal industry at the cost of air quality. They want to maintain the status quo while appearing to fight for clean air’-said a KAS representative (quoted in Fejfer 2017). A similar attempt at regulating fuels was derailed by the coal industry already in 2014–2015. In 2017, the government stopped the funding program for replacing furnaces. While it managed to finance some 34,000 new installations since 2015, that only added up to 1% of furnaces needing replacing.

The anti-smog campaigns were able to mobilize new sections of the society, politicize the problem of air quality and disseminate environmental awareness. An important link was made to both energy and climate policy, which are increasingly becoming a top political issue in the country, as economic and security factors converge with EU and global climate policy pressures on the Polish coal sector. However, the polarization of Poland’s political scene led to the de-legitimization, at least partial, of the anti-smog campaigns among the diehard supporters of the ruling Law and Justice. Despite breathing the same air, pro-governmental journalists asked why

the problem of smog was only noticed after PiS' electoral victory, and questioned both the authority of air-quality experts and the quality of data collected.

All this occurred in spite of smog being not a nature conservation, but a public health issue similar to those that drove the campaigns of the late 1980s. A potent and mobilizing political issue, air quality not only does not directly translate to environmentalism, but itself depends on policy framing. As an environmental journalist pointed out, the wealthy urban middle class is happy to support anti-smog campaigns when they target furnaces in tenement houses, but might quickly become skeptical when attention is turned to the need of limiting individual car ownership in big cities (Jędrak 2017). That problem was signaled earlier by surveys on environmental awareness (Urban 2016, p. 415), however, the ongoing campaign to save the Białowieża forest is an indicator of increased mobilization also in non-anthropocentric issues.

Białowieża: a symbolic struggle

The Białowieża Forest (*Puszcza Białowieska*), shared between Belarus and Poland, is a large forest area containing the last remnants of Europe's primeval lowland forest. The origins of the Białowieski National Park are in 1921; despite some expansion, however, only 16% of the actual Białowieża Forest is covered by the National Park and under strict protection.²⁰ The dispute over the Forest's management, degree and scope of protection and the governance regime is perhaps the longest lasting environmental conflict in Poland, dating back to the early independence years after World War I (Niedziałkowski 2016). Environmentalists and academics have for over 20 years argued for the need of expanding that area, countered by the forest sector interest group, including the State Forests holding and local inhabitants (Blicharska and Angelstam 2010, Niedziałkowski *et al.* 2014, Blicharska and van Herzele 2015, Chudy *et al.* 2016). The bone of contention has continuously been the divergent interpretation of what the Forest is and how it should be treated – a regular forested area subject to normal silvicultural practices, also for economic benefits (the 'managerial' and 'livelihood' discourse in Blicharska and van Herzele 2015, 'industrial' paradigm in Szulecka *et al.* 2014) or a unique site in need of strict protection ('primeval' discourse or 'protective' paradigm). Importantly for the local inhabitants, the expansion of the Park was associated with visible economic losses – the Park's 1996 enlargement from 4716 to 10,506 ha 'caused a 50% reduction in municipal tax income' (Logmani *et al.* 2017, p. 87). Yet the broader economic rationale has to be taken into account, namely, the political economy of the State Forests holding, who are managing this as well as all

other major forest sites, altogether 7.6 out of the entire 9.2 million hectares of Poland's forested area (Lasy Państwowe 2019, Szczutkowska 2019).

In 1998 the ministry proposed a plan to extend the Park to cover the entire Forest, and a 'Contract' to support the affected communities with funding. However, policy change in 2001, requiring local community agreement for National Park enlargement resulted in a grid-lock of any further expansion. In 2009 minister Nowicki made attempts to engage the population of communities bordering the Park, but the comprehensive effort to map and address some of the fears fueling foresters' opposition to expansion (see Niedziałkowski 2016) was rejected by the local authorities and cut short by Nowicki's resignation (Niedziałkowski *et al.* 2012, Logmani *et al.* 2017).

Independently, the Park was inscribed on the UNESCO heritage site list in 1979, in 2014 extended to the entire Forest, introducing elements of an international protection regime on top of different nationally recognized land use forms (Niedziałkowski *et al.* 2014). A UNESCO report notes that since then, State Forests have managed to forge close ties with the local community, while Park authorities were in contact with the environmentalists and researchers, and 'little or no exchange of information and knowledge seems to take place between the two "camps"' (Lethier and Avramoski 2017, p. 17; see also Blicharska and Angelstam 2010).

PiS accession to power in 2015 signaled a sway of balance in favor of forestry interests (Logmani *et al.* 2017). Jan Szyszko, returning to the Ministry for the third time, was not only eager to seek revenge on the environmentalists, but also closely linked to the State Forest holding through family and business ties. The ministry amended the Forest Management Plan for the Białowieża district in March 2016, increasing the volume of logging allowed in the Forest threefold (Lethier and Avramoski 2017). The justification, on which the ministry and State Forests based a public relations campaign to counter the media and NGO outcry, was the alleged plague of the bark beetle. The decision was supported by state institutions, but immediately challenged by nature protection organizations and the Polish Academy of Science. The environmentalists notified UNESCO, and brought a complaint before the European Commission in April 2016.

After a delegation was sent to the Forest, UNESCO called on the Polish authorities to halt the logging. Conversely, clear cutting increased and in April 2017 the European Commission issued a reasoned opinion urging Poland to refrain from logging within one month. To no avail, as by that time the government of Beata Szydło was in conflict with several European institutions (including both EU and Council of Europe).

In May, Greenpeace and Wild Poland activists started a blockade on site, later followed by a Camp for the Forest and cyclical 'Civic Walks' on tourist trails in the area, where activists and guests from across Poland and abroad

could witness and document the scale of logging. In June, a ‘March for the Forest’ was organized by, among others Greenpeace and the *Akcja Demokracja* network, gathering over 3000 people who walked through the streets of Warsaw and organized a sit-in in front of the Ministry of Environment, demanding that Poland obey EC and UNESCO decisions (Karpieszuk 2017). Some 180,000 people signed a petition calling for the Forest’s protection.

The prime minister issued a response to the Commission, informing that the logging activities were not violating EU bird nor habitat directive, while bark beetle is a threat that has to be addressed. The statement also mentioned the ‘continued pressure of naturalists – radical environmentalists’ and attacked the Commission for relying on ‘imprecise data’ (TVN24 2017). In July, the prime minister has also announced that Poland does not recognize UNESCO’s call for halting the logging as a valid decision (Gazeta Wyborcza 2017).

The issue of Białowieża became intimately linked with PiS’ broader assault on the rule of law and constitutional order in Poland, and raised during the wave of mass street protests in July 2017. As such, however, the issue was entangled in partisan politics, with the right-wing media and PiS voters expressing support for the government and its defiant position. The conflict has symbolic qualities, and does not necessarily translate to increased support for biodiversity protection, as biodiversity loss awareness is very low across all sections of society (TNS 2015).

The EC reacted by launching an infringement procedure against Poland and taking the case to the European Court of Justice (ECJ) in July. Environmentalist blockades were repeated several times, and the largest protest in August, gathering over 70 environmentalists from 12 countries, who chained themselves to harvesters and climbed trees, was met with a violent response from the State Forest Watch (Chołodowski 2017). On other occasions, the protesters met with violence from loggers, police, foresters as well as government’s supporters, while pro-governmental media denounced them as ‘eco-terrorists’. In September, the Commission asked the ECJ to impose financial penalties on Poland if logging was not stopped, and the environment minister travelled to Strasbourg in person to ask for more time and defend the government’s position, claiming that the logging was for ‘sanitary reasons’, not ‘economic’ as the EC and environmentalists claimed (Sollety 2017).

As logging continued, so did the environmentalists’ direct action, with several blockades at different sites held simultaneously. In early October, blocking log transport from the Forest continued for over a week, while another protest was broken by the Forest Watch and three activists were transported to a nearby hospital with stab wounds (Kruszewski 2017).

The conflict escalated beyond any environmental controversy since Żarnowiec, and the protesters became aware that protests in the Forest are ineffective and increasingly put the activists’ life in danger. In November,

a surprise blockade of the State Forest holding headquarters in Warsaw was held and after several hours the police detained 22 protesters (Kozłowska 2017).

In April 2018, the ECJ ruled that Poland has violated EU law and that logging must stop while decisions that led to it have to be revoked. Although large-scale logging was indeed halted, as part of a broader campaign to improve the relations with the EU following Mateusz Morawiecki taking over as prime minister. However, journalists and NGOs later reported that the Ministry of Environment as well as State Forests contested the decision and allowed for smaller scale logging to continue, motivated by public safety.

The showdown over Białowieża became a symbolic clash of two ideas about nature and two broader political mindsets. As Niedziałkowski *et al.* (2019, p. 2), two epistemic communities ‘with divergent sets of normative beliefs involved in the scientific discussion’ collided, one including conservation scientists and emphasizing biodiversity, the other inducing specialists in silviculture, stressing the need for interventions in forest dynamics. But the underlying stake was economic – and massive. ‘It was about enormous money. The foresters were afraid to have an example of a forest that can survive on its own, without their intervention. They were afraid that if they lose the battle over Białowieża, it would spill over to other important forests. One of them even told me: “Białowieża is our Stalingrad”’.²¹ Meanwhile, the government was emphasizing economic local interests, though dressed in quasi-environmental rhetoric, and underlining Polish sovereignty, while the nation-wide environmental campaign is gathering protesters at all levels and mobilizing international support, also from the EU and international organizations. As May 2019 European parliament elections approached, the Białowieża case was brought to the political agenda again, with new logging plans announced in April and again motivated with safety concerns, i.e. fires. Additionally, the electoral campaign involved targeting internal minorities, such as the LGBT and the government was eager to play the ‘eco-terrorist’ card, since, as Adam Wajrak argues, ‘conflict dynamics seems to play in their advantage and the environmentalist is an ideal enemy’.²²

Conclusion: between instrumentalization and an ecological crisis

The ecological movement in Poland has evolved since the symbolic threshold of 1989. Professionalization created visible problems, but at the same time, it also unlocked new opportunities. The potential of ecological organizations grows in terms of their scope. International organizations such as WWF and Greenpeace, which organized large-scale events in Poland and transnationally, had great impact on other organizations. That said, the heritage of the ecological movement of the 1980s, its leaders and their charisma is still of great importance (Kozłowska 2007).

What we are witnessing now is a movement in two directions, with the results still to be seen. On the one hand, an eruption of grassroots activism in the last decade (especially following the Rospuda campaign, though not directly linked to it), most clearly exemplified by new urban activism, expands the societal base for non-professional civil society organizations. This also influences the strengthening of environmental movements regaining that form of legitimacy. Contentious actions and civil disobedience as well as mass mobilization are again seen as a sign of civil society's vitality (which is a peculiar heritage of the first and second Law and Justice government), which can translate to a new opportunity for political environmentalism.

On the other hand, with Polish politics polarizing strongly after 2010 on the conservative-liberal axis, the challenge to environmental discourse from conservative milieus is unprecedented. This enables the political instrumentalization of environmental protection, making green issues both a growingly important electoral issue for center-left forces and turning 'ecoterrorists' into ideal scapegoats – a foreign inspired and treacherous internal minority undermining national sovereignty and traditional values – for right-wing populists.

The 1980s environmental mobilization was a foundation for the NGO sector that emerged in the transition (Piotrowski 2015, p. 255). The scale of environmental policy integration in the early 1990s and the way a number of important issues were handled by the expert community shows clearly that EU 'conditionality' was only an additional factor, while important domestic political and societal powers were driving the process of change, even if that did not translate into electoral successes of green political parties. The issues at stake were important (usually relating to commons), but often below the radar of public opinion and not as spectacular as those in the 1980s or the mass mobilizing protest actions – which is not to say that they were unimportant. The NGO sector on the one hand de-radicalized the movement, on the other created a stable source of environmental expertise.

Our research indicates that it is domestic political factors empower or mute environmental claims to a greater extent than external, European influence. Another causal element is societal legitimacy, linked to momentary shifts in the public debate and wider, more long-term structural-discursive changes of dominant 'values' (compare Szulecka and Szulecki 2013).

This is not to say that the European Union, its legal and governance framework and transnational processes do not play a role, as the Białowieża case shows, where the ECJ ruling was crucial for halting the logging – albeit after thousands of trees were already cut and sold. However, the stubborn position of the PiS government in all conflicts with 'Europe' – including Białowieża and climate policy – indicate that supranational institutions might in fact lack the power, instruments and political will to enforce some of the regulations that were previously regarded as binding simply because

they were in place (for example by Börzel and Buzogány 2010, p. 724). At the same time, more horizontal ‘Europeanization’ through funding and learning, cultural diffusion, life-style socialization is certainly very important, though in less direct fashion.

Comparing the Polish case with Western neighbors, the reader might ask why we continue to treat environmentalist protest and direct action as an indicator of the movement’s vitality and political power, even though elsewhere we emphasize expertise and other channels of policy influence. The reason is that despite some positive influence from the EU in terms of establishing good practices of public participation, civil society actors are still most often dismissed as unnecessary by hostile policymakers and civil servants. This lack of a culture of dialogue and limited legitimacy for a plurality of competing interests is explained with historical and cultural factors, and has significant impact on the way legislation is drafted, discussed, adopted and implemented (cf. Cianciara 2015, p. 74). Importantly, while the situation was improving during the second term of the Tusk government, it rapidly deteriorated after 2015. By 2012 93% of governmental legislative projects were subject to consultations and 50% of these were consulted with more than 20 entities (Kopińska *et al.* 2014). The Law and Justice parliamentary majority (since late 2015) has significantly increased the volume of legislation introduced to the Sejm as ‘parliamentary initiatives’ (projects brought forth by a group of MPs, not the government) which do not require any form of consultation at all (Obywatelskie Forum Legislacji 2019). This insulation from civil society impulses turns contentious politics into a much more common tool than in countries with a more participatory governance culture. As the last section has shown, Polish politics is characterized by a deep split, which increasingly influences all issue areas. Ideological and partisan differences can overlap with economic interests, like in the Białowieża case, where ‘given the observed exceptional strengths of the Polish forestry sector and its clear economic orientation, a strong turn towards favoring nature conservation issues is not expected in the near future’ (Logmani *et al.* 2017, p. 89). However, research in political psychology suggests that broader right-wing or nationalist-conservative views are not correlated with anti-conservationism, and only a particular ‘narcissistic’ national identification, limited to far-right and hard-core PiS electorate, is visibly anti-environmentalist (Cislak *et al.* 2018).

The polarization of Polish politics after 2010 boosted political environmentalism by unlocking the legitimacy of radical protest and direct action, which coincided with an expansion of the societal base and a growing awareness of different environmental issues, particularly among young urban liberals. However, the aftermath of the Rospuda success already contained the grains of future limitations. For Law and Justice politicians and their supporters, Rospuda was an example of a clearly instrumental political

campaign, Jarosław Kaczyński went as far as suggesting that environmentalists were inspired by Russian secret services, which undermined the legitimacy of environmentalism rather than strengthening it. The Białowieża case, with the PiS government unwilling to back off despite domestic and transnational pressures, was partly motivated by revenge for the 2006–2007 defeat (compare Blicharska and Smithers 2018).

Of the three case studies analyzed, the issue of air quality appears the most clearly non-partisan. However, while the quality of air in Poland was appalling for a long time, and so, the objective ‘crisis’ was ongoing, only systematic measurement since 2012, and politicization that occurred afterwards, enabled turning it into an political environmental crisis. Environmentalists’ partisan entanglement in an increasingly polarized society moves the political focus from the environment itself to the measurement methodologies, structures of protest and policy proposals. However, like the deep crisis of the 1980s, this one also appears to be too grave to disarm with rhetorical moves. The increasing grassroot mobilization against smog, cutting across the usual cleavages and increasingly present in smaller towns, constitutes an opportunity yet unseen for Polish political environmentalism to deepen and broaden its societal legitimacy in the following decade.

Notes

1. Interview with Radosław Gawlik in: Kenney (2007), p. 162.
2. Personal communication with Radosław Gawlik, Wrocław, 13 November 2017; see also: interview with Leszek Budrewicz in: Kenney (2007), p. 124.
3. Interview with Jerzy Żurko in: Kenney (2007), p. 144–7. Also: Kimla (2016), p. 470.
4. Interview with Radosław Gawlik in Olszewski (2011).
5. Quoted in *Okrągły Stół. Podstolik Ekologiczny po 15 latach*, Instytut na Rzecz Ekorozwoju, Warszawa 2004.
6. Personal communication with Radosław Gawlik, Wrocław, 13 November 2017.
7. Many oppositionists used day jobs more as a cover and legal prerequisite than a source of income, while even very small support from Western and exilic sources could replace regular employment – interview with Eugeniusz Smolar, Warsaw, 30 March 2010.
8. Radosław Gawlik in Tygodnik Powszechny (2014).
9. Jan Szyszko is a professor of forestry and active politician who has been Minister of Environment in several cabinets (1997–1999, 2005–2007, 2007 and 2015–2018). His productive vision of nature reflected in several decisions (permit issued to build the Augustow Ring via the Rospuda Valley in a variant very harmful to the natural environment, the liberal private logging law dubbed ‘Lex Szyszko’ from 2016 that increased rights of property owners to remove trees without administrative permission, increased logging in the Białowieża Forest and proposed changes for ‘extraordinary measures’ in the Nature 2000 sites) caused broad protests and turned him into a symbol of anti-conservationist politics. By contrast, Radosław Gawlik’s, a former WiP

member and NGO activist, although seen as a moderate, has bridged parliamentary and ministerial politics with civil society.

10. Olaf Swolkień cited in Fałkowski *et al.* (2008), fn 13.
11. External support should neither be demonized nor overstated: Gumkowska *et al.* (2008) have found that only a small fraction of Polish organizations listed EU money as an important source of income.
12. Personal communication with Radosław Gawlik, Wrocław, 3 November 2017.
13. Telephone interview with Adam Wajrak, Oslo, 28 April 2019.
14. Interview with Szymon Malinowski and Adrian Wójcik in Hajdasz (2017).
15. Stanowisko pozarządowych organizacji ekologicznych w sprawie rządowego planu wprowadzenia energetyki jądrowej w Polsce, www.ekounia.org.pl.
16. Personal communication with Tomasz Borewicz, Gdańsk, December 2014. While this can be interpreted as strategic support from media of the nationalist-conservative opposition, in fact TV Trwam and Radio Maryja were quite consistent in their energy policy positions: anti-nuclear, anti-wind, pro-geothermal and often pro-coal. Similarly, within PiS itself there were competing factions, some strongly anti-nuclear (with e.g. the later minister of culture Piotr Gliński) and some very strongly supportive, like the minister of energy Krzysztof Tchórzewski.
17. Interview with two Ministry of Economy energy experts in Szulecki and Kuznir (2017), p. 137.
18. Interview with Piotr Laskowski in Borewicz *et al.* (2019), p. 200.
19. Personal communication with Radosław Gawlik, Wrocław, 13 November 2017.
20. Henceforth we use 'Forest' to denote the entire area, and 'Park' for the strictly protected fraction under the National Park.
21. Telephone interview with Adam Wajrak, Oslo, 28 April 2019.
22. *Ibidem*.

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