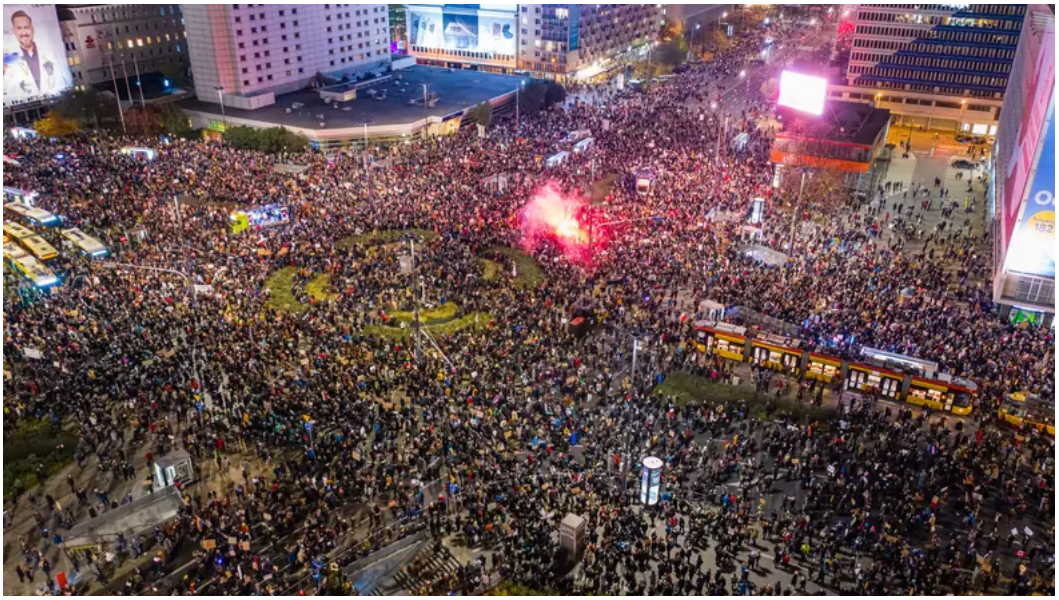
Department of European and International Studies

BA European Politics Dissertation

‘I feel, I think, I decide’: The Cultural Impacts of Poland’s Women Strike



(Gołąbiowski 2021)

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Introduction

The past few years have witnessed a new awakening of the Polish society. Sociologists and practitioners working with civil society organisations (CSOs) agree there has been a change in the way Poles go about civic engagement (Wygnański 2022). We have seen increased activity, from individual acts of service to wide social movements. The first, and by far the largest mobilisation was the Women Strike (Strajk Kobiet). The movement first emerged in 2016, when the parliament was proceeding the 'Stop Abortion' civic bill – a legislative initiative to delegalise all abortions. Poland has already had one of the most stringent abortion regimes in the European Union (Grzebyk 2021, 184-185). The movement managed to pressure the government to withdraw the bill. In late 2020, however, the Constitutional Tribunal, whose legal status is widely contested, ruled that one of the three cases when abortions in Poland were legal - severe foetal abnormalities - is unconstitutional (Nawojki and Kowalska 2022, 82). This extra-legislative tightening of abortion laws led to the revival of protests under the banner of the All-Poland Women Strike (Ogólnopolski Strajk Kobiet). Despite the mobilisation of a wide constituency of supporters, who took to the streets in numbers not seen before in democratic Poland's history, the movement failed to reverse the Tribunal's ruling (Ziętek 2020, 166).

The novelty and magnitude of this mobilisation suggest the movement may have had an impact in other aspects than policy change. Scholars have looked at the legacies of the 2016 and the 2020 waves of protests individually (e.g. Korolczuk 2019; Frąckowiak-Sochańska and Zawodna-Stephan 2022; Nawojski and Kowalska 2022). To my knowledge, however, the movement has not been studied as a continuum. In this dissertation, I analyse the impacts the two mobilisations have had on the Polish society. Existing literature on social movement impacts categorises the various influences on the society as *cultural impacts of social movements*. I hence base my analysis on the question: what were the cultural impacts of the Women Strike in Poland?

I define *social movements* with Goodwin and Jasper, as "a collective organized, sustained, and noninstitutional challenge to authorities, powerholders, or cultural beliefs and practices" (2015, 4). Social movements emerge from a wider category of *contentious politics* – "non-constitutional forms of interaction [of individuals or groups] with elites, opponents or the state (Tarrow 1996, 874). Contentious politics can evolve into a social movement when dense and effective social structures emerge that connect the claimants (Tarrow 2011, 16). In all of these definitions there is an emphasis on the engagement of a collective. Hence to encapsulate more than just social movements, I use the term *collective action*. All three of these concepts operate within a wider space opposite the state – *civil society*. This space "is composed of those more or less spontaneously emergent associations, organisations and movements that, attuned to how societal problems resonate in private life spheres, distil and transmit such reactions to the public sphere" (Habermas 1996, as cited in Kaldor 2003, 21).

In the Polish context, prior to the Women Strike, civil society was often regarded as weak and unorganised (McMahon and Niparko 2022, 1355). The recent developments suggest, however, that this has changed. The various mobilisations we have seen are often against polices introduced by the national-populist Law and Justice (PiS) party that governs Poland since 2015. PiS has carried out a number of controversial reforms widely thought to undermine the democratic order in the country (Gwiazda 2021, 581). Most importantly for this work, the Law and Justice government changed the procedure of selecting Constitutional Tribunal judges and staffed the court with party loyalists. These are the grounds on which the ruling on abortion law is disputed (Nawojski and Kowalska 2022, 82-84). The party can be further classified as conservative, with close ties to the Catholic Church (Gwiazda 2021, 581). Religion has had a prominent role in Polish politics throughout its democratic history, with an overwhelming majority of Poles declaring themselves as Catholics (Kowalska and Nawojski 2019, 59). PiS has been using a religious-conservative rationale to divide the society into good and desirable Catholics vs. unwanted and dangerous others influenced by Western ideology

(Gwiazda 2021, 585). An example of the latter is the LGBTQ+ community (Nawojski and Kowalska 2019, 91). As I argue in this dissertation, however, the values of the population are now changing, and people demand a lesser presence of religion in politics.

Appling theory on social movement impacts, I find that the Women Strike has had a profound cultural effect. Firstly, it altered the public debate on abortion by bringing it back to the public sphere and granting women their due voice on the topic. This destigmatised the issue and changed people's views on terminations. Poles now overwhelmingly support legal access to abortion. Secondly, this mass mobilisation changed people's understanding of citizenship and democracy. Civic engagement became a way of reclaiming space in the public sphere and affording voice to the disregarded groups. Poles embraced an assertive civic culture, ready to disobey the state and rise up against oppression. Civil society, based on solidarity and agency, evolved into a support network for counter-practices, where people can carry on living according to their convictions against state ideology (Frąckowiak-Sochańska and Zawodna-Stephan 2022, 33).

This dissertation is structured as follows. I first provide more context on civil society in Poland from existing literature. I then engage with social movement theory to outline the ways movements mobilise and the impacts they may have. In the third section, I present the theory used, as well as the data and methods relied on. In the empirical part, I first briefly analyse the conception of the Women Strike to then move on to its impacts – on abortion discourse and on civil society. In the last section I summarise my conclusions.

Polish Civil Society in Literature

A range of authors have looked into Polish civil society, as a unique case, whereby despite its crucial role in ending communism in the country, the subsequent development of this sphere is somewhat lagging as compared to business or politics (Giza-Poleszczuk 2017, 66-67). Indeed, when looked at

from a quantitative perspective, Poles are amongst the least engaged in the EU with low membership in non-governmental organisations (NGOs), low electoral turnouts and seldom engagement in organised volunteering (Jacobsson and Karolczuk 2017, 14). Civic activity grew in the 1990s, fell by the year 2000 and has since been gradually increasing. Such state of affairs is blamed on the "cultural degradation of society in communist Poland and the decline of traditional intelligentsia and civic values" (Gliński 2011, 276-277). People are in general thought to be more resourceful in their professional careers, while the civil sphere, apart from local enclaves of involved individuals, is dominated by apathy and 'learned helplessness', considered a uniquely Polish phenomena (Jacobsson and Karolczuk 2017, 14). The low numerical results of quantitative analyses of civic engagement, together with normative assumptions may and have previously led scholars to wrongly conclude that civil society in Poland is weak and underdeveloped (Ekiert and Kubik 2017; Giza-Poleszczuk 2017). Ekiert and Kubik systematically debunk these false myths about the Polish civic sphere. They argue that the societies in the post-communist world have been built from their informal forms, carrying on from socialist times into today. In strength, they often match Western counterparts, albeit with lesser influence on political decision-making (2017). Giza-Poleszczuk points to the methodological and normative biases by which such conclusions are arrived at, excluding much of the wide-spread civic activity that there prevails in Poland, not relying on membership in civil society organisations (CSOs), organised volunteering or other forms of formal engagement (2017, 69-70). Indeed, scholars who argue that civil society is in fact robust, understand it as a "solidaristic sphere […], where people associate and co-operate to advance common interests and concerns" moving to a conceptualisation "that is less normative and more process- and practice-oriented and that includes a variety of activities ranging from low-key local informal initiatives to organized forms of action and mass social movements" (Jacobsson and Korolczuk 2017, 2). Such broad understanding encapsulates all forms of civic engagement and is much less deterministic in judging the strength or weakness of the society. It allows to study the variety of civic activity, from one-off, ad hoc solidarity actions, to organised social movements. Civil society is hereby more than a set of institutions counterbalancing the state

(Gellner 1994, 5) – they two are intertwined (Jacobsson and Korolczuk 2017, 2). While parts of the civil society's activity in fact do stand opposite the state as will be explored here, much of it also functions to complement lacking state services.

Social Movements in Literature

As most major academic disciplines, social movement theory has undergone many refinements over the course of its development. Scholars studying collective actions in different periods conceived different theoretical perspectives and traditions. This part of the dissertation will review the different perspectives in order of conception.

Classic social movement theory was largely born in the 1970s in the attempts to analyse the civil rights movement in the United States. Social movements went from a neglected area of sociology in the 1940s to one of its "most vigorous" domains (della Porta and Diani 2020, 1). Despite the initial focus on grievances and ideological justifications needed for movement mobilisation, the scholarship quickly took a rational turn, into what was named *resource mobilisation theory* (McCarthy and Zald 1977, 1214). Largely in contrast to the previous study of movements as reactionary, some scholars began studying them as an extension of conventional politics, with actors engaging strategically and in line with their individual goals (della Porta and Diani 2020, 15). Drawing from rational choice economics, Olson identified the free-rider problem, according to which movements face the challenge of mobilising sympathisers, who may have an appetite to rip the benefits that stem from the attainment of the movement's goals but will not bear the costs of participating (1967).

Hence, resource mobilisation scholars focus on the role of resources in social organising, such as "professional staffs and fundraising" (Jasper 2010, 966). The framework analyses the use of resources available to movements. Most crucially, focus is placed on the aggregation of money and labour (McCarthy and Zald 1977, 1216). Additionally, as McCarthy and Zald write, some organisation is

required for gathering of the resources, hence the framework analyses management and leadership (1977, 1216). Moreover, the economic approach is manifested in the study of "supply and demand model" and "costs and rewards" for individuals and organisations (McCarthy and Zald 1977, 1216). The approach is widely criticised on the basis of its hyper-rationality and the disregard for emotions, moral or cultural motives of individuals and cultural factors (della Porta and Diani 2020, 14; Jasper 2010, 966-968). In somewhat of a response to this critique Charles Tilly proposed his polity model, whereby movements emerge in relation to existing political opportunities and threats to the challengers, as well as the ratio of facilitation or repression of action (Tarrow 2011, 27). The balance of these factors creates openings in the political system exploited by social movements. Wider processes but also single events, which significantly alter these balances have a potential of 'expanding' or 'contracting' such openings. Such phenomena include "wars, economic crises, regime changes, major demographic shifts, or significant political realignments at either the domestic or international level" (McAdam 2017, 194). The political opportunity framework has been incredibly influential in social movement theory. Further development of the polity framework, with inclusion of critics' remarks, such as those concerning the disregard for the role of culture and grievances, led to the conception of the *political process model*. Initially conceptualised by Doug McAdam in his seminal work on *the development of Black insurgency*, process theory was further developed by Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow, or the McTeam as they often referred to themselves (Jasper 2010, 967). The theory puts forward that an opening in the system will not be enough to generate motivation without sufficient resources. The issue also needs to be adequately framed: "At a minimum, people need to feel both aggrieved about (or threatened by) some aspect of their lives and optimistic that by acting collectively they can begin to redress the problem" (McAdam 2017, 194). The political process model claims to focus on the agency of social movements, albeit taking into account structural constraints generated by political environments in which collective action takes place (McAdam 1982, 39-40). In the minds of process theorists, these limits to autonomy of movements are the borders of a given opening in the system. Further, such opportunity needs to be equally perceived among

movement members, who act based on cues that the balance in the system has indeed changed and collective action is feasible (Ibid., 48). Mobilisers will act to ensure there is a common cognition of these cues, leading to what is referred to as *cognitive liberation* (McAdam 1982, 49-50). This phenomenon is elsewhere understood as framing, which I will explore in-depth in a later section.

Grievances, packed with appropriate emotions, are assigned to responsible actors against which collective action is taken (Tarrow 2011, 26). Emotions that have a particular motivating potential are "anger at a perceived injustice, or fear at a perceived threat, and hope that the injustice or threat can be redressed through collective action" (McAdam 2017, 194). Indeed, the feeling of *injustice* has been especially often pointed out as crucial in generating support for collective action, insofar as it recruits not only people who are personally connected to the cause, but also individuals joining the movement in *solidarity*, which generates other sentiments crucial for movement maintenance, such as *trust* and *cooperation* (Tarrow 2011, 30-31, own emphasis).

Criticism to the Political Process Model and The Cultural Turn

The process model, and its mother theory – *the opportunity framewor*k – have likely been criticised as often as they have been cited. As well as the common critique of its consistent overreliance on rational choice economics, the theory has been called out for its vagueness and tautology. Opportunity scholars cannot agree on a single definition for what constitutes an opening, diluting its explanatory potential (della Porta and Diani 2020, 18). Moreover, depending on how one defines them, some opportunities may be both external - exploited by collective actors - and created by movements themselves (Goodwin and Jasper 1999, 31-32). Some scholars further find evidence against the need for opportunities to be expanding for mobilisation to occur – movements can rise in environments when openings have been contracting (Brockett 1995, as cited in Goodwin and Jasper 1999, 39), much as in the case of the Women Strike studied here.

Political process model is also criticised for its heavy structural bias that prevents proper grasping of cultural dynamics (Jasper 2010, 966). In this bias, despite some correction to the stringency of the opportunity structure, the model fails to afford agency to collective actors, undermining the dynamism of social movement formation (Goodwin and Jasper 1999, 42). Structural factors take primacy, while non-structural ones are treated as if they were static (Goodwin and Jasper 1999, 28-29). Moreover, the framework overlooks the role of culture and identity (della Porta and Diani 2020, 18). Where these concepts are brought in, is through the aforementioned *cognitive liberation (framing)*. However, in so doing, McTeam focuses on it solely as a strategic activity, whose successful outcome is the common conception of grievances. Process theorists fail to acknowledge that the collective feelings of injustice can indeed preclude the framing process, and grievances can be felt independently (Goodwin and Jasper 1999, 49). The role of culture can thus be much broader than only in terms of social movement strategy. Finally, as argued in the critique of the model by Goodwin and Jasper, the key concepts that political process model relies on - political opportunities, mobilising structures and cultural framings – are embedded in the definition of social movements (1999, 43). "Certainly, social movements cannot emerge where people are unable, for whatever reason, to form the minimal solidarity necessary for mounting and sustaining a challenge to authorities or cultural codes. Nor can movements emerge among a population with no shared beliefs", we read (Goodwin and Jasper 1999, 43). In this sense, the explanatory logic employed here is circular.

Under this heavy criticism of the 'opportunity tradition', a new wave of scholars took the discipline of social movement theory through what is referred to as the *cultural turn*. Contributors to this strand of theory emphasise the role of identity, culture and emotions as causal in the formation, rather than only characteristic of collective action (della Porta and Diani 2020, 14; McAdam 2017, 201). Emotions are afforded a crucial role in motivating individuals, shaping movement goals, forming collective identities, and sustaining movement action (Jasper 2011, 286-288). This change away from structures, opportunities and rationality did not only occur in social movement theory. In political

science more broadly scholars observed an increase in salience of post-materialist values, such as equality, social justice or minority protection among those who became adults after the 1960s (Inglehart 1977). In terms of collective action, this is represented by 'new social movements', such as feminist or environmental movements in the 1980s (della Porta and Diani 2020, 70-71). The *cultural turn* was largely a result of the study of these post-materialist movements, as they did not so neatly fit the previous strands that relied on resource mobilisation and political opportunity. A look into identities, culture and emotions was necessary. As parallels may be drawn between new social movements and the Women Strike studied here, this dissertation adapts the cultural approach as much of its theoretical framework. In particular, *collective action framing* is useful for my case study.

Collective Action Frames

Collective action framing focuses on how agents *frame* events and phenomena, by attaching meanings and beliefs to the issue that needs to be addressed by collective action, the actors at whom it is to be directed, the desired outcomes and adequate responses (Benford and Snow 2000, 614). Frames have several functions and elements. Within the interpretative function, which is the first step to collective action, there are diagnostic, prognostic and motivational elements.

The diagnostic component is a shift in perception of a phenomenon that was previously regarded as an individual problem or a naturally caused issue into a social one. In this sense, the problem is moved to the public sphere and becomes a collective grievance. This also includes identifying actors who are responsible – at whom collective action should be directed (della Porta and Diani 2020, 74).

The prognostic element then, is the act of constructing a vision of what should be in place of what is (Benford and Snow 2000, 616-617). This is a crucial moment, when goals are formulated and agreed on. These goals can be immediate but framing here also allows for a more utopian visioning that allows movements to challenge the dominant cultural contexts (della Porta and Diani 2020, 77-78).

Finally, the motivational component is where these collective feelings can be translated into collective action (Benford and Snow 2000, 619). This step involves linking "the individual sphere with that of collective experience" (della Porta and Diani 2020, 79). The problem needs to be generalised enough to be considered a cause for collective action, while at the same time it must be felt and related to on the individual level to incentivise individual engagement.

Collective action frames often interact with each other, through what is referred to as bridging. In this phenomenon, collective actors incorporate aspects of other existing frames by demonstrating that the different movement goals are linked (Benford and Snow 2000, 624). The range of problems covered by the frame hence becomes wider, which increases its mobilising potential. This can effectively recruit new sympathisers to the movement (della Porta and Diani 2020, 83). When framings are very broad, they can be referred to as master frames, which are flexible to include various aggrieved groups (Benford and Snow 2000, 619). This is particularly often a product of the interaction between social movements, social conflicts and other historical and political phenomena, whereby what is conceived as a collective frame becomes a "broad interpretation of reality" (della Porta and Diani 2020, 80). While not many frames have been classified as master ones (Benford and Snow 2000, 619), this framework demonstrates well the transformative potential of social movements.

Social Movement Impacts

Social movements can have a wide range of impacts. Most directly, and often most desirably for the collective actors, they can influence policy – for example one against which the movement is protesting (della Porta and Diani 2020, 19). But contentious politics also have impact on aspects that do not directly correspond to movement goals or actions. One such set of impacts that collective action may have, is on the electoral and party systems. Social movements constantly interact with actors of conventional politics, such as parties and voters. Collective actors stand up against political

parties, while parties take stances vis-à-vis movements – rejecting or embracing their demands, allying or otherwise interacting with them (Kriesi 2015, 667). Scholars have recently been paying more attention to these interactions, as collective action increasingly becomes "part and parcel of the political system" (della Porta and Diani 2015, 19). Historically, political parties have incorporated social movements or new parties were born from collective actors. This is more directly visible on the left - where Green parties emerged to represent multicultural values and other demands made by protest movements (Kriesi 2015, 672). Social movements also force mainstream parties to take stances that have previously been off their agenda. These two aspects, combined with the influence on the societal values discussed later, have the potential of transforming party systems. Chief example of such transformation is the labour movement across Western Europe (Ibid., 674)

Two more kinds of social movement impacts have received significant attention - on democracy and on culture. As the two are closely intertwined, this dissertation will consider them together. A clear impact on democracy can be seen in movements that contributed to democratisation by demanding it, for example in the revolutions ending communism in Eastern Europe (Mastnak 2005, 324). Collective actors have also played a crucial role in ensuring states stay on the democratic consolidation path, by mobilising when politicians steer off it (della Porta and Diani 2020, 255). Collective actors have also done much to enhance existing democracies. In any case, collective action represents a critique of the conventional way politics is done – its institutions or liberal democracy as a whole (Offe 1985, as cited in della Porta and Diani 2006, 239). In this sense, it is a call for broadening deliberation, often in directions that remained off the political agenda. For example, new social movements, such as the feminist mobilisations, helped bring attention to issues of social justice and broadening civil rights (della Porta 2015, 767).

Many of these effects have wider cultural implications. Waves of mobilisation have the potential to influence cultures and identities, as they socialise new generations of citizens (Giugni 1999, xxiii).

This influences people's ways of living, art, education, or medicine. Social movements "make some behaviours socially inappropriate and others newly appealing. They create new collective actors, alter lines of social cleavage, and transform what counts as expertise" (Amenta and Polletta 2019, 280). A movement emerges when institutions fail to keep up with the changing values and attitudes of individuals, who mobilise in favour of these newly accepted values and against the failing institutions: "[…] new norms emerge, defining the existing situation as unjust and providing justification for action" (Turner and Killian 1987, as cited in della Porta and Diani 2020, 13).

Indeed, cultural conflict – between old and emerging values – is often crucial for movement emergence. Collective actors in their actions typically take a stance to embrace, reform, or reject certain values (Tan and Snow 2015, 515-520). Combined with media coverage of protest events, these orientations can prompt public reconsideration of the issues they advocate for. This effect is greater, the more effective the framing processes have been, and can carry on beyond the time when the collective action took place, based on people's memories of the movement (Amenta and Polletta 2019, 282). For this reason, social movements are crucial actors in cultural change (Tan and Snow 2015, 528). They may also amplify existing long-term processes (Kriesi 2015, 678).

In this sense, the impacts of a mobilisation can extend far beyond what it mobilised for – even movements considered unsuccessful, insofar that they have not reached their goals of changing policy, may achieve much more in other aspects. For instance, they can alter the existing value systems, changing what is socially accepted or desired. Social movements challenge dominant norms by providing space for the production of counter-knowledge (della Porta 2015, 768). They facilitate the emergence of shared cultural orientations among members – often in parallel or contrary to what is or has been dominant in the society – creating sub- and counter-cultures (della Porta and Diani 2020, 108). Most importantly, the creation of such spaces opposite the state facilitates further mobilisation and activation of citizens, both in the sense of increasing the role of civil society and

hence encouraging people to be active citizens (della Porta and Diani 2006, 245), and by shaping favourable contextual conditions for future mobilisations, for example through networks and resources (Marchetti 2015, 756). Indeed, once engaged in a social movement, an individual is more likely to mobilise again for similar or compatible values (Amenta and Polletta 2019, 283). Social movements hence have the potential of activating previously apathetic societies.

Theoretical Framework, Methods, and Data

In this dissertation, I seek to answer what cultural impacts the Women Strike has had on the Polish society. The choice of Strajk Kobiet as the case study to use here is appropriate, because it was the biggest social movement in democratic Poland (Ziętek 2020, 166). I follow scholars, who intrigued by the magnitude and visibility of the movement, looked for its influence on other aspects than policy (e.g. Korolczuk et al. 2019; Piechota 2022). This collective action was followed by mobilisations for other causes, which share some common aspects with the Women Strike. It is therefore fair to expect that Strajk Kobiet has had a wider influence on the society This dissertation examines this influence.

To look into impacts of the Women Strike on the society I employ theory on cultural influences of social movements outlined in the literature review. I depart from the premise that social movements can alter value systems of the society, instilling new values, and producing counter-knowledge (Amenta and Polletta 2018; della Porta and Diani 2020; Tan and Snow 2015). These cultural changes, together with the establishment of networks for mobilisation, can inspire future collective action (Marchetti 2015).

To facilitate the understanding of cultural impacts of the Women Strike, I briefly look at the formation of the movement. Siding with the criticism to the political process model, I focus on the processes of framing as have other scholars looking at Strajk Kobiet (e.g. Korolczuk 2019). I do, however, borrow from process theorists the idea of political opportunity, as it can be useful when looking at "the

relationship between institutional political actors and protest" (della Porta and Diani 2020, 17). The political context of the mobilisation of the Women Strike (especially its 2016 wave), necessitates the inclusion of this influential framework. As I demonstrate, however, its explanatory capabilities in my case study are limited. Instead, I focus on the use of collective action frames to explain this mobilisation. This framework is more appropriate for analysing Strajk Kobiet because of the role of emotions in its mobilisation (e.g. Frackowiak-Sochanska and Zawodna-Stephan 2022; Zurek 2022). As I outlined before, motivating emotions include anger, feeling of injustice, solidarity, and hope that collective action will adequately address these grievances. The collective action framing theory treats these feelings with much more attention than the process model, allowing to study their motivating potential in-depth, which is necessary to understand Strajk Kobiet. While cultural framing has been used before to analyse the 2016 mobilisation (Korolczuk 2019), my work here expands this onto the whole Women Strike movement.

To study the impacts the movement has had on people's values I use data from the Centre for the Study of Public Opinion (CBOS), supplemented with newspaper articles based on poll results from other research bodies. I also use existing literature on the Women Strike (e.g Nawosjki and Kowalska 2022) and think tank reports (e.g. European Solidarity Cemtre). In the final part of the empirical section, I link the effects of the Women Strike to the Poles' recent response to the Ukrainian refugee crisis. Drawing causal connections here is not possible and would necessitate primary research, which to my knowledge has not been carried out to date. Scholars have, however, linked participation in Strajk Kobiet and volunteering in the relief initiatives among young people (Krawtzek and Goldstein 2022). To explore these links, I draw on this piece, together with CBOS data and supplementary newspaper articles.

Case Study – The Women Strike

Background of the Women Strike

Ogólnopolski Strajk Kobiet / All-Poland Women Strike came to represent the movement born from protests against tightening abortion laws in the country. It is important to stress that the movement, first mobilised in 2016, when the Polish parliament debated on a proposed bill to de-legalise all abortions (Przeszło 2017, 15-16). At that time the law was already one of the most stringent in the EU, with only three sets of circumstances for legal terminations: 1) when the pregnancy is a risk for the mother's life; 2) when the pregnancy is a result of a criminal, act, such as rape or incest; and 3) when there are severe foetal abnormalities (Grzebyk 2021, 184-185). This legal state is known in Poland as 'the compromise', which represents an apparent agreement between politicians and the Catholic Church in the early 2000s in exchange for the latter's support for Poland's accession to the EU (Korolczuk 2019, 121). The bill proposed a complete end to legal terminations, as well as jailtime for patients and doctors carrying out the procedure (Ibid., 133-135). The process of the mobilisation of this movement has been studied in-depth by different scholars (e.g. Korolczuk et al. 2019). The 2016 protests successfully displayed civic resistance against the project, and the parliament rejected the bill. The failure of the ruling party to push through the anti-choice bill marked an end to legislative attempts of tightening the abortion regime. Instead, in 2020, the Constitutional Tribunal, by many Poles viewed as politically motivated, ruled the 'foetal abnormalities' premise (3) unconstitutional (Grzebyk 2021, 185; Nawojski and Kowalska 2022, 82-83). The disputed verdict sparked a second wave of protests under the All-Poland Women Strike, which quickly widened its constituency to represent other marginalised groups, such as the LGBTQ+ community. The common postulates included far more than legal and free abortion, soon calling for the resignation of the government (Nawojski and Kowalska 2022, 85).

The two mobilisations differ both in terms of what caused them – the introduction of the 'Stop Abortion' bill to the parliament proceedings in 2016 – and the Constitutional Tribunal ruling in 2020 – and in regards to the response they generated. However, as I am interested in the impacts the Women Strike has had, it would be insufficient to look at one of these protest waves only. It is possible one of these mobilisations had greater effects on the society, however in the scope of this work it is not feasible to come to such a conclusion. Moreover, the initial motivation, together with the networks established, undoubtedly paved the way for such prominent resistance in 2020. Therefore, to give a full account of societal effects of Strajk Kobiet, I consider the 2016 and the 2020 protest outbreaks together.

Social Movement Theory and The Women Strike

As the process of mobilisation of the Women's Strike has important implications for its effects, I will first analyse it using the theory outlined before. An opening in the political structure is required to spark collective action (McAdam 2017). In 2016, the parliament's decision to proceed with the Stop Abortion bill, while at the same time rejecting all projects to liberalise abortion, can be understood as such political opportunity. This decision was a clear sign that the government sides with the ultraconservative community (which submitted the bill), even though such views on abortion are only shared by 12% of the population (Korolczuk 2019, 146). No consideration was given to other views. This can be understood as an opportunity in terms of reclaiming the space that failed to be afforded by the parliament refusing to consider other options. In the light of the disregard of women's interests, there was no other option than to voice demands outside of conventional politics. In 2020, on the other hand, Strajk Kobiet acted in an environment of contracting opportunities (Goodwin and Jasper 1999). First, the Tribunal's verdict is in itself binding and becomes law after its publishing (Nawojski and Kowlaska 2022, 82-83), hence reversing it would be a much more difficult gaol to attain. Secondly, as the protests took place under COVID-19 restrictions, public gatherings were banned. These should theoretically limit opportunities for collective action. In practice, Strajk Kobiet re-

emerged stronger than before. This serves as evidence that the opportunity framework has limited explanatory potential in the case of the Women Strike. It is important to stress, quoting Goodwin's and Jasper's (1999) critique of the model, that of course people did share similar orientations towards the topic and did possess minimal resources required to mobilise. In this sense the political opportunity existed – it is difficult to judge, however, if it was external or generated by the movement itself.

Collective action frames are more appropriate for the case of the Women Strike. Indeed, the effective framing processes in 2016 are afforded the key role in the success of the protests. Women successfully employed an interpretative frame that allowed the movement to use a rhetoric of dignity of the women's body and their freedom to decide about it (Korolczuk 2019, 148). The easily relatable arguments, formulated in highly emotional language provoked motivating feelings in protesters (Jasper 2011), such as anger and fear but also hope and pride (Frąckowiak-Sochańska and Zawodna-Stpehan 2022, 10). Frąckowiak-Sochańska and Zawodna-Stephan argue that the collective emotions felt by the striking women helped establish a *community of* rebellion, which then moved grievances against the state from the private sphere and posed them to the public sphere (2022, 25). I explain this in more detail, linking it to the cultural impacts, in the following section.

One more aspect of collective action frames that is visible in the case of the Women Strike is frame bridging (Benford and Snow 2000). Especially in the 2020 protest wave, as the demands became broader, more groups became included in the frame (Nawojski and Kowalska 2022, 82). Because of the extra-legislative way of reforming abortion law in 2020, the demands of reverting the verdict were grounded in anger with the government's lack of respect for democratic procedures (Frąckowiak-Sochańska and Zawodna-Stpehan 2022, 14). From there, the dignity frame was extended to include all those, whose Law and Justice politics disregard or hurt. This allowed for the inclusion of marginalised groups, such as the LGBTQ+ community (Nawojski and Kowalska 2022, 85). The result

was a broad demand for the resignation of the government. For this reason, and for the effect this frame has had on the redefinition of citizenship explored in the next section, I argue the framing used by the Women Strike produced a master frame (Benford and Snow 2001).

Impacts of The Women Strike

The Women Strike, despite generating widespread support and mobilising tens of thousands of protesters, failed to achieve its primary goal – reversing the Tribunal's ruling that tightened abortion laws. The court delayed the publishing of the verdict for several months as the protests continued, raising hopes that it could be annulled. However, as soon as strike events became less frequent and turnout fell, the Constitutional Tribunal released the controversial verdict (Frąckowiak- Sochańska and Zawodna-Stephan 2022, 13). In this sense, the protest movement was unsuccessful.

The novelty and the size of this movement, however, prompted scholars to look for other impacts this collective action has had – on the Polish society as a whole. Strajk Kobiet has had several cultural impacts through embracing or rejecting some cultural values (Tan and Snow 2015). The Women Strike embraced freedom of choice and dignity, while rejecting obedience, religious state, and the objectification of women. The cultural impacts can be categorised. I differentiate between two sets of influences of the movement: 1) on the abortion debate in the country, and 2) on civil society.

Impacts on The Abortion Debate

Strajk Kobiet has had a tremendous effect on the abortion debate in the country in several aspects. First of all, the original mobilisation in 2016 against legislative work on tightening the law marked a return of the topic of abortion into mainstream political debate. The 'compromise' has been the legal state in Poland since the early 1990s and successfully maintained a social taboo on terminations, with a public understanding that those who have the financial means to get the procedure abroad often do so. This remained in the private sphere (Korolczuk 2019, 129-130; Nawojski and Kowalska 2022,

84). Public debate was largely absent, or at least dominated by men – politicians, priests – who focused on the rights of the conceived foetus, rather than women's experiences (Korolczuk 2019, 122). The 2016 legislative initiative changed that completely.

As expected by della Porta and Diani, the immediate protest mobilisation moved the topic straight into the public sphere, now with women dominating the debate (Kowalska and Nawojski 2019, 61). In the words of Korolczuk, "the movement – for the first time in nearly three decades – successfully directed attention towards the situation of women and away from embryos or foetuses" (2019, 148). Women became visible in demonstrations and on the media, disseminating counter-knowledge (della Porta and Diani 2020) on abortion from their perspective and as a medical procedure, rather than a moral decision (Korolczuk 2019, 127). For the first time, women's issues were represented by women and were afforded due attention with news spreading quickly in traditional sources and online (Ziętek 2020, 167). Moreover, the women engaged in the protests were referred to by the media as 'ordinary women'. This group of 'ordinary women' emerged as a new subject in the abortion debate. Previously, members of feminist movements were largely regarded as a 'liberal elite detached from reality', whose postulates do not resonate with the wider public. This picture painted by mainstream media was altered by the mass mobilisations of 2016 (Ramme and Snochowska-Gonzalez 2019, 92-93). Contrary to what the government expected, the emergence of the topic in the public sphere did not rally indignant abortion opponents. Instead, the intrusion into what remained private angered those who were earlier ambivalent (Kowalska and Nawojsk 2019, 69).

Discursively, the women's movement utilised emotional language calling out their 'suffering' and 'barbaric treatment'. Doctors also became an outspoken voice on the side of Strajk Kobiet (Korolczuk 2019, 146) This shift in dominant discourse around abortion also allowed for Strajk Kobiet to broaden their demands to also include easier and cheaper access to contraception, better prenatal and postpartum care, as well as adequate sexual education in schools. The focus of the protests expanded

to postulates of women's (and men's) life in dignity and safety (Kowalska and Nawojski 2019, 66-69). The women's movement successfully broadened their framing of abortion and reproductive rights, while using simple arguments that had a grounding in science and medicine but spoke to people's emotions. The rhetoric on the side of the anti-choice movement was, on the other hand, largely unrelatable and resonated weaker (Koroczuk 2019, 148). This allowed Strajk Kobiet to alter the dominant abortion discourse in the country.

Despite the short time that has passed since Strajk Kobiet took place, it has already resulted in a change of values of the Polish public. In this sense, the Women Strike led to a public reconsideration (Amenta and Polletta 2019) of the issue of abortion. As issues raised by social movements often stay in the memory of the society for long after the collective action quiets down, they "come back to the public sphere from the streets, internet forums, and discussions at the hairdresser's" (Korolczuk 2019, 125-126). Following 2016, when the wave of protests successfully stopped efforts to tighten the law, the topic of abortion still remained a point of debate, albeit to a smaller extent. The 2020 Tribunal's verdict, however, immediately brought the legal regulation of abortion back into the public debate, as the verdict brought an end to the 'compromise' and undermined the 2016 movement success (CBOS 2020, 1). In the initial period after the court ruled abortion in case of foetal abnormalities unconstitutional, the percentage of Poles in favour of complete liberation of terminations grew by mere 4% (Ibid., 3-5). However, when The Centre for the Study of Public Opinion (CBOS) carried out a similar study in August 2021, it found that the group of abortion supporters grew considerably – to 41% (12% increase) (2020, 5). This was after the protest events of Strajk Kobiet have mostly stopped and the Constitutional Tribunal officially published the verdict, which made it law. It is a significant piece of evidence that the movement has had an effect in altering public opinion, as previously low support levels for abortion have been relatively stable through the years.

That reproductive rights now have a prominent space in the Polish public sphere, is finally evidenced by the fact that the topic has made it to the political agenda. All political parties running for seats in the upcoming parliamentary elections have now taken stances on abortion – most aiming at liberalisation or at least a return to the 'compromise' – a move not seen prior to the Women Strike (Piechota 2022, 103-106). Likely a result of taking its prominent space in the public discourse, abortion continued to broaden its support base. Currently the figure stands at an all time high – 70% of respondents answer 'yes' or 'definitely yes' when asked if access to abortion should be legal (Chrzczonowicz 2022).

Impacts on Civil Society

The Women Strike was the largest mobilisation in democratic Poland (since 1989). Around 200,000 people participated in protests around 150 cities in 2016 (Ziętek 2020, 166). In 2020, around 100,000 manifested in a single biggest protest event in Warsaw (Ciastoch 2020), while collectively 430,000 Poles participated in protests around the country (Warszawa Nasze Miasto 2020). The numbers immediately cast doubt on the premises that Polish civil society is "helpless" (Glinski 2006) or "apathetic" (McMahon and Niparko 2022). On the contrary, the mobilisation implies a great sense of agency and organisation. As the protests largely lacked an organising structure (especially in 2016), this collective action is in line with Poles' preference for ad hoc engagement (Giza-Poleszczuk 2017). Scholars did find, however, that Strajk Kobiet altered civic culture and the understanding of citizenship in the country.

As pointed out earlier, a protest movement is always an act of resistance against conventional politics (della Porta and Diani 2006). This is evident in the case of the Women Strike, as the collective action did not only rise up against the ban on abortions, but also and most importantly in favour of the freedom of choice and decision over one's own body. Moreover, what especially angered protesters in 2020 was the extra-legislative way of imposing the ban – through a politically motivated tribunal

ruling. Both of these mobilisations, and especially the 2016 protest as they were precedent, are seen as "a breath of fresh air" – which contributed to a change in what people perceive as citizenship and democracy. The latter was embraced as pluralism of interests and positions, which were deliberated upon by protesters (Kowalska and Nawojski 2019, 45-46). Indeed, something that was also unseen before in a Polish social movement, was the diversity of participants – with women of different backgrounds and social positions, and also solidarising with them men (Ziętek 2020, 166). In this sense, what changed is people's understanding of democracy and citizenship. Poles became ready to demand their rights and become civically engaged to do so (Kowalska and Nawojski 2019, 67). Ziętek looks at this shift in terms of the transformation of civic culture into its assertive kind, where people are committed to democracy but stand up against the way it is carried out. They are prepared to engage in demonstrations, strikes and civic disobedience to make their voices heard (2020, 164-169). She contends this was the first time this shift of civic culture became apparent in Poland. Such assertion represents the reclaiming of dignity and agency by the society (Kowalska and Nawojski 2019, 70)

An important aspect of the assertive civic culture in Strajk Kobiet not mentioned by Ziętek is the questioning of the role of religion and the Church in public life. As mentioned before, the stringent legal status of abortion, and the recent further limitation thereof, are largely the result of the important role the Catholic Church plays in Polish politics. As many young people around the world choose to live secular lives (Mariasński 2017, 233), there has been much backlash against this evolvement, which exploded in 2016. The Women Strike protests voiced demands for a reduced role of religion in public life, especially in regards to the Church publicly engaging in political debates. In 2018, when the Polish Episcopal Conference issued a statement urging the government to revisit the topic of further regulation of terminations. Poles took to the streets once again under the Women Strike banner, this time concentrating around the 'secular state' postulate (Kowalska and Nawojski 2019, 59).

The one aspect, in which Ziętek argues Strajk Kobiet did not exhibit the assertive civic culture model, is social distrust. The original framework indeed positis individuals have a negative attitude towards the state but also each other. In the case of the Women Strike, we have seen the opposite. The protesters formed a diverse community that displayed high levels of social trust in its members (Ziętek 2020, 169). Solidarity was a common motivation for protesters to join. Especially women past their reproductive stage or men often reported protesting for their children, wives, or friends. Solidarity became the basis for civic engagement (Kowalska and Nawojski 2019, 70). Żurek observed considerable levels of intra-generational solidarity, whereby older women, who hold more collective orientations, likely shaped by growing up in communist Poland, supported the strike motivated by the common weal of all women. Young protesters, on the other hand, with more individualistic attitudes, have mobilised for their own interests, as well as "the common feeling of oppression and harm" (2022, 76).

In the 2020 protest wave, solidarity between protesters allowed for the inclusion of other marginalised groups, such as the LGBTQ+ community. The demands then broadened to encapsulate not only the liberation of abortion rights, but also recognition of same-sex marriage equality and an end to hate speech (Karwowska 2021). Soon the movement demanded that the government step down. The Women Strike was a space that amplified voices of those that have been marginalised by the Law and Justice party – women, the LGBTQ+ community, and other minority groups (Nawojski and Kowalska 2022, 85). In this sense, the collective action created a counter-culture of people disregarded by the state, who stand up together to oppose it. At the root of these efforts is the new definition of citizenship grounded in agency, solidarity, and dignity. These reclaimed notions have carried on beyond the movement into everyday life of Poles – "disregarding those in power" and "carrying on with counter-practices, such as supporting like-minded NGOs or raising children in line with own convictions" (Frąckowiak-Sochańska and Zawodna-Stpehan 2022, 32). Active citizenship became the tool to deal with the shortcomings of the state, where civil society is a support network for those in need.

Such shift towards greater activity can indeed be seen in the subsequent development of civil society. The Women Strike mobilised many new and previously unengaged activists (Kowalska and Nawojski 2019, 68), who subsequently often joined other demonstrations, for instance in support of junior doctors and teachers. Strajk Kobiet members joined Belarusians protesting the rigged election in their country, and demonstrated for independent judiciary during controversial court reforms. Activists also expressed their opposition to the appointment of Przemysław Czarnek, an openly homophobic and chauvinistic politician, as the Minister of Education (Suchomska and Urzędowska 2021, 14). As activists are now "everywhere, where democracy needs to be defended", the activating effect of the Women Strike lives on (Kowalska and Nawojski 2019, 76).

Strajk Kobiet also activated the third sector with numerous organisations that work on reproductive rights having emerged since 2016. NGOs, such as Dziewuchy Dziewuchom (Girls to Girls) or Aborcyjny Dream Team (Abortion Dream Team), have helped thousands of women access abortion outside of Poland (Nowosielska and Klinger 2021). Termination not only returned to the public sphere, but also became an issue around which people mobilise – not only posing demands against the state but also helping one another. The All-Poland Women Strike itself became an organisation that is now a prominent actor in Polish politics. As mentioned before, movement activists often participate in other collective actions, while leaders frequently take stances on current affairs in the media or on the internet (Urzędowska and Suchomska 2020, 15). Many smaller organisations were born from local structures that emerged during the protests, which later facilitated mobilisng for the women's cause but also for other ones. The strike also brought attention to existing NGOs that often offer free and confidential advice or gynaecological appointments, educate about contraception and safe sex. Poles were reminded about their functioning by the media, which eagerly picked up the topic following the demonstrations (e.g. Dabrowska 2020). In terms of collective action, more experienced activists willingly shared best practices, for example in organising gatherings (Urzędowska and

Suchomska 2020, 13). This knowledge exchange created new interaction between people, energising them for action. In this sense, I argue, Strajk Kobiet contributed to the development of the Polish civil society, making it a more robust and active entity vis-à-vis the government that does not represent all citizens, but rather acts to create divisions into desirable and undesirable Poles (Nawojski and Kowalska 2022, 91). This amplifies a wider shift into everyday activism – focused on everyday issues of citizens (McMahon and Nipakro 2022, 1364).

Strajk Kobiet has also practically contributed to activation of civil society – in creating favourable conditions for future mobilisations. Since the movement's activity Polish citizens mobilised for many other causes, such as in defence of the judiciary, LGBTQ+ rights or climate policy (McMahon and Niparko 2022, 1355-1356). Perhaps the most wide-scale mobilisation of civil society, was the Poles' response to the Ukrainian refugee crisis, following Russia's aggression in February 2022.

While causal links cannot be drawn here, and a full exploration of the connection necessitates further research, I argue that the Women Strike facilitated the present mobilisation. Polish civil society has been modestly active in the humanitarian sector, while international aid has by far not been the focus of active Poles (McMahon and Niparko 2022, 1366). What the country has witnessed over the last year, therefore, is completely unprecedented if not unexpected. Over 70% of the population participated in some help initiatives since the beginning of the war. One in ten of the helping Poles never engaged in any volunteering before that (Fundacja Stocznia 2022). Many people volunteered on the border or on train stations to assist with the arriving refugees. Some have donated money or food, many have gone further, driving to the border to take Ukrainian families into the country, often to their own homes (Krawtzek and Goldstein 2022, 15). An average respondent spent PLN369 (approx. £70) to aid relief initiatives between the beginning of the war and October 2022, while two fifths of Poles declare readiness to keep helping (Openfiled 2022, as cited in Dimitrow 2022). Around half of the society consistently declares helping refugees, although at the beginning of 2023 the figure

decreased to 41%. As the support for the acceptance of Ukrainian nationals into Poland did not suffer a similar decline, analysts hypothesise high inflation prevents some Poles from staying engaged (CBOS 2023, 2).

Attitudes amongst the society have been generally very welcoming. In an early study by the Centre for East European and International Studies (ZOIS) researching young people's involvement and attitudes towards the crisis, almost half of the respondents said Poland should let in as many Ukrainians as necessary (Krawatzek and Goldstein 2022, 12). The general support for the acceptance of refugees from Ukraine has fallen slightly in the beginning of 2023 but remains between 68% (Openfield 2023, as cited in Szczepanik 2023) and 78% (CBOS 2023, 2) between different polls.

The vast scale of the relief efforts, as well as the fact that for so many of these volunteers it had been the first time helping, imply an array of highly motivating factors was at play. People who engaged in the help initiatives have done so out of emotional motives – a feeling of solidarity with their neighbours and a will to help those in need. One in third asked Poles said they tried to imagine themselves in a similar situation and considered helping the just thing to do (Instytut Praw Migrantów 2023). Solidarity and agency here are once again at the basis of civic activity. I argue it is the redefined idea of citizenship and the shift towards an assertive civic culture that resulted from the Women Strike, that allowed for such an impressive mobilisation. While emotions are undoubtably a crucial factor here, I posit that the feeling of reclaimed agency in the society, as well as existing structures from the practical side, were equally important. On the side of emotions, the civil society's reaction to the arrival of refugees could have similar grounds as the mobilisation to protest against tightening abortion laws. Apart from solidarity, people felt pity for the fate of Ukrainians, as well as fear of the war coming to Poland. The perception that the war in Ukraine is a threat to Polish security has been shared by a stable 75% of the Polish population (CBOS 2022, 2). The assertive civic culture is manifested by the interplay between the people and the government. While the decision-makers did

support (or simply did not oppose) these solidarity efforts, the society mobilised considerably before the government took official stances or offered their relief efforts (Krawtzek and Goldstein 2022, 14). Perhaps expecting that the state will fail to provide adequate assistance, citizens took matters into their own hands. Here again, legacies of Strajk Kobiet are visible.

Conclusion

This dissertation looked at the case study of the Women Strike in Poland in 2016 and 2020 and the cultural impacts it has had on the Polish society. Departing from the literature on social movement effects I found that Strajk Kobiet has had a profound impact on the Polish public sphere, despite not achieving its primary policy goal of legalising abortion in the country. I argued that there have been two sets of cultural influences the movements has had: 1) on the abortion debate and 2) on civil society.

In the first aspect, Strajk Kobiet brought the topic of abortion back into public debate. Terminations were moved from the private covered by a social taboo to the public sphere. Importantly, women reclaimed their space in the discussion finally re-emerging in the debate previously dominated by men. The women's movement also presented itself as 'ordinary women'. This view was amplified by the media and replaced the previous portrayal of feminists as elite and detached from reality. Attention was brought to women's experiences of childbearing and their sexual health rather than morality. This normalised abortion as a medical procedure and the topic of reproductive health and care more broadly.

Strajk Kobiet utilised a broad interpretative frame, where demands for dignity, safety and agency were voiced. Such framing resonated with the Polish population much more effectively than that of the anti-choice side, which amplified rights of conceived human life. This tremendously changed

people's vies about terminations and their legal accessibility. Today, more Poles then ever support the right to free abortion.

In the second aspect studied here, I argued the Women Strike had no smaller influence. The framing used by the Women Strike informed a new vision of citizenship that is active and promotes civic engagement. Poles reimagined the meaning of democracy, to one where pluralism of interest is deliberated upon in the streets if conventional politics fail to afford them voice. In this sense the civic culture in Poland transformed into an assertive kind, but one based in solidarity, where disregarded and oppressed groups come together against the state. This allows them to reclaim dignity and agency.

This activity has carried onto other areas of civil society, which became a support network for citizens. For instance, since Strajk Kobiet many NGOs helping with access to reproductive help services have emerged. Activists used their experiences from the Women Strike to motivate for other causes, while Ogolnopolski Strajk Kobiet became a prominent actor in the political sphere. I also argued that the new active citizen ideal, as well as networks established during the pro-abortion mobilisation motivated Poles' engagement in relief efforts for Ukrainian refugees. There are grounds to link the two collective actions together, however causal links between the two remain to be explored. Future research could involve looking into people's motivation to help Ukrainians (other than emotional motives mentioned in this work), as well as previous civic engagement of these volunteers. While this dissertation was not able to carry out such research, the implications of such findings would be illuminating.

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