

Polish Floods

Clues for Civil Society and the State Post-Communism¹

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A collective panic, which spread in Poland during the flood of July 1997, revealed off-stage properties of state-citizens relationships, i.e. the inability to trust, as an important aspect of post-communist societies. In this article the city of Wrocław is a local string point for a study of citizenship-relations in post-communist Poland which are related to specific hidden histories – the communist heritage as well as the repressed German past of the region. Both factors, by producing overcentralization and unaccountability of state structures, deep rivalry among political actors, disrespect and distrust among citizens and between citizens and states, as well as collective amnesia, explain the incapacity of Wrocław's citizens to keep control over their city, the Odra river, the state organizations and their imagination.

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In July 1997 a heavy downpour hit Poland and the Czech Republic. Followed by continuous rainfall, it caused the flooding of alluvial areas and the breaking of dikes, in particular in the mountains and swamp areas of Lower-Silesia.² In Poland, 1 358 villages and towns – 2.1% of the national territory – were flooded, 160,000 people fled their houses, and 54 casualties were registered.³ This calamity made headlines in European media for weeks. National governments sent help, and the European Commission offered financial support. A collective panic spread in Poland. The outside world got the impression that at least half the country was flooded. In Poland itself the flood became wrapped in almost biblical imagery. The waxing waters took both the population and the authorities by full surprise. On July 9, for example, the local authorities declared the inhabitants of the town of Opole to be safe that night, but waking up they found their houses surrounded by flushing waters.⁴

The Polish flood of 1997 occasioned a social drama that revealed important off-stage prop-

erties of state-citizen relationships in this “successful transition country”. We will take the flood and associated social and governmental processes as a starting point for a situational analysis (Handelman 1996) that will help us perceive a cluster of hidden histories which crucially shape popular cognitions, expectations and sensibilities. These popular sensibilities pervade social interactions within formal institutions and between these institutions and citizens in contemporary Poland. We aim to show that such interactions are, compared to (what is idealized as) ‘the West,’ marked by problems of trust and trustability between actors. The absence of trust, and its consequences for citizens, citizenship, and political culture, is an important aspect of most post-communist societies. It forms the downside of problems of democratic consolidation as discussed by political scientists such as Linz and Stepan (1996) and Offe (1995). It should also be seen as that everyday aspect of social relations on which the rising tide of ethnonational, exclusivist, and parochial ideologies as studied by Tismaneanu (1998)

and evoked by Jowitt (1992) is based (see also Niedermüller 1999). Poland occupies an unsteady place in such accounts, since the gravest reservations about democratic transition spring from the experience of the ex-Soviet “inner empire”, ex-Yugoslavia, and the Balkans. This is also true for the much more sensitive anthropological writings of Katherine Verdery (1996) and Gail Kligman, who both concentrate on Romania. In the conclusion we will dwell on this intra-regional comparison and on Verdery’s ‘unruly coalitions’ as an explanation for civic distrust and obstacles for civic democracy.

The importance of relating problems of trust to the quintessentially anthropological notion of hidden histories (Schneider 1996) is twofold. First, the notion encourages us to see that the observation that these societies can now be placed under the general rubric of democratic capitalism is the start rather than the endpoint of social analysis. Most state-nations, including the post-communist ones, have now joined the club of capitalist democracies. But this does not imply that they have become or are even in the process of becoming replicas of ‘the West’. Rather, it means that the rubric of democratic capitalism itself has lost any critical edge for understanding basic aspects of local, contextualized, embodied social relationships that necessarily remain hidden for analyses that do not aim beyond abstraction (see Geertz 1998).

Secondly, the notion of hidden histories allows us to trace significant variations and dynamics within a generic type of social formation to local historical conditions prior to its inclusion in the wider rubric, as well as to the sequences of social events that have subsequently unfolded. The notion of hidden histories presumes that ‘cultural’ idiosyncracies are not the inevitable result of essential cultural otherness, but are rather the provisional product of particular people acting in a specific conjunction of ‘local time’ and ‘universal time’.

In this article, we take the city of Wrocław as a local starting point for a study of civic relations in post-communist Poland. It shows how waxing waters can reveal the contemporary civic consequences of the communist heritage as well as the repressed German past of the region. These are the hidden histories that, by

producing over-centralization, unaccountability of state structures, collective amnesia, and deep rivalry among political actors, as well as disrespect among citizens and distrust between citizens and states, explain the incapacity of Wrocław’s citizens to keep control over their city, the Odra, the state organizations and their imagination.

City in the Odra

Wrocław (640,000 inhabitants) is Poland’s fourth city and situated in Lower Silesia (Dolny Śląsk). Its landscape is partly suburban. Around the former German administrative and cultural centre, extensive residential settlements have been erected, consisting of the typical low quality/low cost tenement blocs of communism. Its economy, with its wide variety of industries – chemicals, textile, steel/engineering, electrical industries, food and transport – is still a (post) communist ‘update’ of an advanced nineteenth century German industrial location.

Today, Wrocław is the third most successful transition area of Poland.⁵ Capitalist transformation has led to a rapid class differentiation within neighbourhoods, primarily between lowly skilled industrial workers on the one hand and the higher educated service class on the other. Distinctions in wealth, however, have not yet led to residential segregation, except perhaps for the upper-ten who are now moving to newly developed ex-urban sites of country house development or to gentrified urban apartments. With some exceptions, then, everyone still lives in the same urban ecology of large-scale tenement blocs or badly maintained inner city areas. These areas, nevertheless, are rapidly turning into stages for post-communist status display, mainly through the medium of cars and other mobile items of conspicuous consumption.

Wrocław is located in the core of a swamp area where the rivers Bystrzyca, Widawa, Słęza and Olawa pour their waters in the river Odra, the branching arms of which embrace the center proper. This conjunction of various riverbeds was the cause of the unexpectedly rapid and threatening waxing of water levels on July 12, 1997.



Map of Wrocław. The darker parts show the flooded areas.

The first rumours about the threat of flood started to spread on Wednesday July 9. That day, the Regional Committee of Flood Control had concluded in its joint meeting that the city could rely on its extensive system of waterworks to channel the excess water safely through the area. Despite the Committee's confidence, or perhaps even as its consequence, rumours about a coming flooding were being raised in tandem with the rising level of the Odra river. On Thursday, a local newspaper on its own account published a doom scenario, self-confidently predicting which neighbourhoods would be flooded. In response to the mounting pressure of public fear, the Regional Committee decided to blow up a dike near Lany to show that it was preparing to spare the city. Angry peasants from Lany, however, prevented miners from doing so and clashed violently with police forces. The administration willy-nilly retreated and later attempts failed too. A dike in the area of Brzeg broke spontaneously however, which served to postpone the flooding of the urban area.⁶

In the city itself, manifest collective action only started on Saturday afternoon, on July 12. Thousands of volunteers – called on by the popular media – started to reinforce riversides with sandbags. They also blocked off streets and posted guards at critical points. The national government responded by sending military sup-

port for the volunteers. The Odra reached its peak-level around midnight. But in the subsequent days fears remained for dikes and bridges, which were under continuous pressure from strong alluvial currents, causing the population to remain on guard.

Except for the nineteenth-century neighbourhood in Traugutta Street (called 'the ghetto'), the old centre was not flooded. The water mainly hit the postwar residential areas in the north and the south-east. Of the city's territory, 26.5 per cent was flooded. At some places, the water reached seven meters, such as in the post-war neighbourhood of Kożanów. But the average depth was between 30 and 60 centimetres. There were two casualties in the community, one of whom was drowned.

The flood brought, of course, everyday public life in disarray. Many neighbourhoods were without electricity for many days, and the whole city was without tap water for one and a half week. Each day people stood in long lines for pumps and tankers. The telephone network was completely in disorder and on July 17, thirty thousand telephone numbers still did not function. For many people it took more than a month to become re-connected again. The city centre was completely deserted for one long week, and the re-establishment of daily urban routines took certainly another week. Mountains of litter dominated the street scenery for

about a month because the refuse dump was flooded too and neighbouring communes declined to make space available. It took four months before tram-traffic functioned as before.

The economic damage was considerable: 3,476 buildings were flooded, among which thousands of apartments, 840 shops and other services.⁷ Shortly after the water receded, local authorities claimed that hundreds of apartments should be demolished and replaced. A dilapidated house in Traugutta Street neighbourhood had collapsed. A year later, several nineteenth century tenement houses in 'the ghetto,' notorious for its lack of maintenance since the thirties, were blown up to prevent the same.

The flood and the social events surrounding it, made a strong and unique impression on Wrocław's citizens. In the late summer and in autumn, two large photo exhibitions remained open for months, visited by thousands of people. Five illustrated books on the flood have as yet been published, as well as a video, entitled 'Historical Catastrophe.'

State-Citizen Relations in Post-Communism

It is no fresh discovery that during calamities rumours, as an informal means of communication and coordination, frequently take over from formal media and routine governmental procedures. Wrocław too, during the flood-episode, was dominated by rumours. But rumours, here, signified something more fundamental than just the cognitive and practical self-organization of people in the face of danger. They were the expression of a basic feature of many post-communist societies: the profound popular distrust of the purposes and capacities of authorities, the enduring lack of accountability and transparency of political structures, as well as the deep rivalry and disrespect between contending political factions and between different population segments.

Before, during, and after the flood, rumours virtually defined citizens' conceptions. They were the effective vehicle of public fear that prepared people for spontaneous action in defiance of the authorities well before the flood reached the

city. They kept people mobilized for days during the flood. And almost a week later, on July 18, a rapidly spreading rumour about a second wave of water motivated many people to barricade themselves in their houses again, incredulous of the authorities' prediction that this second wave would only threaten those areas where dikes had been broken before (as it turned out, the Odra stayed several meters below its former peak-level).

Rumours reflected a popular anticipation of the state's incapacity to deal with the emerging dangers. Effective local government was made impossible by the lack of reliable and authoritative administrative knowledge, which was, in its turn, produced by unclear and overlapping responsibilities, over-centralization, and political rivalry. Consequently, after spontaneous civic action had initiated the collective rescue of the city, the public administration had a hard job regaining the initiative. Its actions in the two crucial days – July 12–13 – were characterized by panic. When the Odra was already well under its maximum, armoured vehicles drove on high alert through the city centre. At the same moment, arriving travellers at the central railway station were ordered back by the police with the warning "The whole city is under water, epidemics are breaking out, it is perilous."⁸

Local authorities misjudged situations and panicked because of their fundamental ignorance about the water circulation, the infrastructure systems for its management, and the vulnerability of specific residential areas. As a result, it was completely unclear where the problems would arise and how they could be prevented. The deeper cause of this ignorance had its roots in the communist past. Water management had been treated as an exclusively military domain, information about which was kept at military regional headquarters and in Warsaw, but not at the level of local public authority. The ensuing deficiencies of prediction and management were, moreover, aggravated by rivalry between different governmental agencies, headed by protagonists from opposing political parties, with on the one side the city government under leadership of the independent local politician Mayor Bogdan Zdrojewski, and on the other the Regional Commit-

tee of Flood Control headed by the post-communist regional governor (voivod) Janusz Zaleski.

Lack of expertise led to governmental inertia as the floods were approaching the city, causing a temporary power-vacuum which was instantly filled up by the local media. Local broadcasting stations (radio and TV) became, for better or for worse, co-ordination centres for popular mobilization. Volunteers now took the lead. But, understandably, in absence of well defined plans, many things went wrong. For example, dikes of sandbags were erected on places where they were useless or even counter-productive. Local authorities were not capable of removing such obstacles in the next days, fiercely defended as they were by local residents who believed such dams would protect their houses against the upcoming flood, the extent of which no one could really predict.

It was Mayor Zdrojewski who understood the crucial importance of local media in this situation. He promptly removed his headquarters to the television station TD (Telewizja Dolnoslaska) and before long became the hero of the flood, compared in the vernacular with Kordecki, the Prior who in 1655 had led the defence of the Jasna Gora monastery against a Swedish invasion (today a national pilgrimage site near Czestochowa).⁹ Voivod Zaleski, on the other hand, became the bogeyman, allegedly lacking any organizational talents. Zaleski's failure on July 13 to blow up a dike near Lany was expatiated in the press and his reputation was thoroughly destroyed.¹⁰

But more than lack of personal talent, it was political rivalry that aggravated governmental incapacity. The regional administration was appointed by the national government, at that moment a coalition of post-communist and peasant parties. The regional governor (voivod) Zaleski was a post-communist. The town council, however, was controlled by a coalition of local and opposition parties, and Mayor Zdrojewski – chosen by the council – was an independent politician. Conflicting political (and electoral) interests between on the one hand the post-communist central government and its representative the voivod, and on the other oppositional politicians in control of the local administration, certainly in the atmosphere of deep

and profound disrespect of political rivals characteristic for a nation as Poland, with its long years of people's protest, frustrated any co-operation between the administrative levels and obstructed all possible action.

The structure of regional governments, moreover, was inherited from the communist regime, and its set-up reflected the centralizing plus fragmentalizing aims of the politburo vis-à-vis the provinces. In 1975 the regime changed the administrative division from 22 into 49 voivodships – the region Wrocław, for example, was divided into 4 different voivodships.¹¹ This policy of centralization through fragmentation was meant to strengthen the vertical lines within the command economy by cutting off lower-level communication between districts and allowing optimal local penetration by the centre. The organized lack of contacts between adjacent local units is a basic and little recognized administrative feature of (ex-)communist societies, as the former Polish deputy Minister of Housing, Irene Herbst, emphasized in an interview.¹² During the flood, this administrative heritage obstructed the transmission of information between local public authorities and inhibited any effective 'voice' from below (which is of course something other than direct popular action).

It is interesting to make a comparison with the grass-roots information and co-ordination system characteristic for the 'civic' systems for water control in a country so deeply dependent on the effectiveness of such social structures as the Netherlands. In this river-delta country, control of waterworks is characterized by decentralized district water boards with democratically elected boardmembers and a professional chair (dike warden) appointed by the crown. These boards have great professional autonomy, and short communication lines with higher executive levels. Board members are regularly recruited from local interests with intimate knowledge of, and high dependence on, local river landscapes, such as farmers and landlords, who have extensive democratic rights (voting, information, etc.) vis-à-vis the dike warden.¹³ As the water rises – for instance in February 1995, when 200,000 people were evacuated – district water boards install warning

systems and inform and advise higher public authorities, i.e. mayors and provincial governors who are in charge during such operations. The role and influence of the national government is a minor and supportive one. Of course, this system can bring about conflicts, as it did in 1995, but such conflicts are typically based in an excess of power and autonomy on the part of the boards and the professional water-managers as compared to other civic interests, such as those of the village inhabitants, rather than on their weakness/dependence.

Ideologies of state policy-making in a post-communist country such as Poland also worked to disqualify governmental responses. Initially, the national post-communist government saw the flood as an alibi for regional claim-making. It tried to play it down just like it would have done with other popular claims on its highly conservative public budget. This response was firmly rooted in the ideological conditions of post-communism. In East Central European citizenship-discourse, a sharp demarcation is nowadays drawn between 'real citizenship' on the one hand, which is held to be highly 'self-responsible', and 'ordinary claim-making' on the other, which is negatively associated with the communist heritage of popular distributive demands vis-à-vis a state with which nobody in the end would identify. Surely, in historical and comparative perspective this is a dubious and moralistic contrast. It overlooks the origins of contemporary citizenship practices in 18th and 19th century popular contestation with states, and it suppresses the question under which circumstances of governance people can become 'self-responsible' citizens rather than egoistic and non-committed claimants. But the distinction between self-responsibility and claim-making is of course political rather than scientific. It serves to bring citizenship-discourse, with its roots in the dissident culture of the 1970s and 80s and its powerful mythical and legitimating functions for the new democratic state, in line with the requirements of conservative social policies and neo-liberal public finances such as demanded by the international institutions.

In the case of the flood, this ideological predisposition led to politically self-defeating rhet-

oric. Prime Minister Cimoszewicz aroused country-wide indignation as he first remarked that the number of the flood's casualties was far below the daily average in Polish traffic. In the second instance, when it became clear that this was a serious event, the government started to put blame on the neighbours. According to a government spokesman, the situation was made worse by the Czech Republic emptying its water reservoirs. That same day, July 12, Prime Minister Cimoszewicz visited some flooded areas and declared that farmers would not get any restitution for destroyed crops by saying 'You have to take precautions, and get insured for eventual disasters. But unfortunately this has not been a popular attitude'.¹⁴ Next, on July 9, local authorities incapable of managing the approaching water masses, bid the national government to announce the state of emergency, but the Ministry of Internal Affairs deemed such a step unconstitutional and claimed that regional governors had all the means at hand to tackle the problems. Remarkably enough, the Polish army had earlier declared that it was ready for action, but the authorities did not ask for systematic help, even though all knowledge of waterworks had been under military control for decades.¹⁵

There are Polish ways to solve such a situation of governmental unaccountability: In Wrocław, during the night in which the waters reached their peak, as we were told, a pensioned military officer came up to town hall and offered his help. He was active there for a couple of days, and as he suddenly disappeared local administrators understood that 'the flood was over' (evidently, his name was not known then or now).

Centralism, rivalry, unaccountability, and the political rejection of state responsibilities fed back and forth into a profound lack of trust and co-operation among citizens. Some towns suffered from large-scale and sometimes clearly organized plundering, a problem bluntly denied by the national government. Many people anticipated this and refused to be evacuated. Problems with enforcing authority also surfaced in the attempts to blow-up dikes upstream from Wrocław. Voivod Zaleski personally mediated with the inhabitants of Lany and

offered them financial compensation. However, he had to be rescued by a police escort in an 'atmosphere of threat' (Wrzesinski 1997: 39). Months later it turned out that he had been taken hostage for some hours. Especially the countryside was rebellious. Inhabitants of Siechnice – a village a few kilometres from Wrocław – first changed the nameplates of their village into 'Witamy w zbiorniku retencyjnym Siechnice' (Welcome into water reservoir Siechnice) and then turned to less frivolous protest, throwing up road-blocks to add strength to their demand for the construction of a canal to empty their village of water.¹⁶

To disguise the fact that there was no effective government in Wrocław for at least two days, President Aleksander Kwasniewski complimented the citizens of Wrocław with their 'excellent rescue operations.' He was followed suit by Mayor Zdrojewski¹⁷ whose growing popularity was founded in the fact that he chose not to let his council, civil service or other professionals do the job, but the local population at large. By doing so, and by using the local media for this purpose, he turned the lack of administrative capacities into populist electoral advantage. During the national elections of September 21, 1997, he was easily elected to the senate. The election campaign also for parliament (Sejm) – was a tough and expensive one. But on the eve of the elections Mayor Zdrojewski announced that his budget had been zero. His campaign had taken place during the flood.

Because the governmental coalition lost the elections, Voivod Zaleski had to resign. The new national government – a coalition of Solidarność parties and Unia Wolności (Freedom Union) – appointed new regional governments and immediately prepared the ground for the reorganization of local and regional administrations. Since August 1998, the former 48 voivodships have been negotiated down to 16.

History Strikes Back

While Poland is now beyond doubt a determined democratic and capitalist country, the communist heritage and its particular consequences for governance, trust and co-operation are elements of specific hidden histories that

produce and reproduce barriers to a smooth functioning civil society. Yet another element surfaced in the Polish flood: the repressed German past. This repressed past was conveyed in public exclamations as 'This is the first flood here for centuries' or 'for a thousand years' and 'We don't have any experience with this.' Remarkable utterances in a city which was built in a notoriously swampy area with extensive water works which had been flooded as late as 1932.

During the conferences of Yalta and Potsdam (1945) the Polish borders were revised under pressure of the Soviet Union and were removed westward for several hundred kilometres. The eastern Polish districts were appropriated by the Soviet Union (today Lithuania, Belarus and Ukraine) while the new state got Eastern German territories, those east of the Oder and the Neisse rivers (among others, Pomerania, Upper and Lower Silesia) in return.

In 1945–47, the ex-German city of Breslau was repopulated by Polish refugees, among them many from Lwów (today L'viv in Ukraine), as well as by Poles from other evacuated areas. The town itself was nearly deserted after Hitler had declared it 'Festung Breslau' in August 1944 – a stronghold against marching Russian troops on their way to Berlin. The town, having been safe for allied aircraft all during the war, was heavily ravaged. During the final battle, about 17,000 citizens were killed. It became a ghost town, perhaps not like Dresden but certainly like Cologne or Nuremberg. Subsequently, between 1945 and 1949, some 3.2 million Germans were ousted from the new Polish territory. In Lower Silesia about a hundred thousand Germans stayed behind, of which thirty thousand migrated in the 1950s. Many of these stay-behinds were forced to do so, being indispensable for the industrial built up of the new Poland. The highly developed German areas offered a new chance for rapid urbanization and industrialization, a modernization which Poland had failed to generate on its own in the interwar period.¹⁸

Wrocław, subsequently, became the destiny of several internal migrations in the 1950s, as people were attracted by housing and industrial employment.¹⁹ In Breslau the number of

remaining Germans was small – today the local German community counts some 800 mainly elderly people – and those who stayed behind were considered second-class citizens and were closely observed by the authorities.²⁰

Public exclamations like ‘this is the first flood here for a thousand years’ reveal a constructed – and false – social memory, a reflection of the dramatic historical caesurae of the city itself as well as of elaborate communist and nationalist efforts to suppress the memory and facts of the German past.²¹ In this constructed memory, an overwhelming historical continuity of the Silesian region as Polish is claimed by stressing the Piast origin of local rule. The Polish kings of the 11th, 13th and 14th centuries would have descended from the Piast dynasty, which controlled parts of Silesia. After the Second World War, a myth was created about these Piast rulers as quintessentially Polish in order to legitimate the “recovered territories” and the new borders once and for all. The German presence in the western areas was now presented as a historical mistake, a temporary and unimportant deviation from Polish cultural continuity, and the presence of German minorities was flatly denied.²²

In Wrocław, this ‘invented’ history served to transform ‘their’ town into ‘our’ town. At least two generations of students had to learn all the long-lasting Piast dynasties by heart. As a materialization of this process, many manifestations of the German past were erased. Names of streets and squares were altered and Polonized, now memorizing communist heroism and Polish patriotism, which was also expressed in numerous monuments. This process of ‘mythical incorporation’ of the region took some time, because the regime itself initially feared for the durability of the western borders. But at the end of the 1960s German cemeteries were cleared away and turned into public parks. The only two cemeteries surviving were Jewish, as a consequence of which contemporary citizens often assume their city to have been predominantly Jewish. But pre-war Breslau (circa 660,000 inhabitants) accommodated not more than some 25,000 – mostly liberal – Jews.²³

After the fall of the communist regime, street names were altered – preferably into new his-

toric or Catholic ones – but the prevailing knowledge about the past did not change. Also in more serious literature the post-war arrival of the Polish population is still referred to as a ‘repatriation’ and it is stated that after the war Silesia was ‘re-Polonized.’ Invented histories create an imaginary continuity with the past, as in the local ale called ‘Piast’ – “brewed since 1893.”

During the flood, suppressed German history “struck back.” Ignorance about the past resulted in a gross lack of common as well as professional knowledge about local waterworks. During the flood an old map was dug up in the town hall with the markings of the flood of 1932, but no one could decipher the lines and symbols. Other historical sources, such as *Das Breslau Lexicon* or publications of the *Schlesische Zeitung* would also have been sufficient to predict what was going to happen, but familiarity with such material was lacking.²⁴ Ignorance was such that the Traugutta Street neighbourhood would not even have been flooded had the material of a temporary dam not simply been removed years ago. During the flood of 1854, the central railway station, a magnificent structure illustrative of eclectic German architectural styles of the time and put into use that same year, had been flooded. This had occasioned the construction of an extensive system of hydrographic projects, i.e. weirs, locks, sluices, polders, and drainage polders around the old centre. But the post-war communist authorities, unknowingly, had destined these vital polders near the urban core as the site for large-scale building projects, such as the Kozanow neighbourhood, which, predictably, was virtually drowned in 1997.

Conclusion

In Wrocław a new mythology arose after the flood. It was characterized by two interrelated exaggerations: one concerning the extent of danger and damage and the other on the supposedly close spontaneous cooperation among citizens protecting their collective safety. In a special issue of *The Warsaw Voice* (31-8-1997) Mayor Zdrojewski claimed one-third of the city to have been flooded. The Sociologist Wojciech Sitek even writes in his book *Wspolnota i Zagro-*

zenie (Community and Danger) (1997) that half the city had stood under water. In reality, 26.5 per cent of the commune's territory, the larger part of it fully undeveloped, had been inundated. While we do not want to deny that spontaneous civic cooperation was widespread, one should also point to frequent self-seeking behaviour, plain sabotage and plundering, and a remarkably non-collaborative attitude vis-à-vis public authorities trying to coordinate collective action.

Myth-making in Wrocław served a populist and mildly redemptive function. Sure, it did not posit any internal enemy to be deported nor did it envision any final-solution, as redemptive myths, also in post-communist Europe, regularly do (see Tismaneanu 1998). But it helped to reactivate and 're-member' a basic mythic aspect of Polish nationalism: the whole nation's fight against an alien and intrusive state in order to protect its integrity. A similar vision of 'the people against the state' had been wrapped into the idea of anti-politics, the well-known cultural banner of the Polish and Central European opposition under Communism, an idea which has itself grown into a founding myth for the new democratic state after 1989. Anti-politics was about the liberation from communism by civic self-organization. A self-organization that was not primarily meant to lead to the conquering of the state. Rather, it was a goal in itself, an everyday practice that should lead to a 'parallel polis'. This parallel polis could perhaps (gradually) substitute for the state. But more importantly, precisely as a consequence of its state-abstinence, it would remain authentic, spontaneous and personalistic rather than bureaucratic and artificial.

Linz and Stepan, in their recent comparative work on consolidating democracies (1996), have rightly called attention to the potential incompatibility of this populist cultural configuration with the ideological requirements for the consolidation of democracy in Poland. They have shown how a perceived inevitable incongruity between the nation and the state prevented above all Włosa himself, the embodiment of Polish populism, but also many Solidarity-intellectuals, from playing the careful, constructive, and responsible role in relation to the state's institutions that is required to help instil

trust, justice and transparency of public governance. Instead, their actions following 1989 often reproduced civic distrust and institutional unreliability (Linz and Stepan, 1996, pp. 255–293; Gross 1992). Polish populist nationalism apparently does not transform itself easily into the mind-scape of a state-nation.

The particularities of the Polish path out of communism mattered. After 1989, the Polish opposition, and certainly Adam Michnik, the editor in chief of the *Gazeta Wyborza*, has accepted and argued in favour of the policy of the Thick Line. Ex-communists would be forgiven for their earlier practices and would face no revenge in the new Polish state. Although many post-communist states have adopted the same stance (the Czech republic is a partial exception, as is, of course, East Germany), there was a special non-voluntary reason for this in the Polish case, creating a situation not particularly conducive to the consolidation of civic democracy.

Since Poland was the first nation to take the decisive steps out of communism, develop the roundtable and agree to elections, nobody could be certain how the Soviet Union would react. Moreover, the Communist Party in Poland had moved toward negotiations on its own during 1988. Contrary to a widespread and important myth, it was not primarily pressed by popular protest. Rather it initiated the pact with the opposition itself, as a deliberate way out of economic crisis and social stagnation (see above all Staniszkis 1992). This created a special heritage: the birth act of the new Polish national and democratic state, the outcome of the roundtable, was not the product of democratic concertation, certainly not the constitutionally enshrined enduring position in state and economy of the ex-communists.

At the same time, Poland had been the only East European nation with an heritage of large-scale and tenacious popular protest against, and non-acceptance of, the communist state, which was not unreasonably perceived as an alien, Soviet imposed, intrusion. The almost general rejection of communism expressed itself again in the 1989 elections. Against all predictions and expectations, and facilitated unintentionally by the technicalities of the voting procedure which were expressly designed to

guarantee a planned communist majority in the Sejm, people expressed their own idea of a Thick Line: eliminating all the names of the communists from the voting lists and with this trick allowing Solidarity a great victory. But here the paradoxes of the first post-communist elections came immediately to the fore: the victory was unconstitutional (because not planned during the Roundtable) and Solidarity decided it would allow the communists their pre-planned seats. The new Polish democracy was squeezed between popular anti-communism on the one side and its own provisional constitution and the policy of the thick line on the other.

It was precisely this contradictory heritage of popular anti-communism caged in by the constitutionally enshrined Thick Line that allowed the populist idea of the Polish self-organizing nation as in its qualities clearly distinct from, distrustful of, and somehow against the state, to be reproduced under post-1989 circumstances. The flood of 1997 helped to reactivate, relive and “re-member” this fundamental contradiction. The popular self-defense against the flood was felt to signal the people’s superiority over, and defiance of, the state and its ex-communist ruling party. Mayor Zdrojewski successfully rode this sentiment in his victorious assault on the ex-communist state-bureaucrats and governors. This relived sentiment subsequently helped the opposition to regain power in the next election.

But apart from “re-membering” functions, myth-making also served at least three ‘misrecognizing’ functions. First, it helped to repress public awareness of the fact that the flooding of Wrocław was not the consequence of ex-communist undeserved leadership, but rather of inadequate public attention to governmental organization and institutions compounded by deep political rivalry and mistrust expressed in identity politics. Secondly, it took away from view the unhappy insight that still, after ten years of democratization and liberalization in the name of citizenship, state-citizen relations in Poland are not yet transparent, reliable, or trust-invoking. And third, it served to celebrate and ‘re-member’ Polish popular unity and *communitas* (Turner) in a situation of rapidly increasing and

visible social differentiation, inequalities, widespread status anxiety, and frequently surfacing group conflict.

In her essay on pyramid-schemes in Romania, Verdery (1996) proposes the notion of ‘unruly coalitions’ as harbingers of populist, nationalist, and mythically inclined movements in East Central Europe. These unruly coalitions are locally or regionally based and shape local politics by operating behind the scenes, potentially through violence, and they usually include local nomenclature, ex-security agents, large proprietors, managers, members of the judiciary etc.

Now, it makes sense to see the Polish flood as having occasioned an unruly coalition in the Silesian region with Mayor Zdrojewski as its centre. Unruly coalitions are certainly not limited to network politics in the Balkans or the ex-Soviet ‘inner empire’. Nor are they necessarily mafia-like. Rather, we would suggest, they are the consequence of the absence of well defined and well structured local party-organizations and grass roots political platforms. Political parties everywhere in CEE countries are very thin institutions, with few members, little formal organization, high visibility of key personalities, and a heavy emphasis on capital cities and national politics. In such a situation, unruly coalitions among local elites necessarily emerge to organize interests behind local policy. They are unruly, not because they may be mafia-like, but rather because of the absence of clear programs, explicit procedures, the weakness of local democracy and the as yet unstable relations between governmental hierarchies. This case study of floods, populism and the state in a Polish city indicates that unruly coalitions may be an inevitable region-wide phenomenon associated with the problems of establishing democratic politics in post-communist societies. It suggests that their specific form, function, and content will be largely a product of their wider environment. This particular unruly coalition in Wrocław decisively helped to bring the issue of regional government and decentralization on the public agenda and facilitated a new chance to govern for the two parties that came out of the ex-opposition movement. It thereby helped to create new chances

for civic consolidation rather than to mafia-type developments. The difference resides in the wider political society and its path of extrication from the communist past.

Notes

1. We would like to thank Ewa Ignaczak, Leszek Koczanowicz and Lukasz Nysler for their help to collect information for this paper.
2. The Odra river flows from the south to the Baltic sea and the flood also struck parts of north-east Germany as the Frankfurt (Oder) area.
3. Cf. Cebo-Foniol et al. (1997: 115; 120).
4. *The Warsaw Voice. Polish and Central European Review* (27-7-1997: p. 5).
5. *Polityka* August 22, 1998, no. 44.
6. Cf. Wrzesinski (1997: 12; 16–19).
7. Cf. Wrzesinski (1997: 72; 137).
8. The collective fear for an epidemic was also aired 'from below.' Despite official announcements to the contrary, epidemics were rumoured for over a week. Lack of public confidence was also voiced in the suspicion that tap water, as it became available again, was in fact poisoned industrial water.
9. Kordecki led the defense against a Swedish invasion (cf. Davies 1982 Vol. I: 452) and is as an historical hero known among the people, among others, because of the historical novel *Potop* (Flood) of H. Sienkiewicz (1868) prescribed literature in secondary schools.
10. Cf. Sitek (1997: 43).
11. Until May 3, 1975 the 3-tier administrative division counted 22 voivodships (with 5 special-status cities) and was changed into 49 voivodships (and 3 urban agglomerations); 2345 communes and 814 towns/cities.
12. Interview on Soco financed research with Don Kalb, June 19, 1998.
13. About Dutch district water boards, see: *Winkler Prins Encyclopedie* 1984 (volume 24: 5).
14. This is a good example of the generally pedagogic citizenship-discourse that CEE governments hold before their constituencies. Like his judgement about the first victims of the flood Prime Minister Cimoszewicz had to withdraw his remarks about damages because of fierce public protest. On July 15 the government decided to compensate farmers whose harvests were devastated and every household hit by the flood was to get 2000 zł, an amount that was raised to 3000 zł by the Polish parliament (Sejm) two days later (Cf. Cebo-Fonoil et al. 1997: 71; 89).
15. Cf. Cebo-Fonoil et al. (1997: 10; 18–19; 24).
16. Cf. Cebo-Fonoil et al. (1997: 18, 24; 40; 101).
17. Cf. Wrzesinski (1993: 70).
18. Cf. Czerwinski (1993: 30); Davies (1982 Vol. II: 489; 513; 526–7); Jakubek et al. 1997; Szarota 1969.
19. Cf. Kaczmarek et al. (1997: 207–220).
20. Cf. Kurcz (1995: 43).
21. Cf. Gevers & Tak 1995.
22. Cf. Korbonski (1992: 257); Mach (1993: 188).
23. Cf. Czerwinski (1993: 26); Elias 1987. That these cemeteries were not cleared away was not so much out of respect for the former Jewish population but because Ferdinand Lassalle as well as the parents of Edith Stein are buried at the oldest one. The grave of Lassalle was visited by comrades of the GDR and the one of the Stein family became a commemorative place for Catholics. Edith Stein converted to Catholicism and became a nun. She died in one of German concentration camps and was canonized.
24. Cf. Sitek (1997: 38–39).

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