

The development of squatting in Poland: structural conditions and local differences

Dominika V. Polanska & Grzegorz Piotrowski

Introduction

First squatting attempts in Poland were reported in 1991 (Żuk 2001) and squatting has spread to several Polish cities since. Our ambition is to understand how cohesion and durability are affecting squatters' use of opportunity structures. We want to achieve this by studying squatting in two Polish cities, Warsaw and Poznań, which are regarded as most vibrant squatting environments.

The aim is to analyze opportunity structures that condition the emergence and development of squatting and how these opportunities are responded to and made use of by squatters. Our ambition is to understand why squatting has developed differently in the two cities by emphasizing the duration and cohesion of the squatting scene as pivotal for the different trajectories in squatting. With our cases we want to show that the cohesion of the scene and its longevity mitigate and intensify some specific features of opportunity structures (political, legal, discursive, and economic) and result in somewhat diverse local developments of squatting.

The empirical foundations for this article are 40 interviews, whereof 20 were conducted with squatting activists in Warsaw in 2013 and 20 in Poznan in the period of 2008 - 2013. Our interviews were semi-structured and held either at squats or in neutral locations and lasted from, 45 minutes to over two hours. For the protection of our interviewees we use a numbering system in the quotations of the interviews. In our analysis the empirical material was cross-referenced with publications and videos released by and about the activists, in official documents, newspapers and other popular media, social media and on the Internet.

The majority of the interviewed squatters were in their twenties and thirties and many of them had a relative long experience of squatting (In Poland, but also abroad). Many of them were students, worked part time or in temporary arrangements, or owned small and project-based businesses. Their squatting activism intersected with participation in anarchist groups, antifascist initiatives, and other activities that could be labeled as belonging to the leftist-libertarian family. Our ambition in the selection of interviewees has been to cover different perspectives on squatting in each city by choosing respondents with different experience in squatting (different squats, length of activism, gender and so on).

We begin our paper reviewing previous studies of squatting in post-socialist Europe and we continue to the topic of what conditions squatting in other places of the world. We then present the theoretical framework guiding the analysis, by discussing the relation between the concepts of opportunity structures, along with cohesion's and durability's role for the influence and use of opportunity structures by squatting activists. In the analysis presented next we argue that the stability and endurance of the squatting scene is crucial for a more permanent character in squatting struggles, but has not proved to be the most used strategy in the use of political opportunity structures. In the final section, we conclude that the durability of squatting environment might

lessen the probability to open to external coalitions and the use of more institutionalized forms of political struggle.

Under-researched part of Europe: Previous studies

Squatting in post-socialist Europe is under-studied and has been rarely treated and analyzed as a research topic. It has rather been indirectly described together with other social movements, collective actions, or cultural expressions, for instance the Central and Eastern European alterglobalization movement (see Gagyí 2013; Piotrowski 2011a). There is, however, a steadily growing number of studies directly investigating the emergence and development of squatting in the region. Piotrowski (2011b) studied squatting in three different countries in the area; Poland, Hungary and Czech Republic, and concluded that the main challenge for the development of squatting is the small size of left-wing movements and the phenomenon's novelty in the region. Among the three countries, Poland was singled out as the one with most stable and vibrant squatting scene, largely due to the *Rozbrat* squat, founded in Poznań in 1994 (Piotrowski 2011b, 2014). Piotrowski (2014) argues that the small scale (compared to Western counterparts) of Polish and Central and Eastern European squatting scenes was a result of the popular rejection of leftist ideology and ideals and radical politics (see also Cisař 2013). Moreover, squatted social centers in the region usually closed on alliance formation with other actors on the political scene. Squatted social centers were – as majority of progressive social movements in the region – closely connected to subcultures (Piotrowski 2013).

Žuk (2001) has made a similar argument about squatting in Poland being connected to the development of alternative culture in the country in the 1980s. Its emergence during the 1990s and novelty can partly be explained by the influences coming from the West after the systemic change. The more structural conditions that Žuk distinguishes in his analysis of squatting's emergence in Poland are: the systemic change along with the rise of capitalism and socio-economic changes that followed. A more recent glance at squatting is provided in our study (Polanska and Piotrowski 2015), where we have argued that squatting in Poland should be analyzed as a response – besides others - to the housing situation in Poland (lack of affordable housing, vacant buildings, privatization of the housing stock), along with the lack of space for the development of alternative culture, and the neoliberal urban governance reinforced since the country's accession to the European Union in 2004 and the global financial crisis of 2008 (see also Polanska 2014).

There are plenty more studies on squatting in Western context (Western Europe and Northern America in particular) however those focusing on structural conditions and opportunity structures facilitating/constraining squatting in specific contexts are limited. Prujit (2013) describes how the authorities have developed strategies to eliminate squatting by legalizing it, by turning the “buildings to established housing associations that concluded lease contracts with individual squatters” (2013: 30-31). However Katsiaficas (1997) claims that in Berlin it was used to pacify the squatting environment by creating a cleavage between the radical and the more moderate fractions of the squatting movement. The activists that agreed to turn their squats into legalized *Wohnprojekte* had lost touch with the radical fraction of the movement refusing to compromise with the authorities. Guzman-Concha's (2015) quantitative study of squatting shows, furthermore, that the most common factors for the development of a strong squatting scene could be: youth unemployment,

left-leaning environment, presence of far-right groups and politics and the responsiveness of local authorities.

Corr (1999) distinguished among different tactics being used by squatters in different contexts mentioning tactics in the spheres of legal regulations, media, cooperation, wider support and so on. He describes how activists use constitutional law and litigation as a tactic to gain their goals. He also analyzes cases of state repression and how squatting and other land and tenants' movements have responded, arguing that repression "can bring into stark focus a previously obscured adversary, cementing solidarity between activists and those previously uninvolved" (1999: 115) in this way strengthening the movement. Martínez and Cattaneo (2014) described on the basis of the Spanish case how the changing political climate has affected squatting and popularized this form of collective action, seeing squatting as a reaction to structural inequalities defining it as "an alternative way of living in the margins of the capitalist patterns, and a political experience of protesting and mobilising through direct action" (2014: 29). However it is not only the openings in the political opportunity structures that condition squatting and several researchers have showed that legal structures and squatters' responses to these could be equally important (Martínez 2014; Martínez, Azozomox & Gil 2014). A crucial factor in the cases described above has been, moreover, the wider support squatters could mobilize, including the support of local neighborhoods, wider society and the media.

Majority of these studies demonstrate how squatting and squatters respond to structural conditions. Most of them underline the economic vulnerability of squatters, squatting's illegal nature, and the role of wider support (of the public and the media) for the successful stories of squatting. Our ambition is to focus on the cohesion and longevity that characterize the squatting environment and to investigate these characteristics' role for the development of squatting and the use of political, legal, economic and discursive opportunity structures by squatters.

Opportunity structures and the relational perspective: theoretical framework

In order to understand the conditions for the development of squatting in Poland and its different local trajectories we use theories known in social sciences as opportunity structures that are enabling and restricting the way that social movements function and develop. Since the 1970s, international research on social movements has studied how the political context affects movements' development and their possibilities to influence society (e.g. Kitschelt 1986; Tarrow 1998; McAdam 1996). Within this approach, it is often stressed that institutionalized politics create both opportunities and constraints for social movements, affecting their prospects to mobilize and influence politics and society. However, the critics of this approach (cf. Goodwin and Jaspers 2004) point out that the majority of research done using this approach is focused on organized groups aiming at political change and not on groups that are pushing for a cultural change and are not regarding the state as its enemy (at least not explicitly).

We agree with previous critique of this view of encompassing too many dimensions of social movement activity and including "political institutions and culture, crises of various sorts, political alliances and political shifts" (Gamson & Meyer 1996: 275) and propose to analyze social movements and other collective actors through the concept opportunity structures. Opportunity structures are in our understanding a much broader term not only focusing on the political dimension, but distinguishing between political, legal, economic and discursive opportunity structures for collective struggles. In our paper we stress the importance of social cohesion and durability permeating these

opportunity structures, sometimes facilitating and sometimes mitigating the way that these opportunities can be made use of by collective actors.

The *political opportunity structures* usually are defined as the degree of openness/closeness of the institutionalized political system, the stability of elites in the political system, the availability of elite allies and the degree of state repression (McAdam 1996). Therefore they should also be understood as threats that collective actors respond and react to. To this dimension, conditioning the work of social movements and other collective actors, we add the *legal opportunity structure*, which we treat as a separate type of opportunity structure, as collective actors can use it separately from the political opportunity structures in order to reach their goals (Jacobsson 2012). *Economic opportunities* consist of the use of collective actors of economic opportunities and strategies. The ability of mobilizing resources could be crucial for the success or failure of collective actors or to their goals in terms of social/economic change (McCarthy & Zald 1987: 45). Economic opportunities, as well as other types of opportunity structures, can be related to legal and political opportunity structures (Tickamyer and Duncan 1990; Korolczuk and Saxonberg 2014). *Discursive opportunity structures* entail what is resonating as “reasonable” and “legitimate” among the wider public (or a specific target audience) in a specific context and have been used by researchers to analyze how “social movement frames are likely to have the greatest capacity to mobilize existing and new recruits, to convince the public of a movement's demands, and to persuade authorities to alter policy and practices in line with the movement's agenda” (McCammon 2013: 1).

We consider the political and legal opportunity structures as most important, and often intertwined, for the development of squatting on national level, being more important than economic or discursive opportunity structures. However, looking into differences on local level focuses our attention on the character of the squatting scene in terms of durability/establishment and cohesion. What we want to add to the analysis of opportunity structures is the relational perspective with the focus on cohesion that permeates all opportunities and strategies undertaken by collective actors. We will argue that cohesion of the squatting scene and its durability are pivotal for the different developments of squatting we have observed in Warsaw and Poznań. We propose that the stability and endurance of the scene is crucial for a more permanent solution to squatting struggles.

Social relations take some time to build up and many scholars of social capital have emphasized their role for individuals' and groups' achievement of goals (Edwards 2013). We do not wish to examine the social capital of squatting activists in this study, rather we want to analyze how cohesion have been built within the squatting scenes in the two cities and how they have interacted with the use of opportunity structures. We argue that the more long-lasting and cohesive the scene has been the more comfortable and less energy-demanding the social relations become. We claim that the less long-lasting the stability of the scene is, the more dynamic it becomes internally, but also in relation to others. There are most likely less rules governing the relations, and more probability of cooperation and coalition-making in relationships where the rules are “loosely” or “freshly” set. We believe that different conflicts within or between groups and individuals within a scene and other actors pose important challenges to the ability to work together and build alliances (Polanska & Piotrowski 2015).

Opportunity structures and squatting in Poland

The political opportunity structure for squatting in Poland has in the recent years been relatively favorable when compared to other countries (cf. Van der Steen et.al. 2014). Since 2013 meetings with the minister of Transport, Construction and Maritime Economy, Piotr Styczeń have been initiated, where squatters, tenants and state authorities have been discussing housing policies in the country (Polanska 2014; Polanska & Piotrowski 2015). The impacts of these meetings are too early to assess. However, we can conclude that the political opportunity structures have not been completely closed for squatters in Poland. When it comes to policies on state level, Polish squatters' intentions to challenge these have been quite low, as the Polish squatters usually focus on challenging the local/municipal level. The political climate in Poland should be perceived as a threat to squatting rather than an opportunity. After 1989 Poland – together with most of CEE countries – witnessed a combination of influences of neoliberalism (in particular in economic terms) and right wing conservatism. Right-wing youth groups are more numerous and larger than the leftist ones (associated with squatting), also the illegal occupation of property is expected to receive little support from the general public (Piotrowski 2011a).

Political structure is tightly intertwined with the legal structure and the question of legalization of squatting is ever recurrent in the Polish case. Nevertheless the issue is each time solved on the local level, depending on the willingness and attitude of the local authorities towards squatting and also squatters' willingness towards cooperation with institutionalized actors and also institutionalization. What is important is that squatting is not criminalized in Poland – there is no law stating that squatting per se is a criminal act. However, there is a law on the disturbance of domestic peace (Criminal Law, Art. 193). Anybody disturbing the domestic peace/trespassing risks fines, custodial sentence or up to one year's prison sentence.

The *Act on the Protection of Tenants' Rights* (2001/2010), the *Act on Housing Cooperatives* (2000) and the *Act on property rights* (1994) are important legal acts regulating the rights of tenants and use of other's property and serve as substantial openings in the legal structure available for Polish squatters. The law on the protection of tenants gives the tenants the right to stay in a place, even if the owner wants them to move, the eviction then needs to be preceded by a lawsuit. The owner is not allowed to enter the place, unless the tenants let him in. However, in particular situations when the owner suspects an emergency or destruction of property s/he is legally allowed to enter the property, but only in assistance with the police or municipal police. However, the squatters – as other tenants – often face illegal practices both of the law enforcement as well as the private security companies and owners. On the other hand one can observe the increasing proficiency of the Polish squatters' use of litigation and their knowledge of legal procedures.

When it comes to the economic opportunity structures Polish squatters try to avoid economic dependency and are often guided by an ideology of self-sufficiency, anti-capitalism and autonomy, averting the use of money as much as possible. They are also usually well educated, but not necessarily (often by choice) permanently established on the labor market. Whenever economic support is needed squatters use crowd-funding tools, benefit events, or loans within the squatting scene to cover the needs. Domestic economic opportunity structures were "closed" to Polish squatters, or to put it more accurately: they were not considered as an important part of their struggles. Economic opportunity structures is usually the field in which one of the key squatting principles – D.I.Y. Do It Yourself – is seen in action. D.I.Y. is not only a way to overcome budgetary restrictions but also a form of prefigurative politics when understanding politicized squatting as an attempt to 'decolonize everyday life' (Katsiaficas 1997).

The discursive opportunity structures for squatting in Poland have been for most part negative against squatting. In times of threats (evictions, attacks on squats, squatters' support for the tenants

struggles), especially after the eviction of *Elba* in 2012, media reports have been somewhat more sympathetic towards squatters. However, a common critique towards mainstream media among squatters is its tendency to portray squatting as a “subcultural” phenomenon, depriving it its political meaning. Squatters testify that the knowledge among the wider public about squatting is still limited and often associated with “uncivil” and “deviant” forms of collective action, interpreting squatting as unacceptable breach of property rights. We will further on in our specific case studies explain how squatters try to influence public opinion on squatting and strategically use the media in order to put pressure on the authorities. However, we will not give a systematic analysis of how media (or any other discourses) are portraying squatting, as it would require a study for itself.

Squatting in Warsaw: dynamic but inconstant

Squatting in Warsaw occurred in the second half of the 1990s and intensified and gathered larger numbers of activists over time. The longevity of the attempts varied from a few days to several years. The more long-lasting squats in the city were all, however, opened in the 2000s, along with *Fabryka* 2001/2002-2011 and *Elba* 2004-2012. At the time of writing (June 2015) there are two squatted spaces in Warsaw, *Syrena* (2010), *Przychodnia* (2012), one collectively squatted land *Wagenburg* (2007), as well as one legalized social center, *A.D.A* (2014). All of them are quite young (oldest since 2007), gather different teams of squatters, provide different activities, and perceive themselves as having different “profiles”.

When the eviction of one of the most long-lasting local squats, *Elba*, took place in 2012, after over eight years of existence, it caused great support in a demonstration following the eviction. The 2000 supporters that gathered at the demonstration, to walk through the streets of Warsaw, was an extraordinary number for this kind of radical libertarian left-wing movement in the Polish context. The remarkable support for the squat was followed by some considerable local and national media attention and a willingness of local politicians to start a dialogue with the squatters in the city. The political situation was described by the squatters as “favourable: large interest of media, even the politicians held out their hands to somehow help this squatting movement” (6).

What happened was that local district authorities of Śródmieście proposed to talk to squatters, as the eviction was followed by an opening of a new squat, *Przychodnia*, in a municipal building in the central part of the city. These talks were shortly moved to the city level, where the *Center for Social Communication*, took over the meetings. The squatters intentionally invited the media to the talks with local authorities that “turned it into quite publicized event” (15). Another strategy when the negotiations opened with the local authorities was to bring along representatives of different squatting teams in the city, but also representatives of the tenants’ organizations, to the meetings with authorities. In that way the claims of the squatters were not only publicized by the invited media, but also broadened to housing politics and tenants’ rights. The interviewed squatters perceived the position of the local authorities as pressured by the positive media coverage. The authorities were also perceived as responsible to set a good example for other Polish cities, in their position of a capital city, and to keep a positive image. “They could have smashed us, because they had the force, but then their image would have been destroyed” (8), one of the squatters concluded. As a result of these talks a new social center, *A.D.A.* was opened in April 2014, after long negotiations between the squatters and the local authorities. The new space was not a squat, but a

legalized space, where the requirement was that the activists founded an association in exchange of a rent contract.

The legal situation of the other squats was quite different. There are two squats located centrally in Warsaw that are parts of the complicated re-privatization processes going on in the city (resulting from nationalization of land and buildings during state socialism). One squatted space is privately owned. Another place is in a municipally owned building standing on privately owned land. The opening of one of these places was accompanied by an awareness of the legal status of the building and also on not breaking the law of trespassing, as the space was opened for anyone to enter, “we also could easily get inside, we didn’t even break any locks or anything” (8).



Picture 1. Przychodnia squat in Warsaw

One of these squats initiated cooperation with tenants’ organizations in the city and legitimated its existence in the light of tenants’ rights. The rights of the tenants have been applied recurrently by squatters in Warsaw, and when the protection period¹ during the winter started, many of the city’s squatters breathed a sigh of relief. Moreover, any attempts of trespassing have in the squats been actively avoided by barricading the entrances in cases of threats and calling on media attention in such cases, but also on the support of sympathizers and other activists as witnesses or by blocking the access to the squats. Recently, in October 2014, a threat to auction one of the squats came closer. The municipality wanted to put the building to the auction, as the owner is indebted, but the auction was cancelled due to the blockade of the evaluation of the building and some partial repayment of the debt by the owner.

For the other squat the legal situation looked differently. Its official opening was scheduled earlier than it was originally planned due to the positive media coverage of squatting by that time (2012). The legal aspect played an important role in the decision to open earlier as the eviction of *Elba* was perceived as illegal and improperly handled by the police and therefore favorable for the squatters.

¹ Prohibiting evictions in the winter period, between 1 September and 31 March, if there is no substitute or social housing guaranteed to the evicted.

The opening was a strategic move at a point in time when “it seemed to us that the public opinion was on our side” (5).

The illegality of the police actions in *Elba*'s eviction, and the positive public opinion, demonstrated how legal opportunity structures were used by the squatters, at the time when the discursive opportunity structures were favorable. To squat the municipal building was also a tactical choice because of the complicated ownership status with “the squat belonging to private owners, in a building belonging to and managed by the Office for Immobility Management” (15). It also shows how deliberately the discursive opportunity structures were treated and perceived by the squatters and the role of mainstream media for the more positive image of squatters. Media strategies were well developed among the squatters in Warsaw and there were rules on who was to represent the squatters in mainstream media, what was to be said, which topics that should be avoided, which journalists were “trustworthy” , and so on, in order to stay in control over the message that was sent to the publics. The main concern was to avoid exotization of squatting, or as one of the activists put it “writing about XX as a zoo with monkeys” (10) that was perceived as a tactic of disarming squatting of its political meaning.

The trailer camp's legal situation is different as the trailers are privately owned by the activists and stand on squatted municipal land. An agreement is being negotiated with city authorities so the activists can lease the land legally, after a court case in which one of the residents was fined for the illegal occupation of land. The location is not as attractive as in the case of the centrally squatted buildings, as it is located in the outskirts of the city. The reason why activists living in the camp are included in the analysis is that large part of the former *Elba* squat team is living there, and this milieu is an important link in the analysis of social cohesion and the dynamic of the squatting scene in the city. The same reason applies to *A.D.A* that per definition is not a squat, but gathers Warsaw's squatters in its activities.



Picture 2. Social center ADA in Warsaw.

Different “profiles” among the squatted spaces and the legalized social center in Warsaw serve as a reflection of the differences of the composition of the squatting movement in the city, and the differences of the goal of such activism among the activists related to the opportunities available on the local level. Over time and especially since the eviction of the more long-lasting squats *Fabryka* and *Elba* the rotation of squatters between the squats and the social center has been quite high. Earlier *Elba* had a unifying effect as it over time (and despite internal differences) broadened its activities and member base. The “profiles” appeared clearly after the eviction of *Elba* in 2012 and were seen by the activists as a part of the development, where the activists deal with and cultivate their specific interests, and relationships.

For many years now I've been noticing such tendencies that people... and it's great, that when there are many places like it's been in Warsaw for a while, that everything is profiled, and some will feel better in Syrena, others in Elbląska, yet others in Czarna Śmierć or Przychodnia, and so on (3).

The eviction did not only result in a more pragmatic attitude among squatters in Warsaw. It was also interpreted as an opportunity of squatting to start all over again and change some of the "old" attitudes. One such critique of the old environment addresses its opacity to new members and ideas (described by one of the squatters as "suffocating in their own world" (2)). The eviction in 2012 and the opening of a new squat in particular opened up for new activists to join squatting and re-define the rules. In this way an external threat set off a new dynamic in the social cohesion of the scene. The main disputes in the squatting environment in the city were concerning legalization and autonomy, and also the balance of political versus cultural activism. However, the attitude towards negotiations with local authorities was shared among most squatters in the city. When the negotiations were perceived as securing or prolonging squatting (by mutual agreements or legalization), or as giving it broader resonance, they were deemed positively. The practical side of this attitude should be assessed in relation to the turbulent past of squatting in the city and lack of stability. The instability in turn created more dynamic and flexible attitude among the squatters and also their relations to the authorities (more open over time) and other actors, like in the case of tenants (Polanska 2014; Polanska & Piotrowski 2015).

Warsaw, being the capital, has often been the stage for nationwide protests of the radical right with the annual peak at November 11, the *Polish Independence Day* when the nationalist environments have been organizing the Independence March (frequented by tens of thousands of participants). This protest is usually accompanied by street riots, first with the antifascists (connected to the squatting scene) and later with the police. In 2013 the right wing rioters attacked two squats and tried to set them on fire. After the 2013 attacks a protest staged by (among others) squatters under the slogan 'You will not burn us all' gathered around 5000 protesters in the capital city. Among the Polish right-wing and nationalist groups, many were in 2015 connected to football fans and in Warsaw especially to – *Legia Warszawa* and *Polonia Warszawa*² – football teams known for notorious xenophobic and racist scandals. Apart from these environments there were numerous right-wing groups showing resemblance to political parties, some historical reconstruction groups, and so on (Kersten and Hankel 2013).

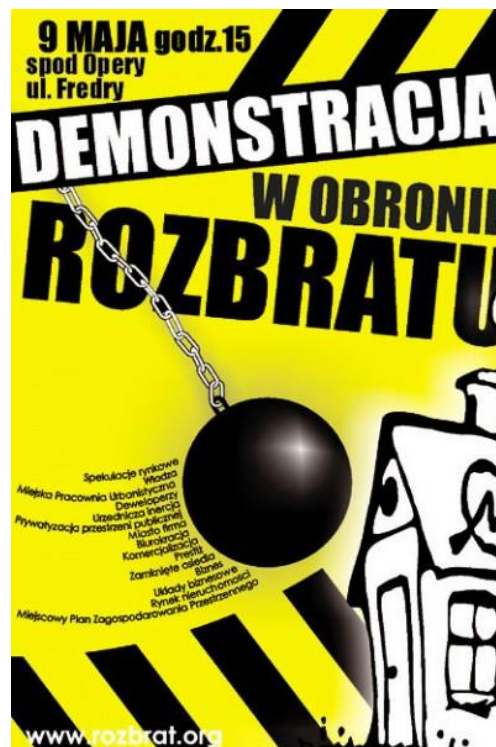
The development of squatting in Poznań: durable with static tendencies

Poznań hosts one of the oldest squats in Poland and in Europe: *Rozbrat* (the name can be translated as an attempt to peacefully disconnect from the reality and make peace with it). As the authors of the website of the place claim: "The original idea of Rozbrat was to set up a commune composed of the people who did not approve of the world based on "the rat race". Then it has evolved and developed: the place itself was changing, different people got involved in the formation. The goal has broadened from residing to carrying on cultural, social and political work"³. Established in 1994, it became a stable institution on the local cultural and political maps (Piotrowski 2011b, 2014;

² Polonia Warszawa has its antifascist group *Black Rebels*, but it faces strong opposition among its own supporters.

³ <http://www.rozbrat.org/rozbrat>

Polanska and Piotrowski 2015). The old industrial buildings located in green area of town close to the city center was first occupied for residential purposes by few activists who came back from their European trips. It became open to the public in 1995 and has since hosted music concerts (around 900 according to the squatters) but also talks, lectures, exhibitions, sports events and many more. For many years being the only alternative place in town it became a home for a bike shop, food not bombs collective, anarchist social club and library, a publishing house and recently to a martial arts club *Freedom Fighters*. Since the beginning *Rozbrat* was closely connected to punk rock and to anarchists who hold their meetings there (mostly the *Anarchist Federation*, for a short while also some splinter groups) that has defined the place politically.



Picture 3. Poster advertising a demonstration to defend Rozbrat in May 2009.

Now out of around 20 people living there, the majority belongs to anarchist or anarcho-feminist groups and was politically engaged prior to living at the squat. When in 2009 there was a threat that the grounds on which *Rozbrat* is located will be auctioned, a massive campaign was launched that peaked in two demonstrations in March and May 2009, that gathered around 1500 and 900 participants respectively (which are the numbers rarely seen in Poland). The place in the end was not sold and legally remains as an asset of a small cooperative bank as there were no potential buyers for the land plot during the auction. The activists claim it was to large extent because of their strategy to 'scare the potential investors' (7) away, but it also coincided with a decline on the real estate market in Poznań.



Picture 4. Rozbrat, Poznań

In 2013, a young group of activists tried to occupy a building in Poznań and to create a squat called *Warsztat* (Workshop) evicted few days before the official opening by counter-terror squad of the police (Kącki and Żytnicki 2012). Previous squatting attempts in Poznań (*Magdan, Żydowska*) were either short-lived or lacking a political message behind it. The same group of activists that founded *Warsztat* later occupied an abandoned commercial building in the Old Town market and founded *Od:zysk* in 2013 (the name is a play of words: *odzysk* in Polish denotes 'recycling', 'zysk' means 'profit'). Although the group is closely connected to the anarchist and *Rozbrat* environments, it differs: the average age is much lower (early twenties) and the group is more focused on cultural and identity issues rather than class and workers' problems. *Od:zysk* organized several LGBT film screenings, a queer-fest and a D.I.Y. sex toy workshop. For the anarchists and squatters belonging to the 'older generation' 'queer topics are secondary and derivative from class struggles and issues of capitalism' (13). The building was sold at an auction in 2014 to a company. After the auction the new owner announced he wants to make the squatters leave on peaceful terms and included a financial offer. At the time of the writing of this paper the negotiations continued. At the same time the city authorities began to look for vacant dwellings where the squatters could move, however none of the offered places met the squatter's requirements (mostly due to unclear legal status, or unappropriateness of buildings). The emergence of the new squatted social center 'became a strong sign to the authorities and to the people of Poznań. It showed that there is a movement in the city and it's quite strong' (16). The local media have approached the new initiative rather sympathetically:

The building was empty for many years and was decaying. Few months ago, in late autumn last year a group entered the building who now call themselves *kolektyw Od:zysk* – young anarchists, independent cultural animators, artists. Gradually they have cleared the building and made necessary repairs, arranged the space to cultural and social activities, and were settling down" (Wybieralski 2013).

This quote shows the self-declaration of the squatters in attempts to define their place in socio-cultural and political terms: as a location for alternative cultural activities and as a tool against gentrification that is one of the topics of anarchist struggles in Poland.

In early 2013 another place added to the alternative environment of Poznań. A group of activists from both squats have bought a place in the city center and opened an anarchist bookstore and café named *Zemsta* (Revenge). Organized as a social cooperative it involves people from both squats and has taken over the role of the 'open' place hosting numerous art exhibitions, talks, book presentations, film screenings etc. *Zemsta* is financed through selling books, fairtrade coffee and also recently vegan lunches. As one of the founders described it: "This is a social cooperative. We established it as a political response, but in economic context and we are using it for particular goals [...] We want to create such economy that will allow us to put something in the pot. People are going protesting, putting posters but between activities you also need to live somehow and for some of us we are giving such opportunity" (Herbst 2013: 36). Therefore *Zemsta* is not only an example of prefigurative leftist-libertarian politics, but provides a purely economic function supporting some of the members of the scene and occasionally providing a space for activities, in particular art shows, film screenings, discussions and lectures.

The new developments on the map of social activism in Poznań lead to a division of labor among the places. *Rozbrat* remains a punk-rock party and concert place and the gallery there was transformed into martial arts gym; many art events are taking place right now in *Zemsta* or *Od:zysk*, same goes for open public discussions. All the places are self-sufficient, relying on organization of benefit events and 'membership fees'. Anarchist press and books are also circulated and other income-generating events are held (such as the bike shop). However, despite (or perhaps thanks to) this internal division of labor, the emergence of the new places has strengthened the scene of relations allowing it for reaching audiences and disarming potential internal conflicts focusing around the direction of the development.

The city of Poznań has an opinion of a conservative one and 16 years in office (1998-2014) of the former mayor, Ryszard Grobelny, had strengthened this image. The conservatism dates back to late 19th century as the Polish nationalist party – *Narodowa Demokracja* – had a stronghold in Poznań and, inter alia, had prepared the successful Wielkopolska Uprising of 1918 that resulted in reunification of Wielkopolska region with the rest of the country in 1919. Poznań is also conservative culturally, as writer Marcin Kącki called it 'a city behind shut curtains' (Kącki 2013). In terms of counter-voices in the public discourse (directed mostly against the local authorities, but also the Catholic Church and conservative elites), squatters and anarchists have a strong position in Poznań's media and public opinion, which is unlikely for Polish cities. They are not only positively portrayed by some media (in particular the already quoted *Gazeta Wyborcza*, but are also supported by some of the academics who are looking for opposition to the local conservative *Academic Civic Club*. The radical right wing movement consists of few groups each ranging from a handful to two dozens of activists, often harassed by the local antifascist group. Their actions are usually limited, however, *Rozbrat* has in 1996 and 2013 faced two neo-Nazi attacks. In the first one a person was injured and the perpetrators faced prison sentences. The second, during a family picnic at the squat, was successfully fought back. Because of the threat of police intervention and right-wing groups or nationalists' attacks, the buildings have been fortified, with many windows boarded up and doors opened for short time slots during public events. On June 7, 2015 during the celebrations of the championship of the local football club around 40 neo-Nazis attacked *Zemsta* breaking the windows and throwing a flare inside and later a crowd of around 350 people attacked *Od:zysk*. They broke

windows, tried to break in and set the place on fire and later clashed with the police that arrived on the scene (Rozbrat 2015). These acts were played down and ignored by the local authorities.



Picture 5. Od:zysk squat in Poznań

For years local authorities had a reputation of being little responsive to grassroots mobilizations. In terms of squatting the only exception were the actions of the former deputy mayor, Maciej Frankiewicz, who suggested negotiations with the squatters and who even visited Rozbrat once. However, these attempts ended with his tragic death in 2009. Relations with the police are a bit tenser as the squatters often complain about repression. Mostly, the detention of activists have resulted in court cases, and in the last 15 years all but one were won by the squatters, who not only have a befriended lawyer but are more and more skilled in litigation and legal practice⁴. As one of the interviewees recalled: “One of the activist was recently detained and he just said: “sorry, for fuck’s sake, either you will tell me what am I detained for, give me the legal basis or call my lawyer or you just fuckin’ take me back to the squat”. And after 10 minutes they let him go and drove him back to Od:zysk” (13).

In December 2011 *Wielkopolskie Stowarzyszenie Lokatorów* (Wielkopolska Tenants’ Association) was established. It consisted not only of the tenants, but also numerous other activists with

4

http://poznan.gazeta.pl/poznan/56,36001,12467703,_Policja_ich_oskarza__kiedy_mowia__co_ich_boli_.html

squatters/anarchists being the core group. The legal framework of an association was used in order to gain legal rights (in particular demanding public information) and occasionally to open up the opportunity of collecting material resources or put pressure on the media and the public opinion. The creation of WSL has opened possibilities for alliance building for the squatters and at the same time was an attempt to position them as part of the civil society and not a countercultural movement always opposing the authorities. It was also a part of a broader strategy that was described by one of the activists: “We are looking for already existing social conflicts, like with the tenants or some others, and we enter them as a player. Then we try to aggregate the conflict, make it more visible to the public. And we are trying to frame it in our way, so it is connected with our struggle” (8). Cooperation with tenants allowed framing the privatization of municipal housing in anti-capitalist and anti-gentrification terms, more familiar to the squatters and anarchists. Local media usually treat the actions of the squatters, not only in connection to tenants’ issues but perceive them as a liberal and leftist voice in discussions on the local level as a sort of counterbalance to the dominant neoliberal-conservative discourse.

Conclusions

On the basis of our two cases, Warsaw and Poznań, we suggest that the stability and endurance of the squatting scene is crucial for a more permanent solution to squatting struggles. Our cases have shown that stability and cohesion of the squatting scenes has not resulted in squatters using institutionalized channels to make use of political opportunity structures. They demonstrate that when environmental threats break the longevity of a scene the relations and attitudes between the activists and with others outside of the squatting scene become more dynamic and open towards cooperation.

In the case of Warsaw we have argued that the re-configuration of the squatting scene after the close-down of the squat *Elba* in 2012, resulted in several profiled squats (and one social center) opening up. Most of them set the rules anew, which we interpret as a move towards a more open and cooperative attitude among squatters in the city. In the case of Poznań, on the other hand, the stable existence of *Rozbrat* since 1994, the lower threat posed from extreme right-wing movements, and local acceptance (some of the media as well as the public) of squatting in the city, have created an established group of squatters with stable relationships, less prone to look for potential allies or influences from outside. The specialization of the alternative places in the city (*Od:zysk*, *Zemsta*) became a result of spill-out more than spill-over. In this way the position, ideology or ability to cooperate among the squatters in Poznań were never overtly and recurrently challenged, which stabilized social cohesion within the local squatting environment further over time.

In this light, we would like to discuss the often posed question of collective actors’ “success”. “How successful is the movement/scene we study?” is a question we often get, when presenting our research. Our point of view is that assessing the “success” of a squatting scene, is very difficult as squatting as collective action includes several preset and unintended goals and “success” is often complex, multilayered and hard to define in a simple way. For some authors (Guzman-Concha 2015) even the sustaining of a strong (or moderately strong) squatting environment should be considered as the success. We have in this study showed the varying “successes” of squatting in two different local contexts, arguing on the one hand that in terms of durability and longevity of the squatting scene – in Poznań it has been significantly “successful”. On the other hand, squatters in Warsaw

have succeeded in opening up to others outside of their immediate environment and in terms of re-configuring and opening up after experiencing external threats. The opening up towards new members, but also towards negotiations with local authorities, we interpret as a tactical move to make use of political opportunity structures available at a specific point in time. We have observed that durability of squatting could result in the lessening of probability of the scene to open to external coalitions or re-configure. Re-configuration and more dynamic and flexible social relations tend to broaden the claims put forward, but also its impact on, in particular, political opportunity structures available to squatters.

References

- Císař, O. 2013. Postcommunism and Social Movements. In *The Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Social and Political Movements*. London: Blackwell, 994-999.
- Corr, A. 1999. *No trespassing. Squatting, rent strikes and land struggles worldwide*. Cambridge, MA: South End Press.
- Edwards, B. 2013. Social Capital and Social Movements. In *The Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Social and Political Movements*. London: Blackwell, DOI: 10.1002/9780470674871.
- Gagyí, A. 2013. The Shifting Meaning of 'Autonomy' in the East European Diffusion of the Alterglobalization Movement. In Flescher Fominaya, C. & Cox, L. (Eds.) *Understanding European Movements: New Social Movements, Global Justice Struggles, Anti-austerity Protest*. New York: Routledge.
- Gamson W.A., Meyer D.S. 1996. Framing political opportunity. In McAdam et al. *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements*, 275–90.
- Goodwin, J. & Jasper, J. M. (2004). Trouble in paradigms. In J. Goodwin & Jasper, J (Eds.) *Rethinking social movements: Structure, meaning, and emotion*. Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 75-93.
- Guzman-Concha, C. 2015. Radical Social Movements in Western Europe: A Configurational Analysis, *Social Movement Studies*, DOI: 10.1080/14742837.2014.998644.
- Herbst, K. 2013. *Ruchy nieformalne a kierunki rozwoju ekonomii społecznej. Rekomendacje dla polityk publicznych*. Warszawa: Biblioteka Pożytku Publicznego.
- Jacobsson, K. 2012. Fragmentation of the collective action space: The animal rights movement in Poland. *East European Politics*, 28(4): 353-370.
- Katsiaficas, G. 1997. *The subversion of politics: European autonomous movements and the decolonization of everyday life*. Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press.
- Kącki M. and Żytnicki P. 2012, *Brutalna policja kontra marzyciele* in 'Gazeta Wyborcza' 31.08.2012 http://poznan.gazeta.pl/poznan/1,36001,12395389,Brutalna_policja_kontra_marzyciele__Opinia_dziennikarzy.html
- Kącki, M. 2013. *Maestro, Biblioteka DF*. Warszawa: Agora.
- Kersten, J., & Hankel, N. 2013. A comparative look at right-wing extremism, anti-Semitism, and xenophobic hate crimes in Poland, Ukraine, and Russia. in VonMering, S. & McCarty, T.W. (Eds.) *Right-Wing Radicalism Today: Perspectives from Europe and the US*. Milton Park, UK: Routledge.
- Kitschelt, H. 1986. Political Opportunity Structures and Political Protest: Anti-Nuclear Movements in Four Democracies. *British Journal of Political Science*, 16(19): 57–85.
- Korolczuk, E. & Saxonberg, S. 2014. Strategies of contentious action: a comparative analysis of the women's movements in Poland and the Czech Republic. *European Societies*, DOI: 10.1080/14616696.2014.977321.

- Martínez, M. 2014. How Do Squatters Deal with the State? Legalization and Anomalous Institutionalization in Madrid. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 38, (2): 646-674.
- Martínez, M., Cattaneo C. 2014. Squatting as a response to social needs, the housing question and the crisis of capitalism. In: Cattaneo C. & Martínez, M. *The Squatters' Movement in Europe*. London: Pluto Press.
- Martínez, M., Azozomox & Gil J. 2014. Unavoidable dilemmas: squatters dealing with the law. In: Cattaneo C. & Martínez, M. *The Squatters' Movement in Europe*. London: Pluto Press.
- McCammon, H. 2013. Discursive opportunity structure. *The Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Social and Political Movements*. DOI: 10.1002/9781405198431.
- McCarthy, J. D. & Zald, M. N. 1987. *Social Movements in an Organizational Society*. Oxford: Transaction Books.
- Piotrowski, G. 2011a. *Alterglobalism in Postsocialism. A Study of Central and Eastern European Activists*. European University Institute. Florence: Department of Political and Social Sciences.
- Piotrowski, G. 2011b. Squatted Social Centers in Central and Eastern Europe. International Center for Research and Analysis, Working Paper.
- Piotrowski, G. 2014. Squatting in the East – Rozbrat in Poland. In Van Der Steen, Katzeff A. & van Hoogenhuijze, L. B. (Eds.) *Squatting and Autonomous Action in Europe, 1980 – present*. Oakland, CA: PM Press.
- Polanska, D.V. 2014. Cognitive dimension in cross-movement alliances: the case of squatting and tenants' movements in Warsaw. *Interface: a journal for and about social movements*, 6, 2: 328 – 356.
- Polanska, D.V. & Piotrowski, G. 2015. The transformative power of cooperation between social movements: the case of squatting and tenants' movements in Poland. *City: Analysis of Urban Trends, Culture, Theory, Policy, Action*, 19, 2-3: 274-296.
- Pruijt, H. 2013. "Squatting in Europe". In *Squatting in Europe: Radical Spaces, Urban Struggles* edited by Squatting Europe Collective. New York: Minor Compositions.
- Rozbrat 2015 <http://www.rozbrat.org/informacje/poznan/4318-owiadczenie-w-sprawie-atakow-nacjonalistow-na-skot-odzysk-i-anarchistyczn-klubokawiarnie-zemsta>
- Tarrow, S. 1998. *Power in Movement*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Tickamyer, A.R & C.M. Duncan 1990. Poverty and Opportunity Structure in Rural America. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 16, 67-86.
- Van Der Steen, Katzeff A. & van Hoogenhuijze, L. B. (Eds.) *Squatting and Autonomous Action in Europe, 1980 – present*. PM Press.
- Wybieralski, M. 2013. Anarchiści otworzyli skłot tuż przy Starym Rynku w Poznaniu, *Gazeta Wyborcza* 26.04.2013, (accessed: April 2015), http://poznan.gazeta.pl/poznan/1,36001,13816646,Anarchisci_otworzyli_sklot_tuz_przy_Starym_Rynku_w.html.
- Żuk, P. 2001. *Spółeczeństwo w działaniu: Ekolodzy, Feministki, Skłotersi [Society in the making: ecologists, feminists, squatters]*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo naukowe scholar.