

What makes a community? The overlooked emancipation of the province in Poland since 1989



The local elections scheduled in Poland for 21 October have been billed as a key test for the country's ruling Law and Justice government. As [Helena Chmielewska-Szljajfer](#) explains, a great deal of international attention is currently focused on Law and Justice due to the perception that the government is undermining the country's rule of law. But while much of this coverage deals exclusively with the actions of mainstream politicians, it is vital to recognise how ordinary activities have helped build the country's provincial communities since 1989, and how these communities are now shaping Polish politics.

The upcoming local elections in Poland, scheduled for 21 October, will be a major test for the ruling Law and Justice government – eight years ago, local elections proved to be the beginning of the end for the right-wing party's rule. Since the 2015 presidential and parliamentary elections in Poland, both won by Law and Justice, the government has been undermining the rule of law in the name of removing post-Communist elites from the judiciary and pouring millions of zlotys into the Catholic Church. Poles are strongly polarised along political lines and the ruling party has steady support of around 40 percent of voters, but some are upset that the 'good change' the party advocated is trumping the foundations of the state.

It is important to understand how Poland came to this point. It is one thing to be labelled a fallen poster child of successful democratic transition, and it is another to analyse the elements that make commonplace activities agents of change – even if the result of the democratic and free-market transformation, for now, is Poland's increasingly problematic relationship with democracy and the rule of law.

Suddenly open to influences from the outside world after the fall of the Iron Curtain, Polish society has been transforming its community-focused activity, inspired by the idolised West both directly and indirectly, even if those involved take it for granted. In a newly published book, [Reshaping Poland's Community after Communism: Ordinary Celebrations](#), I outline three case studies of popular, seemingly unassuming, yet meaningful activities that have strongly shaped notions of community in Poland since 1989.

Catholic religiosity

My first case study is of Catholic religiosity practiced within the walls of one of the most-visited sanctuaries in Poland: the sanctuary in Licheń, located in western Poland, which features a new giant basilica that is one of the largest in Europe. The sanctuary provides a rare sacred space that is open to recreation, for example via barbeque gazebos and New Year's Eve parties. In addition, it offers aesthetics, tellingly labelled 'turbo-baroque', which merge old-style grandeur, Polish imperial military symbols from centuries back, and contemporary visions of wealth that take inspiration from American soap operas.

Within these aesthetics, Licheń offers a black-and-white narrative of Polish-Catholic historical unity, from the beginnings of Polish statehood until today, Poland's EU accession included. At Licheń, Polish Catholic religiosity is accessible, recreational, and visually stunning. Well-educated people from big cities sneer at it, while others enjoy it, even if some of the visitors at the sanctuary point out that they become lost in the oversaturation of visual symbols. Nonetheless, the sanctuary is the second-most visited sanctuary in Poland, only after the several centuries older Jasna Góra.

Secular human kindness

The free summer music festival Woodstock Station (renamed Pol & Rock Festival this year due to copyright issues), on the other hand, represents a different type of faith: namely faith in secular human kindness. An extension of a widely popular winter charity drive which is now 26 years old, Woodstock Station was created as a thank you to the drive's volunteers and has been attracting hundreds of thousands of festivalgoers ever since. Like the charity, the festival is based on volunteers and few rules are enforced – for example, people can bring their own food and alcohol, and there is an inexpensive supermarket on the festival site. In this seeming laissez-faire environment, people behave in an unexpectedly civil way, and are more empathic towards others than at similar paid events, such as offering beer, food, or a hug to sad-looking strangers and allowing people to skip the long line to the free showers if they ask.



Woodstock Station festival in 2015, Credit: [garwol \(CC BY-NC 2.0\)](#)

The Catholic Church is well aware of the festival crowd's competition in offering good deeds and treats the festival as a space to proselytise. For many years, the institution has maintained its own 'Jesus Station' on the premises. It is not very crowded and people prefer the Hare Krishna tent with inexpensive food instead, but it is not completely empty either and people gather there for the Holy Mass. While the Church is aware of the importance of the festival crowd, Woodstock Station is largely ignored by major media organisations, which treat it as provincial because fashionable bands are rarely present. However, at the same time they ignore the fact that in many ways it is far more civic, and in the sense 'Western', than the paid-for festivals with big-name headliners.

Online civic activism

Unexpected civic activity can be also found in the realm of complaining on small-town internet forums. The first bursts of grass-roots online civic engagement in Poland emerged in the mid-2000s during the first government formed by Law and Justice (2005-07). They were pro-voting campaigns created by college students in big cities who created short YouTube videos in which they showed ordinary people giving their reasons to vote (ranging from 'because I can' to 'because I care'), and they quickly turned viral. New voters indeed turned up, and the parliamentary elections held in 2007 ousted Law and Justice from power for the next eight years.

Although the grass-roots pro-voting campaigns were later taken over by professional NGOs with more funds, what remained at the local level were village and small-town online forums. At first used to provide basic information for locals and tourists, they soon became safe spaces to anonymously criticise local authorities in towns and villages where most jobs are provided by the state. Unlike larger Polish portals, the local scale of these forums made online discussions surprisingly polite – after all, the person at the other end could be your neighbour.

What's more, these forums-cum-watchdogs, where people could find supporters for their causes, eventually forced local authorities to implement changes citizens had discussed online, such as installing traffic lights at dangerous street crossings, but also drove a local mayor, accused of corruption, to resign from his seat. What appears to be something of a paradox is the fact that although these internet forums became active because of the necessity to have a safe space to talk about local issues pertaining to communities, few of the site administrators I talked to considered this activity to be civic, and even less so political.

What makes a community?

These three cases of religiosity, charity and respect towards others, and grass-roots online civic activism all point to major changes that have been taking place outside of the centre in Poland since 1989. They have often been mocked or ignored by the better educated and more worldly people in big cities, including public intellectuals and major media. Yet the current political climate is also the effect of these slow changes in people's own understanding of their agency, in addition to over two decades of disregard of the Polish province. The present reveals an emancipation of sorts: often nationalist-religious, insular, and distrustful of outsiders. On 21 October, we will find out if this is to become a longer trend.

For more information, see the author's book, [Reshaping Poland's Community after Communism: Ordinary Celebrations](#) (Palgrave, 2018)

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Note: A version of this article originally appeared at the [LSE Polis blog](#). It gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics.

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