'State Bureaucrats' and 'Those NGO People': Promoting the idea of civil society, hindering the state

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Abstract
One of the characteristics of Polish foreign aid is its focus on the 'transition experience' and civil society. This specific celebration of the 'Polish success story' contrasts sharply with public debates that frequently criticise the weaknesses of Polish civil society and the difficulties in state – non-state relations. The Polish Aid apparatus itself is not immune to these problems, often exhibiting antagonistic relations between NGOs and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. By looking at the relations linking these stakeholders this text aims to analyse relations between the 'state' and 'civil society' in Poland. As the text demonstrates, complicated contemporary relations between NGOs and the State are first the outcome of the country's troubled history of civil society, and an inheritance of the Solidarity movement when the concept of civil society was built on the idea of opposition to the state. Second, the anti-state attitude characterising contemporary organisations was also fostered by foreign institutions, which supported the Solidarity movement in its efforts to overturn the socialist regime in Poland, and later in the 1990s, became the strongest proponents of civil society and NGOs. Finally, these pre-existing historical conditions for the strong polarisation of NGOs and state institutions are now additionally reinforced by the 'professionalization' and 'institutionalisation' of NGOs. However, the uncritical promotion of 'Western standards' exhibited in the ideals of transparency and audit culture, rather than generating positive change only antagonises NGOs and state institutions. The ultimate effect of this process is that NGOs become more and more obsessed with bureaucratic modes of operating, and start to resemble state institutions. Effectively, NGOs risk losing their identity which is so strongly built on the *non*-governmental aspect of their work. Effectively, the perpetuation of the state/non-State opposition becomes a strategy which allows this separate identity to be maintained and NGOs status to remain unchallenged.

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Introduction

Shortly before the Christmas of 2008, I attended a discussion meeting organized by one of the development NGOs in Warsaw. The purpose was to debate the strategies to educate Polish society about the development needs of 'Global South'. The event took place at one of the Warsaw bars. It started with the chair introduced himself and his organization. There were no more than 15 people present, most of them in their twenties, so our host suggested that everybody said a few words about him or herself. The introductions were progressing slowly with people eagerly talking about their NGOs and projects they were involved in. But sitting in the corner, I could observe the discomfort on the face of one of the participants – Karolina – whose turn to talk about herself was approaching.

I met her in the Department of Development Cooperation in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, where she was involved in Global Education – programmes targeting Polish society and aiming to expand people's knowledge about global development issues and foreign aid. Before joining the MFA she was working abroad with various NGOs. The topic of the meeting was therefore matching her interests perfectly. She had found an invitation to this event at the internet portal dedicated for nongovernmental organizations. She also forwarded it to other colleagues from the MFA, suggesting it as an interesting way to spend an evening and learn few things. Over lunch in the Ministerial cafeteria, together with yet another colleague who decided to go – Aleksandra – we discussed the best way to get to the meeting, so as to make it on time. Worried that we might be stuck in the office till late, Karolina and Aleksandra laughed that they could always excuse themselves, explaining that they must go and do a monitoring of that project as it was sponsored by the Polish Aid Programme – a scheme managed by their department. 'This is *our* project so we need to be there!' they said joking, about the oversight procedures of their own institution.

Now sitting at the meeting they seemed less energetic and a bit shy. I started to wonder why this was so. They knew some of the people in the room from previous similar occasions. They were collaborating with others in a professional capacity – often acting as the ministerial supervisors of the projects that the MFA was funding, and NGOs were implementing. Karolina also knew particular discussants from the time when she was actively involved in the organisation supporting Fair Trade. With some participants she did a graduate course in development studies at Warsaw University. Still, apart from modest nods to acknowledge each other's presence there was not much interaction between Karolina and her friend on the one side, and other participants of the meeting on the other. Even though they knew some people, they did not sit with them and virtually did not speak to anyone before the meeting had officially started. Finally when it was Karolina's turn to

introduce herself, she briefly explained her interest in the subject and only mentioned her current position in the MFA in passing. She clearly was not comfortable with making her job association a public matter in that room.

As she explained to me later, she did not want to be perceived as 'The Woman from the Ministry'. She came because she was interested in the topic. Even though she shared her interests with many other people in the meeting – they were all of the same age, with similar working and educational experiences – it was clear that there was some mismatch between her and the other participants. While the rest of the attendees were representing NGOs, she and her friend were the only people from the MFA, from a State institution. When later on we were discussing this uncomfortable division, she told me that she felt not only labelled, but as if she should not be proud of her job and her institutional affiliation. In fact, while introducing herself at the meeting, she made a disclaimer saying she was there as a private person, not as the Ministry representative. Nevertheless, she was upset by the way the meeting moderator commented on the fact that the project of which this meeting was part of was financed by the Ministry. Like in the case of all similar projects, organizers were obliged to inform participants about the sponsor. In this meeting the NGO leader briefly mentioned with some grinning: 'by the way we just have to let you know that the project is sponsored by the Ministry'. His announcement was accepted with smirks from the audience, expressing ironic woe for the Ministerial rules. For Karolina, this small incident was rather disturbing: 'Why do they patronize us that way, what's with those smirks? Are they ashamed of being financed by the Ministry? They do not make those faces when they have to thank the EU for the sponsorship, or some Norwegian Funds. It is not easy to get Ministerial grant, they should be proud that they succeeded! It is very positive and they just make it unpleasant'. In fact for both her and Aleksandra the tension was the most disturbing at the personal level. As they explained, they put a lot of effort in to their work trying to build good partnerships with NGOs. They believed that they were doing all they could to make cooperation easier and to meet NGOs expectations. Having friends among NGOs, who now refrained from extended communication at public meetings, made the animosity even more disturbing. It was clear that the division was there, and that it was based on the line of NGOs versus the Ministry. This paper will be dedicated to the examination of this specific relationship between the NGOs and the MFA as one of the crucial elements shaping the aid chain originating from Poland.

One of the characteristics of Polish Aid managed by the MFA is its focus on 'transition experience' and the support for democracy and civil society – a trajectory which is unorthodox within the EU circles, but is typical for the representatives of Eastern Europe (Drążkiewicz, 2013; Kucharczyk and Lovitt, 2008; Lightfoot, 2010; Petrova, 2011; Szent-Ivanyi, 2012, 2014). The state orchestrated Official Development Assistance, but also a big proportion of the initiatives undertaken by NGOs independently of the State, are done with a conviction that Poland exhibits a successful story in democratisation efforts, and that the experiences of the Polish people in that field could be transferred to other societies

(Drążkiewicz, 2008). But this glorification of 'Polish transition experience' contrasts sharply with public debates which frequently criticise the weakness of Polish civil society and the difficulties in the state – non-state relations (Graff, 2010; Nowicka, 2010).

In this paper, I want to analyse historical and contemporary roots of this somehow 'schizophrenic' condition of the Polish development scene: which on one hand celebrates the 'Polish transition experience', while in fact, on daily basis, the NGOs and governmental stakeholders of Polish aid struggle to make their own complicated relations work. I will focus specifically on the relationship between developmental organisations and the Department of Development Cooperation in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs which is characterised by strong animosity and distinction between NGOs and the state. While such separation of the state/non-state division is part of the more general conceptualisation of the international development apparatus (Alvarez, 1999; Ferguson, 2006; Jad, 2007), here I will argue that, in the Polish case, it is additionally an expression of the specific Polish historical and contemporary socio-political context, on the other hand.

As I will demonstrate, the contemporary complicated relation between NGOs and the State is the outcome of the country's own troubled history of civil society, and both internal and external influences shaping the discourse on civil society in general and the Polish development scene in particular. First, the Polish version of the civil society concept was originally formulated during the socialist era by the intellectuals of the Solidarity movement, who build it on the ideas of opposition towards the state. This notion remains unchallenged and seems to still hold a very strong position. I want to examine how the fact that the democratic movement of the 1970s and 1980s had little appreciation of the state as a form of public authority (Mastnak, 2005) resonates with the contemporary state – non-state relations, and the current lack of trust toward state institutions. As I will demonstrate, the rooting of the civil society concept in the ideal of independence resulted in the contemporary defensive attitudes of the NGO representatives being (who usurped the civil society discourse, associating it solely with 'third sector') suspicious towards any governmental action relating to them. Second, I want to examine the role of external actors in fostering these antagonistic relations. What are the consequences of the foreign institutions' actions, which supported the Solidarity movement in its efforts to shed socialist regime in Poland, and, later in the 1990s, became the strongest propagators of the civil society promoting it as the best tool for democratisation and state transformation? Finally, I want to ask, how these pre-existing historical conditions for the strong polarisation of NGOs and state institution are now additionally reinforced by the 'professionalisation' and 'institutionalisation' of NGOs – a practice which belongs to the more complex struggle of Polish society with modernity, and establishing its status as a modern, developed, Western country? In the development scene, this dynamic is exhibited at best by the application of terms such as 'emerging' versus 'established/mature' donor – with Poland being defined by the first category signalling its immature, non-modern character.

Eager to move up to the second category and receive international recognition, Polish organisations are still looking up to their Western counterparts for a templates worth mimicking. However, as I will demonstrate, the uncritical promotion of 'Western standards' exhibited in the ideals of transparency and audit culture, instead of generating positive change only reinforce mistrust and antagonises NGOs with their main partner, i.e. State Institution. The additional effect of this 'professionalisation' process is that NGOs become more and more obsessive with the bureaucratic modes of operating, and start to resemble to some extend state institutions. Consequently, NGOs risk losing their identity which is so strongly built on the *non*-governmental aspect of their work. Effectively the perpetuation of the state/non-State opposition becomes a strategy which allows this separate identity to be maintained and not-like-state status unchallenged.

This article draws on the research I have been conducting on Polish foreign aid since 2007. My work consisted of traditional research methods which included extended participant observation in various NGOs, tens of interviews, as well as some small surveys. My research was occasionally facilitated by the more in-depth professional involvement with particular NGOs or the Department of Development Collaboration in the MFA. For more than a year I worked for Solidarity Fund – an institution which since its (re)establishment in 2012 has become a key player among Polish promoters of civil society abroad. Even though the work in this organisation did not constitute a part of the systematic fieldwork, the observations I made while working there became very important for this article.

'They promised us civil society but they left us with thousands of NGOs'

In September 2011, Polish Parliament established its first Act on development aid (Kancelaria Sejmu, 2011). The general provisions section explains that development aid should primary consist of 'promoting and supporting the development of democracy and civil society, including development of parliamentarianism, principles of good governance and respect for human rights' (Kancelaria Sejmu, 2011). The economic development and poverty elevation become only secondary issue in the Act's definition of development cooperation. This emphasis on democracy promotion and civil society building as the main objectives of Polish Aid is built on the premise that Poland has a successful story to tell when it comes to the country's 'transition experience' from socialism to whatever came next.

This idealistic image contrasts sharply with the internal assessments of the current state of affairs in the country, in particular those which focus of the Polish civil society (Buchowski, 1996; Gliński, 2006b; Graff, 2010; Nowicka, 2010). As Graff (2010) notices one of the main 'problems' with Polish civil society is the privileged position of NGOs, and persistent undermining (both by activists as well as academics) of other forms of engagement. In the mainstream discourse, the passage from *civil society talk* to discussion of *NGOs' issues* is so smooth, it is almost

invisible (Gawin and Gliński, 2006; Gliński, 2006a; Kurczewski, 1992; Lewenstein and Melchior, 1992; Rymsza et al., 2007; Zaborowski, 2005). Effectively, the conversion of civil society and NGOs into the one entity is being taken for granted. *They promised us civil society but they left us with thousands of NGOs* concluded one of my somewhat frustrated NGO informants during one of our several informal conversations about Polish Third Sector. In fact, this quotation is borrowed from Janos Kis, a Hungarian social activist who was talking about his own homeland (Graff, 2010). But indeed, it equally well describes contemporary Poland. Here the concept of civil society flows between being understood as an analytical, yet highly politicised tool, and a naturalised idea in the specific expert culture of NGO activists.

As a result, the equating of NGOs with civil society becomes internalised into the popular language, successfully turning it into a *native category*. It is a category which gives an illusion of greatness, of representing The People, and giving an ability to encompass masses with all their differences and variety. In fact, it describes a narrow group of elite classes operating in the highly institutionalised NGO mode. In this paper, that is exactly the usage to which I am referring. Even though the usefulness of the 'civil society' concept in social analysis have been criticised widely (Benthall, 2000; Clough, 1999; Comaroff, 1999; Dunn and Hann, 1996; Ferguson, 2006; Gupta, 1995; Lewis, 2002; Navaro-Yashin, 1998). I find it hard to avoid this term in my research, neglect its omnipresence and power. For that reason, in this article, I am concerned with 'the native category' of civil society. Following the way the term is used in the public discourse in Poland, the way it was used by my informants, and Polish scholars supporting them (even if I do not agree with their stand), here I will refer to civil society understood as an assemblage of NGOs, and, at the same time, NGOs considered as surrogates of civil society (Alvarez, 1999). Given the importance of the local version of the civil society discourse in the activities of Polish NGOs (particularly developmental organisations), and furthermore taking into account a specific overlap of the 'civil society' and 'NGO' terms, in this paper I want to examine how they became one phenomenon, and both terms became synonymous. As I will demonstrate in the following sections, it is exactly the process of equating 'civil society' with NGOs that laid the ground for the ongoing antagonisation of NGO representatives with the State.

Civil Society – the round trip of the concept

In Poland, NGOs as we know them today are quite a recent phenomenon. Also, the concept of civil society, has not been part of the public discourse in Poland until mid 1980s. It was not until the 'Second Solidarity' and the end of martial law in Poland that the civil society, as a political concept, became linked with the activities of Polish opposition (Załęski, 2012). Before that, the concept did not belong either to the state or to Solidarity discourse. Conceptualising their visions of future, or naming their own activities, supporters of Solidarity would refer to terms such as

'Self-governed Republic', 'parallel society', 'self-organising society', 'alternative society', 'parallel structures' – terms emphasising the external nature of the society vis-a-vis the state, and its opposition to official apparatus. During Martial Law, these features would be even more strongly emphasised, when term 'underground society' became a way for conceptualising the activities of opposition (Ost, 1990; Staniszkis, 1984; Załęski, 2012).

The shift from the *self-governed* and *underground society* talk to *civil society* talk could happen only later, with the softening of state regime in the mid 1980s and amnesty of 1986. Only then the term started to be used by a very narrow group of dissidents who supported by Western elites had an opportunity to travel abroad, and educate themselves there (Lewenstein and Pawlik, 1994; Wedel, 1998). Inspired by the political and sociological literature which was unavailable in Poland, conversations and meetings with French, German or American intellectuals, people such as Adam Michnik, Marcin Król, Bronisław Geremek, Ireneusz Krzemiński, Bronisław Misztal, were among the first using the term civil society in relation to Polish opposition (Załęski, 2012). The concept's discovery in Eastern Europe resulted from the fall of the revisionist approach to socialism. In the light of the disappointment with the contemporary political ideologies, civil society promised a political vision that seemed feasible. The aim of the opposition activists was to reconstruct social bonds to impact social reality from bottom up. With fresh memories of Martial Law, the government tightly associated with the state constituted their main enemy, an opponent for those who opted for freedom, democracy and 'authentic life'. The idea was to create society independently of the State and the Party. Consequently the civil society of the eighties was defined as antagonistic to the state (Renwick, 2006).

Such understanding of the civil society, even though it has damaging and frustrating repercussions for Today's NGO activists antagonising them with the state, in the 1980s, it was seen as the only possible solution for the opposition leaders. It was also fostered and supported by their Western benefactors (such as National Endowment of Democracy in the US) which in the 1980s was first and foremost interested in bringing down the socialist government in Poland, and, therefore, was ready to support any ideology which would mobilise that process (Wedel, 1998). Eventually, in the 1980s, through the combination of internal and external dynamics, the distinction between the state and society (the civil-society as it later became to be known) got stabilised as a constitutive of democracy, or even as democracy's *conditio sine qua non* (Mastnak, 2005). This separatist vision would become one of the central factors in identifications of what civil society later became and what ideologies it still resonates with today (Gellner, 1994).

Interestingly, as it was demonstrated by Załęski (2012), this Solidarity led trajectory of the Polish variation of the civil society history, coincides in time with the state interest in bringing the concept to the public discourse. Since the late 1980s, the term civil society started to be applied in official state media in reference to the freedom of associations and organisations, which was introduced soon after. The fact that both state and opposition started to use the term civil society at more or

less the same time allowed for it to become internalised in Polish public sphere – even if for both sides it had a slightly different meaning. Within Solidarity cohorts, this term has been used as a way to describe opposition to the state. For a socialist state, it was a way to describe a public realm, which they were ready to free, but which was still to be controllable through various registration procedures. Indeed, opposition leaders welcomed the new legal arrangements with excitement. When in the early 1990s, NGOs started to mushroom across the country, it was clear that most of them were set up by the previous opposition members, giving them a legal framework for their social action. From the underground opposition, they moved their activities to legal organisations, yet the feeling of state oppression, and anti-state attitude became a trait which up until today remained the main feature in the autoidentification process. The constant antagonising with the state became a way of legitimizing one's action and authentication strategy.

But it was also around the same time when the civil society concept arrived in the country through its third trajectory, this time in the 'democratisation', 'transformation' and 'development' programmes sponsored by the Western institutions (Lewenstein and Pawlik, 1994; Wedel, 1998; Zaborowski, 2005). The civil society term, which was not that popular until late 1980s in the West, now thanks to Solidarity hype became resurrected and grasped the attention of the Western intellectuals (Keane, 1988, 1998, 2003; Ost, 1994). Through the promotion of the civil society ideology in volumes such as 'Civil Society and the State' (Keane, 1988), what started as political visioning – an intellectual manifesto of those unsatisfied with the realities of the Eastern Bloc – soon became an analytical framework for the Western academics. Eventually the concept became naturalized as an 'ideal model'. The political project which gave it a new life started to fade to the background.

Now, in the early 1990s, it was exactly this version of the term, which arrived in Poland via International aid agencies. Civil society became one of the synonyms and conditions of modernity. It was a Western-like modernity which since 1989 became an obsessive goal for Polish society. Civil society, as a concept which operates through its very elusiveness, being a rather vague idea, difficult to grasp, became one of the many political tools to deem the society as *not modern*, and hence in need of change and external intervention (Comaroff, 1999). This narrative paved a way for foreign development agencies to enter the country and assist its efforts in civil society building – a somehow ironic situation for a country which has only proved to have very effective social organisation, ready to build social movements capable of overthrowing the unwanted state regime and motivating socio-political change. Yet, as Wedel (1998) notices, this process was not simply a one sided attempt of the West to impose its ideas over the Rest of the world. At that time, with the opening of the borders, Polish political activists, intellectuals and various community leaders became particularly keen to search for inspiration outside the country. Foreign organisations were eagerly sponsoring 'study tours' to the Western Europe and North America for the ex-opposition, now NGO leaders, to educate them about various aspects of social activism and organisation.

Foreign donors were also actively involved in establishing NGOs in Poland (among them were organisations which today are key actors in foreign aid: Polish Humanitarian Action – originally set up as Polish office of French EquiLibre; Education for Democracy Foundation – founded with the support of American teachers, Batory Foundation – founded by Soros, or PAUCI – Polish – American – Ukrainian Cooperation Initiative) and promoting them as the best incarnation of civil society ideas, the best vehicle for the bottom-up social activism. According to Sampson the role of external intervention in the creation of civil society cannot be overlooked (cf. Wedel 1998a). As he noted, during that time, the emphasis was put on the measurable and immediate outcomes of the projects that were concerned with civil society building. As the result 'the goal in Poland, for example, was to increase the number of NGOs from 3000 in 1988 – far above any Eastern European country – to 20,000 by 1992' (1996). Such an attitude paved the way to conflating NGOs with civil society.

This NGO rush was confirmed to me by a social activist, a leader of the various NGOs and a 1989 Round Table[1] negotiations participant, with whom I talked in 2009. As he explained to me, in the post 1989 era, associations and various organizations were perceived by him and others alike as a 'natural' solution. Among the activists, there was a shared feeling that they would facilitate the change. What he failed to address, though was the fact that before the need for NGOs became 'natural' it was carefully fostered by various factors. Among them were structural adjustment reforms, and the 'shock therapy' prescribed by Sachs and Balcerowicz (Sachs, 1994, 2006). Along with 'freeing the market' the advocates of implementing neo-liberalism in Poland were calling for freeing the state from the responsibility to protect the welfare of its citizens. What used to be state domain, now became a responsibility of 'civil society', which basically meant that NGOs became associated with the provision of social services, an outsourced state, rather than vehicles for political activism (Kamat, 2004; Mandel, 2012). This trajectory was enforced by study tours to the Western countries, where Polish social leaders, hosted by local NGOs, were educated about the necessity to create institutionalised social organisations, and the importance of NGOs for truly modern society. Eager to quickly shed the humiliating stigma of a non-modern, socialist state, to mimic Western solutions, these activists adopted the vision of the society, where social activism is mobilised by 'People's institutions' – NGOs. What proved problematic, however, was a detailed definition and the agreement on the language of the description and the issue of representation: how to find the language that would define new identities:

> *For sure, at the beginning it was crucial to define our own identity. Then later this world of the organizations controlled by [western donors] appeared . . . you know the ones from which we wanted to break through. [But] we didn't have our own language yet. (. . .) Of course the Non-Governmental cut through, and became the most successfully, surely more than non-profit. But it was because it was aiming the best at the essence of what all those shivering identities were. Historically it fitted well: that we are those*

> *Non – governmental. (. . .) At the end it was simply a matter of language. It was hard for us to use the term 'social organizations' and so on. (. . .) We couldn't use it because it was seized [by the communism/the state] . . . So we needed some fast lexical borrowing.*

As this NGO leader explained me, at the beginning, the distinction was simple: it was 'our side' versus the governmental side. The discourse, the language, the institutional scaffolding came only later, only after '1989', together with Western prescriptions for the transformation, and with the belated readings of the Western social theories. And so, building on those bases, the conviction that the future lies in the institutionalized associations – NGOs, as they became known, prevailed. Eventually, in the mid-1990s, the conflation of the NGOs and the civil society concept was in full swing.

Emerging as a donor – professionalisation

All these features which took shape during the Polish People's Republic era, and later when since 1989, the country was subjected to 'development' schemes, are becoming crucial now, when the Polish state and society are establishing their own foreign aid apparatus, and insist on 'exporting Polish transition and civil society building experiences'. Clearly, such a strong interest in promoting civil society abroad is a result of the past; personal experiences of people who while being involved in opposition movement of the 1980s, and later, in the 1990s, being busy with building their own organisations benefitted from the support of Western donors. Experiencing first-hand the hardships of the transition process, and the importance of foreign support, they have genuine interest in assisting others who today are undergoing similar processes.

However, the very same process of building Polish Aid structures also reveals other, long lasting consequences of the complicated history of the civil society in Poland. Among them is the self-identification of NGOs as non/anti-political. Again, this might be considered a typical trait for development per-se (Ferguson, 1994), but as we could see, in the Polish case, the de-politicisation of NGOs was facilitated by particular historical context: firstly by the events of the 1980s when politics and the very term 'political' became associated solely with the state apparatus, and as such considered 'contaminated'; second, by the structural adjustment era and subsequent substituting of political activism with technical, service oriented NGOs. This is very much a case for most Polish organisations involved in international development, who do not formulate their action in political terms: the NGO operating in Africa focus predominantly on technical issues and service provision (education, health, water and sanitation) or micro-economics, without addressing political issues shaping them. But even those organisations which operate at the East of Poland, and define their activities in terms of 'democracy support' – a trajectory which one would think is explicitly political, tend to limit their projects to activities of mostly technical nature (for instance, trainings for journalists, workshops for local organisations on management related issues,

trainings for leaders, etc.). As I learned through my work in Solidarity Fund, a GONGO which distributes state funds for 'democracy support' initiatives, most organisations applying for the funding were primarily interested in these technical issues, and were promoting NGOs as the primary vehicles for change, yet emphasising their role as the basic service providers rather than social or political activists. With few exceptions, the political motivations, the 'democracy' talk seemed to work as artificially added superstructure, securing the match with the CFP objectives, and guaranteeing success in the funding competition. Paradoxically, this led to the *literal* transplantation of Polish transition experience with other nations: by eliminating political engagement from their actions, promoting the idea that transformation is a technical process to be led by institutionalised NGOs, whose otherwise primary purpose is service provision, Polish NGOs effectively replicate among their Eastern Neighbours the same mechanisms which in 1990s, the advocates of neo-liberalism were subscribing for Poland.

But there are also other immediate traits of the complicated, Polish history of the civil society, in the country's ODA apparatus. They are in particular visible in the difficult partnership linking NGOs with its main donor MFA. Built on the strong antagonistic feelings towards the state – a trait which was prominent among Solidarity cohorts and which was fuelled by Western supporters of the country's democratisation – civil society as we know it today (i.e. the aggregate of NGOs) became defined by the constant friction with the State. This is particularly on display in the world of Polish developmental NGOs which are financially dependent on MFA – they share a similar interest in building a strong, centralised state-run Official Development Assistance apparatus, and, as I will demonstrate in the following sections, have significantly similar – bureaucratic, institutionalised – modes of operating, but still have difficulties in effective collaboration with the state administration.

Yet, while historical implications have set the tone of the present relations between NGOs and state institutions, there are also other, contemporary factors contributing to that process. Among them is the never ending, and never-to-be-satisfied obsession with Modernity. The struggle to be recognised as modern, in spite of the country's accession to the EU or DAC/OECD which at least superficially ought to work as guarantors of this status, is constantly ongoing (Drążkiewicz, 2013). In the development sector, it is visible in the way the country strives to shed the patronising label of 'emerging donor' (Hattori, 2003; Mawdsley, 2012). For NGOs, one way to receive international recognition as the 'established' donor, an expert in the development field, is through progressive 'professionalisation'.

However, this professionalisation, which entails institutionalisation and a larger emphasis on knowledge production techniques, actually approximates State and non-State modes of operating. Consequently, NGOs risk losing their own identity, which is so strongly built on differentiation from the state. Paradoxically then, the professionalization, while intended as the process of ordering the work of activists and making it more successful, becomes counter effective: NGOs which are defined, not by their actual mode of operating, by what they *are*, but by what they are *not,*

identified through pointing to an anti-group – the state becomes obsessed with the state (and whoever embodies it) (cf. Latour, 2005). In the light of the ongoing institutionalisation, the animosity with the State becomes a way to remain the pretence of difference between NGOs and state institutions. The sense of conflict, constant underlining of the differences between NGOs and state administration, while it helps organisations to maintain separate identities, works against any fruitful collaboration on both sides.

The way this mechanism is played out is very well exhibited in the efforts of Polish NGOs to professionalise themselves and Polish Aid. Enthusiastic about development pursuit, searching for ways foreign aid should be organised, Polish NGOs look up to the West as a potential, and the best source of information, often the template to be copied. Special workshops are designed, the aim of which is to professionalise Polish foreign aid activities. These workshops are usually conducted (by special request of the Polish side) by foreign experts, whose taken-for-granted-authority of 'established donors', provide unquestioned credibility of their teaching. Such initiatives have various topics, yet often, even though they were targeting NGOs, their centre of attention was Official Development Assistance – that is aid managed by the states. Over, and over again various courses were ramming home official DAC/OECD definitions of what 'real' development was, what 'counts as aid', and using Millennium Development Goals, or other inter-state agreements (such as Paris Declaration or European Consensus on Development), as markers of how development problems should be solved, how international aid should be distributed and managed. Paradoxically, as a result of these initiatives, their *non*-governmental participants, soon became the strongest supporters and advocates for the otherwise mainstream, state-centered and state-orchestrated development politics. It did not result, however, in the growing support of the state institutions and their actions, but quite the opposite.

Passionate about development issues, eager to be recognised as 'professional' players, Polish development activists, inspired by their Western counterparts, started to associate professionalism in development practice with the rules set up by foreign institutions such as DAC/OECD and treating international treaties as ideal templates for the best practice. Since the Polish state does not treat these requirements rigorously and does not follow the lead of Western players (as can be seen in the geographical allocations of Polish Aid prioritising Eastern Europe over Africa), it became perceived, by NGOs, as the main obstacle in global development. Instead of becoming a partner, with whom NGOs could jointly combat poverty issues, MFA started to be painted as the main enemy, and the reason for the development problems. Polish NGOs, which were already prone (due to the historical implications described above) to the rhetoric which polarises the state and non-state institutions, now easily subscribed to the visions promoted by the western organisations which were suggesting aggressive watchdog campaigns as the best model for encouraging change in the state politics and institutions.

Effectively, today much of the NGDO energy is directed towards campaigns which are aimed at Polish state institutions (predominantly MFA, and occasionally

the Parliament) with a hope of controlling and correcting its actions. Most of the activities are focused on knowledge production. Their main outputs are dozens of documents, brochures, policy papers, leaflets and reports which are calling 'the Polish state' to change its ODA politics and mechanisms. Convinced by the Western educators that such tools for knowledge are an attributes of professionalism and 'mature donors', and 'if effectively applied, have the potential to transform the efficiency and effectiveness of development and humanitarian agencies',[2] Polish NGOs became obsessed with methods which usually are associated with bureaucratic institutions – otherwise known for being preoccupied with producing papers (although not necessarily reading them).

The paramount manifestation of this process is 'Annual Aid Watch Report' published by Zagranica Group and presenting NGOs taking on Polish ODA (Grupa, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010). This annual Report is not only one of the main publications produced by the Polish Development NGOs but its premiere is a paramount moment in the NGOs calendar.

The work on the report started as an initiative of a small group of development workers representing different NGOs who were involved in the lobbying campaigns within the Polish governmental institutions. They gained their experience in this type of work through collaboration with Western NGOs, particularly through the Concord Group (the platform of European NGDOs by the EU). The inspiration to write the report was triggered precisely by this cooperation. Every year Concord produces a joint report on national ODAs of EU member states. It was the work on the Polish contribution to this report that, with time, developed into the preparation of a separate, extensive document on Polish ODA. The work on the report was mobilised and strongly influenced by western modes of producing such documents, and the ambition to fulfil yet another ''European Standard'' in order to be recognised as the Established (rather than Emerging) Donor. The contextualisation of this practice in this specific discourse, facilitated the perception of the Report (and other documents alike) as the best tool for change and social action. The people who orchestrated its origins in Poland were truly convinced, that simple extrapolation of working methods originating from the West, will guarantee also their success.

The report's aim is to expose the faults and weaknesses of the Polish ODA. Even though at first glance the document is addressed towards the general public, it is clear that its ultimate addressee is the Ministry itself. Instructed by the Western counterparts, at various courses on what a 'real' or 'good' development should be authors of the annual report had a readily available check list to pin down the state's flaws. They perceive Report as the best tool for making a change – hoping that Report will unveil all the faults of the state institution, shame it and force it to make corrections. Through the evocation of the State in the text (*Poland needs to . . . Poland must, the Government is obliged . . .*) it is clear that the document forms a tool of communicating with the Ministry. The Report is a voice of disappointment and rancour. Even though the authors present it as an 'independent', rational and methodological study, it is an expression of the clearly critical attitudes towards Ministerial operations.

Yet even though the report is advertised as an 'independent' analysis of the Polish (State) ODA, in fact it represents the voice of the actors, whose financial sustainability is strongly dependant on the state funds, and who would not be capable of conducting their development initiatives without MFA grants. For that reason, some NGO leaders, when the first editions of the Report were to be published, were worried about the possible consequences of their participation in this initiative with respect to their relationships with the Ministry. Interestingly this was particularly the case of one of the largest developmental NGOs, who each year benefited from the particularly strong financial support of MFA in the form of grant allocation. On one hand, the management of the organisation was interested in the production of the report, hoping that it would motivate some changes within the ODA system. On the other hand, since organisational management did not want to disturb its particularly good relationship with the MFA it did not want to be associated with the strong criticism that the NGO report represented. As a result, a staff member was delegated to work on the report, yet was asked to keep her involvement 'under the radar'. This proved especially difficult when she had to obtain some information from the Ministry which was essential for the document. One of the typical methods in gaining any information from public institution is through invoking the Access to Public Information Act, which regulates the rights of the citizens to obtain information. Being familiar with this tool, she decided to send a fax to the Ministry in which she explained her work on the report and put forward a request for access to information. A few hours later, when she was already out of the office, her superior gave her an unexpected call and in nervous tones reprimanded her for such an 'irresponsible move'. The fax was withdrawn. For the management, the request made by the employer was too confrontational and risking possible damage of the relations between this NGO and the Ministry.

The confrontational character of the Report, and potential risks resulting from it, was not overcome by changing writing strategies (for instance moderating text's tone) but by manipulating the authorship attributes. While each of the co-authors was leaving a strong mark on the section he or she produced, the document at the end was signed as the collective voice of NGOs, of the Zagranica Group. This allowed authors and NGOs they were representing not only to shed away individual ownership (and responsibility) for the political claims included in the Report, but also facilitated a false impression of document's objectivity. The affiliation with the Zagranica Group facilitates the recognition of the report as the 'voice of NGOs' (of civil society), rather than the statement of isolated individuals or organisations. The recognition of the expert status of the authors and their professionalism (objectivity) is further enabled by the application of official name, identifying authors as 'the Monitoring Group' and the recognition of the initiative as 'a Project' with its own objectives, schedule, coordinator, budget, etc. Even if the monitoring group consisted mostly of the people who were representing organisations involved in African trajectory of Polish aid, and were expressing their agendas in the Report, the presentation of the Report as the voice of Zagranica Group

offered illusion that the postulates of few organisations, are in fact representative to the otherwise diverse group of developmental stakeholders.

In spite of these shortcomings, the Report was not dismissed neither by the NGOs who were representing different views than those presented in the Report, nor by the MFA, whose employees often informally questioned the objectivity of the publication. Yet it was due to the presentation of Aid Watch campaign and the Report itself as yet another 'European standard' that most NGOs subscribed to the initiative easily, or at least did not want to object it. For the same reasons, the Ministry could not dismiss the publication, as its ability to conduct a dialogue with 'civil society' was considered a necessary condition of proving the mature character of Polish Aid. The openness to 'Aid Watch' campaign was considered of a particular value in that regard, even if in fact this 'public audit' practice invented in the West, once extrapolated to Polish environment hold more confrontational than dialogue value.

The good illustration of the antagonising dynamic, that the report had, might be its premiere. It is a carefully designed event which, each year (up to the 2011) was taking place at the Development Aid Forum organised by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The aim of this daylong, open to public event was to publicise the activities of the Polish state in foreign aid and to encourage Polish society to get involved in development issues. It also worked as the venue where NGOs were invited to present themselves, and their work abroad and engage with visitors. The official part of this initiative included the presentation of the official, ministerial report on Polish Aid. In the same event, shortly after the MFA session, NGOs were given the time to present their Report.

In 2010, the Forum took place in the Library of Warsaw University, which often works as a venue for such public events. Opening the Forum was a ministerial presentation. Behind the high table sat representatives of the Ministry. The audience composed mostly of NGO staff, some journalists and few diplomats representing foreign embassies. The ministerial representative introducing the MFA report in an excessively enthusiastic way focused on the positive sides of the national aid programme, presenting it as a success. The presentation included a slide show full of graphs and charts.

There would be nothing extraordinary in this meeting; however, there was one incident which made it stand out from other bureaucratic rituals of that kind. Just when the presentation was about to begin, a group of young people wanted to enter the room. There should have been nothing controversial about that, as the meeting was open to everyone, yet some of those people had their heads covered with gigantic eyeballs. For the ministerial staff, who were greeting guests by the door, this performance, came as a surprise: 'It is not in the official programme' one of the staff members observed. Not understanding the purpose of it, he thought that the people with those giant balls on their heads looked like aliens. It did not make sense to him, and looked like a joke threatening the serious character of the meeting. The performers were, therefore, asked to take their headgear off and only then were allowed to come in. Once inside the conference hall, they formed a line which also

formed a message from the letters printed on their T-shirts: 'We are keeping an eye on Polish aid'. However, even though their performance was prelude to the NGO-Aid-Watch report (which was next on the meeting agenda), some of the members of the audience had difficulties with understanding what was the meaning of the mysterious 'eyeballs' and the T-shirt coordinated slogan. One of the older ministerial staff members later on asked me: 'Ela, you hang out with *those NGO people*, so maybe you will explain to us, what is it all about, what are these bulbs?' Clearly, the 'Aid Watch' phrase, so literally translated from English, and promoted by the activists who were inspired by the Western workshops on monitoring national ODAs, made no sense to some of the Polish public.

The 'eyeball performance', as one of its initiators told me, was a way to bring attention towards the otherwise serious campaign. To get public interest was crucial, as just after the presentation of the ministerial report, NGOs got their chance to present their publication. Now they took their places at the same table, and moved to the Powerpoint presentation which, just like the previous one, was full of graphs and charts. This time, however, speakers would use this opportunity to ask provocative questions and eloquently pin down ministerial weaknesses. The whole performance was carefully crafted. The aim was to use this once a year opportunity when the Ministry representatives were impossible to had to listen to the voice of NGOs in the presence of journalists, to voice all concerns and criticism towards the ministerial approach to development. In fact for NGOs, it would be almost impossible to gather such a crowd in one room, so the aim was to generate the strongest effect possible, hence the 'eyeball performance', but also focus on the most controversial aspects of Polish aid, such as Polish involvement in Afghanistan, or lack of long-term funding, weak involvement in Africa.

The aim was to confront the Ministry. This was additionally to be achieved by creating suspense over the NGO report, which, even though it was ready before the conference, it was not to be distributed to anyone before the Forum. As it was explained to me by one of the authors, there were suggestions to change tactics, and send electronic copies to the MFA, at least as a sign of courtesy – after all the presentation was taking place at the event organised by the Ministry, where NGOs were the guests. Occasionally, there were also propositions to hold more informal discussions between the Ministerial and NGO representatives about the findings of the Report. However, such ideas were usually quickly rejected, as 'unprofessional', suggesting corruption, and 'getting too close with the MFA' and supposedly weakening the Report effect. The idea was, that the public presentation of the controversial politics of the Ministry, would have a greater impact, and more chances to induce some reaction from the MFA.

Yet in spite of all these efforts, to get the attention of the ministerial staff, there was not much of a conclusion to those meetings, which were functioning more as a performance of power (especially on the NGO side), and a sign of courteous cooperation (on the ministerial side); they finished as they started with polite greetings and wishes for better future cooperation. The Report was presented as the expression of NGOs' transparency desires, claiming that greater access to

information (and Report supposed to fulfil this function), could result in better, i.e. more rational management of social problems. But by the MFA, it was perceived as unnecessarily confrontational. For the staff members of the Department for Development Collaboration, who were targeted audience of the publication, and whose work was its main topic, the Report's content was not very revealing – most of the issues tackled were very well known to them, and, in many instances, they actually agreed with the NGO authors. Year by year, reprimanded by the NGOs that their work was not done properly, ministerial administrators were losing interest in the Report itself. The ultimate example of the counter effectiveness of the NGO publication, or rather the way it was antagonising the NGDOs with the MFA, was the Ministerial decision to stop organising Development Forums. Originally, the event was created as an opportunity for MFA and NGOs to jointly show off their accomplishments and to propagate development issues. Yet at some point, it became a venue for development organisations to vent their frustration with the way Polish Aid was managed and publicly expose the flaws of MFA.

The Report, an emanation of the widely promoted audit practice which ought to act as a sign of professionalisation of the Polish development scene, was promised as the effective tool for political action, in fact became yet another opportunity to reinforce NGO – state animosity. As Strathern (2000b) points out, the reference to accountability implies that people want to make their trust visible through the demonstration of information. However, at the same time, the very desire to do so, already points to the absence of trust. The document was produced as the expression of the transparency ideals. Yet as Tsoukas (2005) noticed, this very ideal in fact undermines the trust that is necessary for an expert system (and we can treat the development system as such) to function effectively. This was especially the case in the relations between NGOs and MFA as exemplified in the above 'Battle of Reports'. Both Reports (Ministerial and NGOs) sides were claiming expert status. Via Reports they supposed to offer not just their viewpoint but the 'real' version of what a Polish ODA is. Yet the NGO – Aid Watch attempted to undermine the expert character of the Ministerial work. Even though both reports were based on the same sources (ministerial statistics provided by the same administrative staff) the NGO report, both through text and the verbal communication of its authors, challenged the credibility of the Ministerial publication. Most importantly, however, the Report, and other documents alike published in the audit spirit were an obvious instrument of surveillance expressing the trust issues that NGOs had with the Ministry (cf. Strathern, 2000a, 2000b).

Yet, no matter how many Aid Watch campaigns were undertaken, how much information the MFA would release through its website, booklets, pamphlets, conference presses etc, the feeling that there was some information hidden, seemed to never go away. However, this general dissatisfaction with the access to information was not equal to the actual lack of knowledge of what was going on the other side. Representatives of both NGOs had various personal relations with the representatives of the 'other side' (as in the case of Karolina described in the beginning of this paper shows). And even though, through those informal channels they could

learn about various plans, moves, etc. of their counterparts, until they obtained 'official' information they acted as if they 'didn't know'.

This characteristic was additionally aggravated by the specific qualification of the knowledge which could be considered as *information*. In the process of writing Report, the strongest emphasis was on obtaining information of a 'statistical' nature. The emphasis on this type of knowledge – abstract, precise – ought to work as a signal of the professional, serious and objective and independent character of the publication. It ought to guarantee trust towards the information and its providers (Strathern, 2000b). But in the eyes of some of the MFA readers, it was exactly these features which were making the Report less trustworthy. It was perceived as dehumanised, missing the human face of the bureaucrat (sic!) behind the procedures and numbers. While they agreed that many observations of the Report were valid, its authors were accused of failing to acknowledge the context in which ODA was shaped, and understanding how complicated institutional dynamics of the MFA were.

Effectively, what started as the attempt to professionalise Polish aid, to fashion Polish NGOs as the 'Established' rather than 'emerging' players at the international arena, following 'international' agreements and standards, effectively led to the widening polarisation of NGOs with the State. The promotion of 'official' mainstream discourses of development placed the State at the centre of attention and deemed it as solely responsible for the (failure) of international development. Given the history behind Polish NGOs and their antagonistic attitude towards the state, we can see how development organisations were already prone to this sort of rhetoric, which yet again confirmed their vision of the world where state, and bureaucrats' actions are suspicious and require control and corrections. Such visions also wash NGOs clean of any responsibility they might have for the work of development apparatus. This is particularly visible in the way the NGO Report is constructed: while, as I noted earlier, the great proportion of Polish ODA is outsourced to Polish NGOs, there is no mentioning, or evaluation of their activities in the Report, as if they were not part of Polish ODA mechanism, and not benefiting from it financially. This allows NGOs to not see themselves as part of the problem, but separate from it, blaming all failures of Polish Aid on the state.

Finally, the obsession with transparency, audit and other knowledge production techniques approximates NGOs to the state in the operating mode. Just like bureaucrats, they become fixated with producing documents, seeing them as the important tool for governing social reality. Moreover, even though NGOs assume different goals and agendas from the ministerial workers, in fact both camps, are often driven by their similar interest in the improvement of Polish ODA and the global fight against poverty – this was certainly the case for Aleksandra or Karolina whom I described at the beginning of this paper. It seems then that development activists from Poland might have more in common with their Ministerial counterparts, than they would wish to admit. The recognition of those similarities became, however, an unbearable thought for many of the development aid leaders – whose organisational identity is so strongly engraved

in the *non-governmental* particle of their label. With progressing institutionalisation NGOs risk losing their identity as social entities which represent a bottom-up approach and which do not operate through bureaucratic channels. The fact that they so heavily depend on state money to operate, and with NGO staff members and state administrators easily manoeuvring employment opportunities between the two camps, this also works against their primary identification as a *non*-governmental bodies. Yet, the perpetuation of the non-State – State conflict allows this separate identity to be maintained.

Final comments

Since their development in the post-1989 era, the organising characteristic of NGOs was differentiation from the state. However, today 'third sector' gets much closer to their state partners than they themselves would probably wish. In spite of the shared goals, similarities and commonalities joining various individuals at all sides, the division marked along the institutional affiliation has prevailed and seems to be here to stay. The civil society concept, which in not-yet fully shaped form left Poland in the 1980s via the 'inspirational travels' of the Solidarity dissidents to the West, and later made it back to the country to become simultaneously internalised by the opposition and state regime, and later aggressively promoted by the foreign aid agencies received a special place in Polish public discourse. The circumstances which shaped it – such as Solidarity movement, Round Table negotiations, and socialist state propaganda – empowered it and decided of its strong popularity today. But at the same time, became its worst enemy, setting the context of the phenomenon as the constant battle between the state and the rest, and defining NGOs not via their actual mode of operating or field of action, but through emphasis on their *non*-governmental element, which in current circumstances remains nothing but an illusion anyway. That is why, as I was trying to show in this paper, contrary to the popular believes, in the production of this state/non-state division, a much more active role is played by NGOs, as it allows them to remain the false impression of separate identity. Effectively, in Poland, we can observe how the specific dynamics of the NGO–state relations, where original enthusiasm and perception of the NGOs as an essential instrument for creating a new state have been gradually taken over by mutual mistrust, competition and even antagonism.

The generic separation of NGOS and State representatives forms one of the most common identification creating separate fronts. The idea of civil society, promoted at the time of dramatic social change and propagated as the solution to contemporary structural and political problems by both State apparatus and Opposition, and later by foreign evangelists of development and change, quickly found popular support and became taken for granted, naturalised. The consequences of the stubborn and uncritical promotion of this specific phenomenon we can observe today in complicated relations between organisations and state institutions. It is somehow paradoxical that institutions that face such major

difficulties in building positive relations with each other, who actually experience first-hand the negative consequences of the implementation of the antagonistic civil society discourse, today insist on promoting it abroad. Moreover, they claim that, as representatives of a country which itself went through the processes of civil society building, they are predestined to export this model to other societies making it a trademark of the Polish Official Development Assistance.

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Notes

1. The Polish Round Table Negotiations took place in Warsaw and gave a space for discussions between opposition leaders (mostly representing Solidarity – a Trade Union) and state leaders. They were held in the presence of the press and Catholic Church observers, and paved the way for the future political and economical transformation of the country.
2. http://www.odi.org.uk/rapid/tools/toolkits/KM/Index.html,   http://www.development-network.eu/events/rt_i_-_warsaw, cf. materials provided at the site of the project 'Fostering Global Responsibility: Building a Development Policy Knowledge Network to Enhance NGO Public Outreach Initiatives in EU New Member States': http://www.development-network.eu/.207.

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