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Democratization

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Published online: 06 May 2024.

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Activism in the era of democratic backsliding: explaining the efficacy of the clean-air campaigns in Poland

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ABSTRACT
Recent scholarship on popular mobilization and activism in Central and East Europe suggests a shift from institutionalized civil society organizations towards grassroots mobilization. Whilst the emergence of such citizen-led activism across the region can be traced back to the anti-neoliberal urban movements that arose in the 2010s in the immediate post EU-accession period, the so-called "illiberal turn" and the legal restrictions placed on formal civil society organizations by radical right and conservative politicians have arguably exacerbated the shift and momentum. In Poland, the reaction of political elites to air pollution activism and the apparent responsiveness of policymakers is particularly puzzling given the "green conservatism" bordering on "environmental nativism" of the Law and Justice government (2015-2023). Building on semi-structured interviews conducted with 30 policymakers and activists involved in the clean air campaign in Poland, we contend that their success in terms of increased public awareness and positive government response is a consequence of the concurrence of (i) a particular (health) framing of air pollution, (ii) the devolution of power and responsibility for managing air quality to regional government, (iii) the circulation of new information and data, and (iv) the emergence of new actors and activist strategies.

Introduction

In their 2007 article, Petrova and Tarrow characterized civil society in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) as lacking "participatory activism" (people on the streets and mobilized citizens) but having significant "transactional activism" (networks containing state and nonstate actors that enabled effective policy change).[1] Recent scholarship on popular mobilisations and activism during democratic backsliding suggests a shift from institutionalized civil society organisations (CSOs) to grassroots citizen-based movements.[2] In other words, there has been a decline of transactional activism and a rise in participatory activism. This is particularly noticeable in the realm of

environmental activism, where professional ENGOs, a key actors in the early post-communist period and during EU enlargement, have seen whatever political efficacy they had diminish. Across Europe, established environmental movements remain in the vanguard and have adapted to the recent wave of climate activism, engaging a new demographic, and a more radical action repertoire. Indeed, social movement scholars have long identified the cyclical nature of activism in the mature democracies of Western Europe as a means of renewal and as a response to the institutionalization of protest forms.[3] However, the emergence of more radical and citizen-based green activism across CEE appears to be at the expense of the established tier of environmental NGOs.[4] It is also occurring against a backdrop of so-called "democratic backsliding" and the electoral dominance of populist and radical right parties, which manifests itself in "environmental nativism", whereby local and global environmental threats are blamed on "non-native persons, institutions, ideas and norms … fundamentally threatening … the homogenous 'people'".[5] The emergence of grassroots and citizen-led activism across Poland can be traced back to the immediate post-accession period and the anti-neoliberal urban movements that arose in response to the co-optation of NGOs into the state machinery.[6] By the time Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (PiS) came to power in 2015 and started to place legal restrictions on formal CSOs, local activist networks were well established and ready to mobilize in defence of a broad liberal agenda. What does require further analysis is why and how such activists were then able to influence political elites, invariably from PiS, on the contentious issue of air quality.

Recent scholarship on civil society and activism in Poland has challenged one of the core assumptions of the early post-communist studies literature – namely that what was emerging across CEE were autonomous and horizontal social networks, and a separate pillar from the state and the economy.[7] What has yet to be fully understood is whether and to what extent Polish civil society is in fact segmented; and constituted around vertically pillarised networks of organizations linked to political parties.[8] Indeed, focusing on protest events, Płatek[9] has illustrated how Polish civil society is structured around two political forces, the liberal/left and the right-wing, and, even if they are "not entirely separate components", both seek to "strengthen relations with their allies through various types of connections and exchanges of resources". Given their efficacy and geographic range, are organizations such as Smog Alert – a new activist movement concerned with air quality and the focus of this article – capable of bridging such political divides?

We also interrogate a core assumption within the scholarship on green activism, namely that progressive environmental agendas are most likely to occur under green, alternative and liberal (GAL) governments,[10] while traditional, authoritarian and nationalist (TAN) governments are commonly associated with climate change scepticism.[11] We also use the case of Poland to consider the extent to which environmental issues can still be said to exacerbate left-right polarization.[12] Indeed, contemporary Polish environmental activism demonstrates how, despite democratic backsliding under the right-wing government led by PiS,[13] air pollution – an issue associated with left-liberal and post-materialist politics – can gain salience.[14] In other words, we use contemporary anti-air-pollution activism to interrogate the claim that vertical pillarisation along conventional left-right lines determines social movement efficacy.

We draw our evidence from the growing mobilization of civil society groups,[15] increased public concern for and awareness of environmental issues, and evidence of positive government response to public concerns.[16] Our specific contribution is

to use the case of air pollution activism in contemporary Poland to illustrate how sequential change in the dynamic interaction between the "political opportunity structure",[17] actor configuration, societal knowledge and understanding, and the particular framing of a campaign by activists can result in policy change. Specifically, we contribute to an expanding literature seeking to explain why and how the Polish state, local activists and formal and informal institutions interact in the context of air pollution and broader environmental challenges.[18] Whilst our research does not focus on substantive change in air quality, providing a more nuanced understanding of the power dynamic between key actors does potentially cast light on debates about the limits of new environmental measures and institutions.[19] More generally, studies of the politics of air pollution in CEE have tended to focus on actor configuration and engagement in the policy process.[20] Whilst we do not depart from a broadly neo-institutionalist approach – informal and formal rules and norms as determining behaviour – we seek to better understand the dynamic interaction between the various factors identified in the literature as contributing to progressive policy change. We interrogate the implicit assumption in much of the existing literature that increased knowledge about worsening air pollution encourages citizens to become more involved in environmental movement organizations, which then exert pressure on policymakers; change being more likely to occur if centre-left liberal parties are in positions of power.[21] In tune with much of the recent scholarship in social movement studies, we place significant emphasis on how campaigns are framed.[22] However, our starting premise is that the emergence of new frames as part of a dynamic process (involving changes in the political opportunity system, resource availability, new actors, as well as the availability and interpretation of knowledge and data) merits particular consideration in the context of democratic backsliding.

Our data and analysis illustrate that changes in air pollution policies at the regional level cannot simply be attributed to increased public awareness, and that positive government response is not a response to worsening air quality or more pro-environment parties gaining power. Rather, it is a consequence of the sequential concurrence of (i) a particular (health) framing of air pollution, (ii) the devolution of power and responsibility for managing air quality to regional government, (iii) the circulation of new information and data, and (iv) the emergence of new civil society actors and activist strategies.

We employ a qualitative approach combining results from an online 2021 scoping focus group with 2 native Polish facilitators and 11 Polish participants and a series of interviews conducted in 2020–21 with 30 policymakers and activists using the snowballing technique.[23] The interviews explored issues related to civil society activism, policy responses, and public and political understandings of the issue and were conducted with individuals working for CSOs, local and regional authorities and elected politicians. Focus groups are a tool well-suited to uncovering common understandings of concepts, issues and problems among members of a community.[24] They are also a useful means of assessing diversity of views and differences of opinion about the way topics are understood among people with common lived experiences.[25] Focus groups are thus a useful way to probe issue framing, as they can reveal recurrent usages of discursive themes, symbolism and other linguistic devices that citizens employ to inflect the expression of their views with connotations. We have employed thematic analysis, which generated four "organising themes" and in this article we evaluate and interpret the theme of health frames, which capture the significance of health issues in framing the air pollution issue.[26]

The focus group was conducted in Polish and involved 5 female and 6 male participants living in towns and cities, though several had grown up in rural areas. The interviews were conducted predominantly with Polish actors in Poland (24/30) along with 4 EU institutional actors and 2 representatives of the World Bank. 27 were conducted online, with 3 others (no. 4, 24 and 25) in the form of written correspondence. The online interviews were 45–60 minutes long on average and were transcribed. They were conducted in English except for 5 in Polish (no. 25–30). Of the actors in Poland, 12 were with those with a local or regional role – 10 in Southern Poland and 2 in Central Poland – areas of high air pollution and corresponding activism.

Before describing the emergence of Smog Alert as a new activist movement, we introduce the concept of framing and how it has been used in the context of air pollution activism in Poland and elsewhere. Framing is the core concept of the article as we contend that how meaning is constructed and attributed to an issue is fundamental and a catalyst for impact and efficacy. The final section considers how legal and regulatory changes to environmental management in 2015 transformed the prospects for local activism and agency, enabling local political opportunity structures to become critical in determining efficacy.[27]

Polish air quality: getting worse or simply more information available?

An estimated 47,300 premature deaths occur annually due to air pollution in Poland, the highest number in the EU in 2021 and 19% of the total.[28] A 2019 survey found that 62% of the population considered air pollution to be one of the top three environmental issues in the country, against a global average of 35%.[29]

However, a distinction must be made between the extent of the problem, and public perceptions of it. Eurobarometer data shows that most Poles believed pollution levels to have deteriorated or remained the same between 2012 and 2019, whereas in fact, there had been a sustained improvement on most measures. Furthermore, the proportion of people who believed air quality to be improving halved between 2012 and 2019, which, we contend, constitutes an increased awareness of air pollution.[30]

What is perhaps more surprising, is the policy response by the conservative-led government, otherwise associated with the least ambitious environmental goals in the EU,[31] the democratic backsliding,[32] and the general constraining of Polish civil society.[33] In 2017, the Polish Prime Minister set out to tackle air pollution as a priority, arguing that "clean air is a civilisation challenge",[34] and in the following year, the government launched a national Clean Air Programme to replace outdated domestic coal and wood boilers.

The national government's response has been linked to grassroots air pollution activism, which emerged in Kraków and then expanded in other regions across Poland, especially in southern parts of the country where the air pollution has been most evident. Environmental movements in Poland played a role in the collapse of communism[35] and in the period of early democratization, they have become synonymous with the burgeoning civil society supported by international organizations.[36] However, during the accession to the EU, NGOs became more institutionalized and bureaucratized and shifted their activities to managing relations with the state rather than society. Consequently, local citizen activist groups emerged alongside the established NGOs[37] and in response to locally experienced environmental issues.[38]

The framing of air pollution activism: a theoretical and comparative perspective

Framing processes have recently become "a central dynamic in understanding the character and course of social movements" alongside resource mobilization and political opportunity structure.[39] Whilst it is certainly the case that availability of resources and the political and institutional structure have shaped environmental policy in post-communist Poland, neither can adequately explain the apparent recent rise in local activism against a backdrop of restrictions on civil society and an illiberal turn.

In tune with much contemporary social movement scholarship, we focus on the concept of "framing" – understood as the "process of negotiating shared meaning" that movements undertake to articulate their grievances and galvanize support[40] – to explore the rise in activism and popular mobilization. This shift focuses on explaining why, given similar resource endowments, and operating in the same political context, some organizations and networks achieve greater success than others.

Framing is an essential part of the public communication process as it provides interpretative lenses through which individuals "render events or occurrences meaningful".[41] Whether intentional or not, framing "involves selectively emphasizing certain dimensions of an issue over others"[42] and, in that way, promoting a particular definition of the problem and "evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation".[43] To be effective and have resonance, frames must be true and connect with the audience's values,[44] cultural beliefs and worldviews.[45]

Substantial and emerging literature focus on the framing of contemporary environmental campaigns in developed democracies. For example, work on climate change discourse has identified strategic issue framing as influential in shaping public attitudes:[46] the ways in which communications about climate change are framed have a substantial impact on the way that they are received.[47] Early experimental studies focused on the role of positive vs negative and gains/benefits vs loss communication frames[48] and more recently the evaluation of particular frame themes effectiveness demonstrated how positive[49] and health frames[50] increase the likelihood of support for climate policies.

Three aspects of the existing scholarship on framing climate and air pollution activism are of relevance to our case study: a) framing climate policy, and air pollution policy, as a health issue impacts citizens' awareness of the issue, b) framing these policies as an issue close to personal experience, spatially and physiologically, increases perceptions of the severity of the problem, and c) the research has demonstrated the importance of improving public perception of the scientific consensus on climate change, and specifically on the impact of air pollution on the health of individuals.

Framing climate change as a human health issue has potential to prompt transformative policy change.[51] Experimental studies in the US have established that health frames appear to be a stronger motivator for attitude change among conservative individuals, highlighting their relevance in garnering broader support for policy change.[52] The public health frame stresses climate change's potential to increase the incidence of infectious diseases, asthma, allergies and other salient health problems, especially among the most vulnerable populations: the elderly and children.[53]

Reframing policy issues as public health issues has been shown to generate increased public support.[54] Such frames can elicit emotional reactions consistent

with support for climate change mitigation and adaptation[55] and generate support for renewable energy policies.[56] Studies conducted elsewhere have produced similar results demonstrating, in addition, how the health frame has the potential to increase support for such policies among those less concerned with climate change.[57]

Scholars argue the health frame appears successful because "we are better at predicting and making decisions about events that are psychologically closer to ourselves compared to those that are more psychologically distant".[58] The health frame "shifts the geographical location of impact, replacing visuals of remote Arctic regions … with more socially proximate neighbours and places across local communities and cities",[59] which is consistent with findings that local frames increase the severity of the problem and support for policy action.[60]

Finally, studies have also shown that people who believe that scientists disagree about global warming tend to show less support for climate policy, which suggests the importance of correcting widely-held public misperceptions about the lack of scientific agreement on global warming.[61] Emphasizing scientific consensus around climate change has a depolarizing effect[62] and people and institutions are more likely to modify their attitudes[63] following increased public awareness of the impact of polluting agents on human health and air. People's understanding of air quality and its impact on health depends on the accessibility of the information and the level of "understanding, perception and vested interest" involved.[64]

Public engagement in air quality management has been shown to be practical and potentially beneficial.[65] Strategic approaches to promoting risks associated with air pollution contribute to public awareness and encouraging public participation.[66] Anxieties about the health-related implications of air pollution have been steadily growing in developed and developing countries. Besides Poland, similar movements, focused on providing more up-to-date and easier to use information about air pollution, emerged in the UK,[67] Spain,[68], South Africa[69] and Taiwan,[70] demonstrating relevance of data in mobilizing awareness.[71]

In the 2010s few cities in the US focused on the health aspects of air pollution in their climate action plans,[72] while local authorities in Paris and Montreal have increasingly focused on the health effects of air pollution in their strategies since the 2010s.[73] Research has found that CSOs can act as "problem brokers" framing air quality issues as "urgent" problems that require a policy response, and that this framing includes emphasizing the health costs such as describing air pollution as a health "crisis" or "emergency".[74] In London there was significant bottom-up pressure for a proactive approach to regulation on public health grounds. Researchers have found that in Antwerp[75] and Poland[76] CSOs contributed to pushing the issue of air pollution up the political agenda by highlighting health risks.

In what follows, we seek to evaluate the role of framing strategies in the case of contemporary air pollution activism in Poland. We focus on grassroots mobilization where local citizen activist groups emerged alongside established NGOs and in response to locally experienced environmental issues. We contend that successful framing of air quality as a health issue alongside the innovative and engaging knowledge distribution strategies contributed to growing awareness among citizens, which was channelled into protests and other forms of pressure towards local, regional (and national) government who eventually responded by designing appropriate air quality policies.

New actors, new frames: from Kraków Smog Alert (KSA) to *Polish* Smog Alert (PSA)

Formed in late 2012, Kraków Smog Alert (KSA) began publicizing poor air quality data,[77] and by focusing on air pollution and its negative implication on health, KSA managed to mobilize local initiatives, sustain mobilization across the country, increase public awareness of air quality measurement and monitoring data, and garner public support for air quality policy. They translated air from a largely invisible social-natural artefact into a political issue.

By focusing on a single issue, they have managed to overcome left-right polarization in Poland, in which climate policies are often associated with the left.[78] Their success has been attributed to their political independence, evidence-based communication, and the consistency of actions performed.[79] Based on our data, we argue that the success was also due to the strategic employment of health frames that resonated with the lived experiences of local communities.

Before 2012, minimal activism was explicitly focused on air quality. KSA emerged from a single group initially composed of three people operating in Kraków in 2012.[80] Their formation coincided with a public consultation on an air quality programme for the Małopolska (Lesser Poland) region,[81] which provided the opportunity to lobby for a ban on solid fuel burning.[82] They started with a Facebook page, and later began to organize actions within the community.[83]

The first large Kraków demonstration in 2013 influenced the emergence of other community-based groups.[84] Beyond Kraków, branches formed in Wrocław (run by another CSO/NGO, Eko-Unia) and one in Zakopane (run by ClientEarth, later Polska Zielona Sieć, then independently).[85] The focus was on "advocating for coal bans in larger cities and health resorts".[86] Zakopane, for example, was strategically chosen as "it has a great impact because each and every Pole has been to Zakopane".[87] The Health and Environment Alliance has since 2013 produced reports framing air quality as a health issue in Poland.[88]

The Kraków demonstrations illustrated the development of a strategic approach to framing the air pollution issue. The activists organized a performative funeral march for the departing Kraków air, accompanied by banners saying, "Why are you letting us be poisoned" and chants such as "we want air".[89] Alongside other activities, the demonstrations produced what can be considered, in hindsight, the most significant result and a tipping point: the Kraków regional assembly passed a resolution in 2013 banning the use of domestic solid fuels. In anticipation of the lawsuit that was eventually brought before the Supreme Court, the KSA activists expanded their relations with Client Earth, an international law charity engaged in holding governments and businesses accountable for their roles in addressing climate change, who provided legal assistance and initiated the expansion of their activities in other regions in Poland.[90]

The early branches of Smog Alert were organized by those with experience working in environmental NGOs,[91] but the PSA network broadened out to those with no such experience.[92] For example, the Poznań branch emerged after a local resident, Wojciech Augustyniak, started experiencing problems with asthma, which made him reach out to friends on social media and eventually start a Facebook page after failing to find air pollution information in the local media.[93]

A major development occurred in 2015 when three local initiatives created the umbrella organization Polish Smog Alert (PSA) to establish a common national

platform and campaign agenda. Eventually, campaigns were set in motion in about ten other localities, mostly in southern Poland, Śląskie (Silesia) and Dolnośląskie (Lower Silesia), and Poznań in Wielkopolskie (Greater Poland) and Warsaw in Mazowieckie.[94] In 2015, 13 alerts were established; there were 28 alerts in 2016; and 30 in 2017. During the first half of 2018, inhabitants organized a further 15 alerts.[95] A nationwide network (though south of the country-focused) of 44 branches existed by 2020,[96] often locally coordinated by a handful of people.[97]

The oldest smog alerts from large cities exhibited the highest number of supporters measured by their membership of Facebook groups – in Kraków (50,500), Warsaw (44,500), Poznań (8,700), Gliwice (6,000) and Łódz (47,000) smog alerts supporters amounted to 3–6% of the population.[98]

KSA was initially reluctant to register formally as an NGO, considering that local grassroots forms of activism were perceived as less bureaucratized, financially unburdened, and more trustworthy than institutionalized CSOs.[99] In their own words, the need to register formally as an NGO came in response to the initial success with a legislative change in Kraków, to achieve transparency and funding as an official organization.[100] Otherwise, an interviewee claimed "It was totally a grassroots organisation. We didn't have funds, we were doing it after work",[101] although the founders were able to build on their extensive experience, as an advisor to a government environmental agency and consultant for international institutions including on environmental issues, which was significant in successfully applying for funding from the European Climate Foundation, and later through EU funding.[102] Other environmental NGOs were also integral to the founding of early smog alerts, in Wrocław (Eko-Unia) and in Zakopane (Client Earth).[103]

From the early days in 2012, after KSA started a Facebook page, the activists "were approached by many Kracovians, by medical doctors, by artists, by people who were running companies. They all helped us",[104] which appeared to KSA as a sign they were addressing something that the community was indeed concerned about:

> when we started our campaign in Kraków, the first thing that we did was to have a nice logo and a Facebook group, and … we just started to inform in an easy language … to publish information on how bad air quality is.[105]

As they were gaining traction, the local media and representatives in local councils recognised KSA's efforts in eliminating air pollution, which required a change of strategy, and after a year of protests in 2014, KSA adopted advocacy strategies.[106] Considering their engagement with various political actors, increasing mobilization potential and the counterclaims by coal-attached businesses, KSA made it explicitly clear from the beginning that they were neither seeking to compete in elections, nor wished "to be associated with any business".[107]

In some cities, such as Wrocław, air pollution awareness among citizens was low, and in most cases, air pollution was not as visible as in Kraków, and information about air quality was not accessible. To overcome these problems, PSA engaged in comprehensive activities to educate the local communities by providing up-to-date data and research findings on the impact of air pollution, organizing workshops and coordinating activities with institutions entrusted to control the domestic use of solid fuel.[108] At the national level, they "usually write reports, those things which are very technical, e.g. regulations for boilers … Because we have the knowledge, and we have the back-up of experts working in the field".[109]

Scientific evidence of the scale of harm caused by air pollution was emerging during this period. A series of reports from 2013 began to link air pollution to a wide range of health problems, including diabetes, asthma, and lung cancer.[110] The 2014 WHO report concluded that air pollution was the world's largest single environmental health risk.[111] These developments contributed to KSA's education and advocacy strategy as they were able to address the correlation between air pollution and health, which previously health practitioners in Poland claimed to be "hard to prove".[112] Piotr Siergiej, PSA media officer at the time highlighted the underlying reasons for the early reluctance of health practitioners to engage publicly.[113]

Framing air pollution as a health issue

In anticipation of the 2015 amendment to the Environmental Protection Law, forty well-known doctors, pulmonary specialists, allergists, cardiologists, and oncologists appealed to the president to sign the bill into law, arguing that air pollution can kill anyone – children, adults, furnace producers, coal miners, and politicians all in the same way.[114] Once the scientific consensus about the impact of air pollution emerged internationally, it became easier for the KSA to frame the issue of air pollution in health terms more explicitly, as initially envisaged and aligned with their own motivation to advocate the ensuing policy change.

It was the perception of several interviewees in our sample that a key challenge to campaigning for change was the lack of awareness amongst the public around the health effects of air pollution:

> For many years, there was no well-established belief in society that the state of health or disease was a derivative of air quality. [but now] … enough research has been done. We now know that health is a derivative of air pollution. Smog alerts and so on … this awareness is dominant.[115]

Therefore, a key challenge was educating the public about the health effects, that "it's not just stench, it's a really toxic thing to breathe in".[116] What helped the PSA activists, in their words, was creating awareness among people that [air pollution] was not harmless and that there are serious health consequences connected with it.[117] The problem was that despite the fact "this pollution problem has been around for several years, … people just didn't talk about it or didn't realise the scale of the problem like they do now".[118] This was countered by using "all available communication channels … tak[ing] part in consultations, public consultations … [including] working with government, with municipality, showing also the politicians on the city level".[119] The effect was considered to be a "big breakthrough … for the last few years, nobody's … refusing to believe that we have an air pollution problem".[120] Focus group participants discussed how there was an awareness of the effect on physical, and mental health,[121] and how it was considered a threat to both current[122] and future generations if the problem continues.[123]

In 2012, KSA prepared visually lucid and accessible educational materials online and in print illustrating the causes, severity, health impacts, and possible solutions to the problem. In disseminating these materials to local legislators and the public, both the policy elite and ordinary citizens were confronted with the true scale of the problem, with the images and data quickly picked up by the local, national and international media. One of the more dramatic, memorable, and widely cited examples of this was KSA's calculation that residents of Kraków, by inhaling air, were taking in the

same amount of carcinogenic benzo(a)pyrene in one year as they would if they smoked 2500 cigarettes (versus 160 in Vienna and 25 in London). In Warsaw, City is Ours (Miasto jest Nasze), founded in 2013 as a CSO focused on local issues, has also used health framing to highlight the vulnerability of children to air pollution, for example, that it was the equivalent of "cigarettes for children".[124] For university cities such as Kraków, Warsaw, and Poznań with large numbers of highly educated residents, including parents of young children, there has been an even stronger focus on the health effects of pollution.[125] A representative of KSA confirmed that they circulated research produced by Kraków's Medical College:

> saying that the children born in polluted areas – Kraków was the place actually researched – are lighter in weight and they are also smaller, and later on in cognitive tests they had slightly lower results. This was very powerful. The very first group of our supporters – we were using social media – was a group of young adults, young parents who were concerned about the future of their children.[126]

.Other available interviews further confirmed that: "The level of air pollution [during a smog episode] was so high that I had to stay at home with both of my kids for a week, and I got so angry and scared that I wanted to act".[127]

In the words of another activist, it appears that the KSA framing of the issue was very successful because:

> earlier, people just thought, okay, the air is bad, and that is how it is, and there is nothing that can be done about it. Suddenly they realised that even some kind of silly winter cold that lots of people in Kraków suffer from—and they are the types of colds that you can never recover from completely—that this is caused by the air. That kids get sick, that kids can't go outside and take walks because there are these kinds of pollution. So, this growth in societal consciousness, this work that KSA did is huge.[128]

Raising awareness of the issue in recent years was also facilitated by air quality apps and the emergence across the country of "hyperlocal and multi-dense networks of sensors".[129] For example, a lack of comprehensive information and real-time monitoring was a prime motivation for establishing the Airly app and sensor programme in 2016 by three graduates of Kraków Technical University. Concerned about the effect of air pollution when preparing for the Kraków marathon and with backing from the university as well as other investments, they were able to locate 100 sensors in Kraków.[130] Regional authority interviewees highlighted the role of such air quality apps in raising awareness of the problem beyond Kraków.[131] New sensors have also been considered critical:

> the smaller the town, where there are no sensors, for example, they say that they do not have this problem … [now with new sensors] everyone can look at it … It turned out very quickly on the first winter that the whole city was black. This argument began to hit the public.[132]

.Concern about health issues increased following the severe January 2017 smog episode,[133] which several interviewees argued highlighted the national scope of the problem,[134] and served to provide momentum to clean air campaigns.[135] The January 2017 smog episode was significant for gaining media attention. It was the focus of national media attention, with smog alerts sounding in some schools, and one NGO highlighted the importance of being given a platform on national TV to discuss research that found that the majority of most polluted cities in Europe were located in Poland:[136] "Immediately, plenty of us, I mean, civil society activists

become celebrities, you know, interviewing, media presence and so on".[137] The former president of the Polish Green party argued that "this is the most important issue in Poland now. It is both an environmental and a health problem. For politicians here, the environment is ok, but health is very important. It is my health, my children's health. You know it is a good and effective argument".[138]

In Warsaw, the health effects have been the focus of framing the problem to the public by *City is Ours*, for example, by highlighting the correlation between approximately 11,000 excess deaths caused in Poland in January 2017 with the smog episode at this time.[139] Emphasizing the relatively high pollution in Poland was also effective in shaping public opinion that the problem was serious.[140]

Another example of this health framing strategy was a September 2020 interview with a campaigner in the weekly *Niedziela* magazine as a part of a large campaign with the participation of the Catholic Church and Smog Alert titled "God gives life, smog takes it away", a campaign where leaflets regarding the issue of smog and how to replace old boilers were distributed to up to 8000 parishes.[141] This campaign was extended in 2022 as "Air and Climate = Common Good", working with two Polish Catholic newspapers (*Przewodnik Katolicki* and *Gości Niedzielny*).[142] Regional politicians in Dolnośląskie (Lower Silesia) highlighted the central role of educating the public "about air quality about its consequences, about the necessity of adhering to the rules" and to do this partly to counter the public concern about the cost-of-living implications of the air quality legislation in the region.[143]

For PSA, the framing of the type of problem air pollution represents has varied depending on location, but it has not focused primarily on climate change or coal: "We, in the PSA, are not talking about coal, we are talking about air pollution",[144] which was especially evident in Kraków where the fight "against coal as a fuel source" took a public health angle.[145] In the words of another activist: " … when people say that we are an eco-movement, we say that we are not. We are not fighting for preservation of leaves in the streets, we are fighting for clean air. It is not necessarily something eco. Reducing the air pollution is nothing eco for us, it is just something that is necessary for us to live here".[146] Similarly, within KSA, the group felt it was important early on to communicate not that "We are ecologists and we care about Earth and greenery" or something like but "We care about the future of our children. This is something really hurtful to people's health; and this and this should be done so that we can breathe clean air and the organisation's goals are only limited to air pollution so it's not a broad ecological organisation".[147]

Both KSA and PSA made strategic choices to primarily frame air pollution as a health issue, only later using a climate change discourse. They argue that this enabled them to carefully link local air pollution to the broader, more abstract climate change issue, and a representative of Greenpeace stated that this is also because "politicians don't mix these things [air pollution and climate policy]".[148] Until the late 2010s the view of activists and local politicians was that the public was that both political and public concern about climate change was relatively low,[149] and additionally a member of the Skawina branch of PSA concluded that "it's very hard to protest against climate change … the situation in Poland, the polarization is quite big … you have this ideological fight".[150] Moreover, by delivering tangible impact from a grassroots campaign, they were able to demonstrate to other communities across Poland that environmental grassroots activism could generate concrete results. Reflecting on the broader impact of the PSA campaign, one activist observed:

"(across Poland) people are concerned with regulating rivers, some with deforestation, some with climate. I think that something is happening".[151]

Discussion

The data presented above would suggest a series of interlinked changes that, in tandem and occurring in a particular sequence, culminated in local authorities in Poland taking a progressive stance on air pollution. A series of key legal changes seems to have enabled and been a catalyst for the new wave of activism. The first occurred in 2015 when the President of Poland, Andrzej Duda (PiS), originally from Kraków, signed an amendment to the Environmental Protection Law to enable regional authorities to implement policies surrounding the issue of air quality. This legislative change was hugely significant for local activism. For example, in Kraków, Client Earth immediately worked with Smog Alert to pressure the local authority to ban the use of solid fuels.[152] The proposal was unanimously passed a year later and came into force in September 2019, the first such ban in the country.[153] In April 2017, Śląskie (Silesia) became the second region to introduce anti-smog regulations, banning the use of outdated boilers in 2022. In 2017 similar resolutions followed across the country and by early 2023 14 of 16 Polish regions had passed anti-smog resolutions.

The second significant event that elicited a policy response was the European Court of Justice (ECJ) decision in February 2018, which found Poland in violation of air pollution directives.[154] Only in the late 2010s "(had) Polish politicians begun to take it seriously at the central level".[155] Finally, in September 2018, a regulation for solid fuel standards phased out poor-quality coal by June 2020. The main national government response has been the Clean Air Programme (CAP) launched in 2018, which offered grants and loans to households to replace boilers.

But our data would suggest that the legal changes and judgements themselves do not explain the rate or rapidity of policy responses across the country. Indeed, throughout this period, PSA emerged formally as a key actor within the state-society relation matrix, and as the policies moved up the ladder from the regional to national and European levels, their strategies shifted from an emphasis on protests towards providing advice and contributing to the policy developments.[156] Throughout, they emphasized health as a frame for their activism and advocacy, which resonated with citizens who had become more concerned about air quality and believed that the situation in Poland had deteriorated.

Framing air pollution primarily as a health concern generated significant support amongst citizens, most evidently established through our interviews. The local civil society initiatives were focused on extending the level of knowledge by providing evidence and information about air pollution alongside the negative implications of air pollution on health. In a climate of conservatism and populist nativism,[157] shifting the framing away from climate policy – which is often associated with left-wing governments – towards existential (health) threats might have proved critical in swaying the government's approach towards regional-level authorities. The national government's decision to change the Environment Law to enable regional authorities to design specific air pollution policies that would rectify the issue in respective regions transformed local political opportunity structures, enabling regional authorities wishing to implement more progressive policies to do so. However, building on the social movement literature, the emergence of new structural opportunities does not

necessarily lead to progressive change.[158] What our research illustrates is how the emergence of Smog Alert, a new movement organization that evolved as part of a more fundamental change in Polish civil society during the 2010s, contributed to re-framing air pollution in a way that did not jar with the nativist ideology of the ruling party, galvanizing particular local mobilisations to occur, to which regional political elites respond by enacting new regulations.

Smog Alert also focused on disseminating air pollution information, ensuring a continuous and growing awareness of the negative effects of air pollution. Interviews presented here demonstrate that the activists employed health frames strategically and believed that, in that way, they successfully drew attention to the problem more generally. Recent research undertaken in Poland and other contexts employing rather different methods and/or data sources suggests that local-level activism resulted in national-level changes in awareness[159] – demonstrating that the claims activists made about using the health frame might have well triggered raising awareness.

Citizens' policy preferences were by 2019 linked in clear ways with regional air pollution activism, possibly via the extensive efforts to shape policy-making, which resulted in support for tougher environmental policies. The national campaign augmented citizens' concerns but channelled their focus at the local level. This echoes other work that has also noted an interplay between local air pollution activism and policy evolution at regional and national level.[160]

Our data and analysis do indicate that how the issue of air pollution is framed by activists certainly matters, and that in the case of Poland during the PiS government (2015–2023) this might well explain the successful implementation at the regional level of policies sought to decrease air pollution. This is treated here as a starting premise that we set out to unpack and understand in more detail. Given the "environmental conservatism" or indeed "environmental nativism" of the PiS politicians at national and local levels, can such success really be attributed just to clever framing of air pollution campaigns? Our analysis and data suggest that the introduction of new and more resonant frames has to be placed in a broader context of sequential changes in actors, societal knowledge and understanding of the problem, plus alteration in what social movement scholars refer to as "the political opportunity system".

Conclusion

In terms of the broader discussion of democratic backsliding and its impact and reverberations for citizen and civil society activism, recent scholarship on popular mobilization and activism in CEE suggests a shift from institutionalized CSOs, which emerged in the 1990s as an autonomous sphere separate from the state and economy, towards grassroots mobilization. Whilst the emergence of such citizen-led activism across the region can be traced back to the anti-neoliberal urban movements that arose in the 2010s in the immediate post EU-accession period, the so-called "illiberal turn" and the legal restrictions placed on formal CSOs by radical right and conservative politicians has, it is argued, exacerbated the shift and momentum.

Our case study demonstrates how support for more progressive (environmental) policies can be achieved even in the context of an illiberal and populist ascendancy. Whilst not seeking to under-estimate the deleterious impact of attacks on democratic institutions or the removal of formal rights to protest, our findings endorse the notion captured elsewhere[161] that democratic backsliding should not assume a weakening of

civil society, nor be equated with a decline in democratic vibrancy at the grassroots level. Our findings indicate that not only is "transactional activism"[162] still characteristic of civil society in CEE, but it is also now combined with "participatory activism". However, our data would suggest that generating efficacy in an illiberal context is dependent on a sequence of changes rather than just a reframing of a campaign or the emergence of new actors. Yet, how the issue of air pollution is "framed" by activists matters.

Notes

1. Petrova and Tarrow, "Transactional and Participatory".
2. Buzogány, Kerényi, and Olt, "Shrinking Space"; Stanley, "Confrontation by Default"; Jacobsson and Korolczuk, "Mobilizing Grassroots"; and Balfour, Gelhaus and Matrakova, "The Changing Landscape".
3. Tarrow, *Social Movements*.
4. Fagan and Edjus, "Lost at the Waterfront".
5. Riedel, "Green Conservativism," 208; Buzogany and Mohamad-Klotzbach, "Populism and Nature," 161.
6. Drazkiewicz-Grodzicka, "State Bureaucrats".
7. Ekiert, "Civil Society".
8. Jezierska, "Liberal Closet".
9. Płatek, "Towards Pillarisation?," 17.
10. Richardson and Rootes, *Green Parties*; Garner, *Environmental Politics*; Neumayer, "Left-Wing"; Colvin and Jotzo, "Attitudes to Climate Action".
11. Fraune and Knodt, "Sustainable Energy Transformations"; Lockwood, "Climate change Agenda"; Forchtner,
        "Climate Change"; Jahn, "Populist Parties in Government".
12. Birch, "Political Polarisation"; Dunlap, McCright, and Yarosh, "Divide on Climate Change".
13. Tworzecki, "Case of Top-Down".
14. Marcinkiewicz and Tosun, "Mapping the Political Debate"; Szulecka and Szulecki, "Ecological Crises".
15. Lillevik, *The Fight*; Frankowski, "Citizen Engagement".
16. Ministry of Climate and Environment, "'Clean Air' Programme".
17. "Political Opportunity Structure" is understood here as the particular distribution of power within the state, and the extent to which political institutions provide access for social movements to the public sphere and decision making areas (Eisinger, "conditions of protest "; Tilly, "To Explain Political").
18. Matczak et al, "Tackling Air Pollution".
19. Ganguly et al., "National Clean Air Programme"; Barnes, "Policy disconnect"; and Schio and van Heur, "Politics of Expertise".
20. Borzel and Buzogany, "Environmental Organisations".
21. Carter, "Greening the Mainstream".
22. Svensson and Wahlström, "Climate Change or What?"
23. Ethical approval - Research Ethics Office reference number MRA-19/20-20924.
24. Krueger, *Focus Group*.
25. Smithson, "Focus Groups".
26. Attride-Stirling, "Thematic Networks".
27. McAdam, "Structural Analysis".
28. EEA, "Harm to Human Health"
29. Ipsos, "Earth Day".
30. Maltby et al., "Activism in Air Pollution".
31. Skjærseth, "EU Climate and Energy".
32. See 13.
33. Piotrowski, "Civil Society".
34. TVN24, *Poles Die Every Year*.

35. Kenney, *A Carnival of Revolution*, 254; Charkiewicz, "The Green Finale," 16; Carmin and Fagan, "Environmental Mobilisation," Szulecka and Szulecki, "Ecological Crises".
36. Carmin and Fagan, "Environmental Mobilisation".
37. Chimiak, "Polish Civil Society," 227.
38. Szulecka and Szulecki, "Rospuda River"; Domaradzka, "Right to the City"; Pluciński, "Forces of Altermodernization".
39. Benford and Snow, "Framing Processes," 611.
40. Gamson, *Talking Politics*, 111.
41. Benford and Snow, "Framing Processes," 613; Goffman, *Frame Analysis*; Lidskog and Sundqvist, "Transboundary Air Pollution".
42. Scheufele, "Framing as a Theory"; Myers et al., "A Public Health Frame"; Nisbet and Scheufele, "What's Next for Science".
43. Rossa-Roccor, Giang, and Kershaw, "Framing Climate Change," 554.
44. Nisbet, "Communicating Climate," 16; Lakoff, "We Frame the Environment"; Dasandi et al., "Positive, Global".
45. Goffman, *Frame Analysis*.
46. Cann, "Policy".
47. Spence and Pidgeon, "Framing Climate".
48. Bertolotti and Catellani, "Message Framing"; Wiest, Raymond and Clawson, "Opinion on Climate".
49. Dasandi et al., "Positive, Global".
50. Badullovich, Grant, and Colvin, "Framing Climate Change"
51. Rossa-Roccor, Giang, and Kershaw, "Framing Climate Change,"
52. Petrovic, Madrigano, and Zaval, "When Health Matters".
53. Nisbet, "Communicating Climate".
54. Maibach et al., "Reframing Climate Change".
55. Myers et al, "Public Health Frame".
56. Stokes and Warshaw, "Renewable Energy Policy Design".
57. Dasandi et al., "Positive, Global". Debono, Vincenti, and Calleja, "Survey of Public Perceptions"
58. Spence and Pidgeon, "Framing Climate," 657.
59. Nisbet, "Communicating Climate," 22.
60. Wiest, Raymond and Clawson, "Opinion on Climate".
61. Ding et al., "Support for Climate Policy".
62. McCright, Dunlap, and Xiao, "Support for Government Action"; Cann, "Policy"; Deryugina and Shurchkov, "The Effect of Information"; Lewandowsky, Gignac, and Vaughan, "Perceived Scientific Consensus"; Myers et al., "Simple Messages".
63. Kelly and Fussell, "Public Health".
64. Ibid., 641.; and Noel et al., "Perceptions of Air Pollution"
65. Yearley, "Lessons for Social Theory"
66. Guo and Li, "Air Pollution Risk Perception," 80
67. Hibbett, "Adapting to Threats"; Maltby, "Consensus and Entrepreneurship".
68. Calvillo, "Political Airs"; Oltra et al., "Urban Air Pollution".
69. Scott and Barnett, "Something in the Air".
70. Tu, "Combating air Pollution".
71. Ibid.
72. Mendez, "Assessing Local Climate".
73. Roggero et al, "Co-Benefits"
74. Maltby, "Consensus and Entrepreneurship"; Eckersley et al. "A New Framework".
75. Van Brussel and Huyse, "Citizen Science On," Loopmans et al., "Rethinking Environmental Justice".
76. Szulecka and Szulecki, "Ecological Crises"; Citkowska-Kimla, "Poland and the Problem."
77. Lillevik, *The fight*; Szulecka and Szulecki, "Ecological Crises"; Frankowski, "Citizen Engagement for Clean".
78. Szulecka and Szulecki, "Ecological Crises"; Rogala, "Coal and Conservativism"
79. Frankowski, "Citizen Engagement," 7.
80. Interview 9.

81. Małopolska Region, "Open Consultation Meeting"
82. Interview 9.
83. Interview 15.
84. Interview 26.
85. Interview 9.
86. Interview 15.
87. Lillevik, *The Fight*, 36.
88. https://healpolska.pl/kategoria/aktualnosci/powietrze/
89. Grobelski, "Becoming a Side," 253.
90. Interview 7.
91. KSA, "Interview with Kraków Smog".
92. Interview9.
93. Lillevik, *The fight,* 36.
94. Grobelski, "Becoming a Side," 258.
95. Frankowski, "Citizen Engagement," 4.
96. Correspondence with Smog Alert.
97. Interview 10.
98. Frankowski, "Citizen Engagement," 4.
99. Pazderski and Walczak, "Social Activity of Poles"; Chimiak, "Polish Civil Society".
100. Grobelski, "Becoming a Side," 274.
101. PSA's Magdalena Kozlowska, co-founder of KSA in Lillevik, *"The fight,"* 38.
102. Interviews 9 and 15.
103. Interview 9.
104. KSA, "Interview with Kraków Smog".
105. Interview 15.
106. Magdalena Kozłowska, in Lillevik, *"The Fight,"* 41.
107. KSA, "Interview with Kraków Smog".
108. Interviews 9 and 10.
109. KSA, "Interview with Kraków Smog".
110. Kelly and Fussell, "Public Health".
111. WHO, "7 Million Premature Deaths"
112. Adam Stantycz, one of the first medical professionals engaged in research surrounding health effects of air-pollution in Poland, in Lillevik, *The Fight*, 26.
113. Lillevik, *The Fight*, 26.
114. Grobelski, "Becoming a Side," 256.
115. Interview27.
116. Interview15.
117. KSA, "Interview with Kraków Smog".
118. Focus Group Participant 1.
119. Interview 11.
120. Ibid.
121. Focus Group Participant 2.
122. Focus Group Participant 3.
123. Focus Group Participant 4.
124. Interview 11.
125. Interview 26.
126. Interview 9.
127. Jolanta Sitarz, a Leader of the Zakopane Smog Alert, in Lillevik, *The Fight*, 62.
128. Grobelski, "Becoming a Side," 270.
129. Interview 17.
130. Ibid.
131. Interview 5.
132. Interview 30.
133. Interview 11.
134. Interview 16.
135. Interview 13.
136. Interview 16.

137. Interview 13.
138. Radosław Gawlik in Lillevik, *The Fight*, 63.
139. Interview 11.
140. Interview 11.
141. Interview 26.
142. Laudato Si' Movement, "clean Air Campaign"
143. Interview 5.
144. Piotr Siergiej in Lillevik, *The Fight*, 50.
145. Grobelski, "Becoming a Side," 60.
146. Michal Daniluk, PSA Activist in Warsaw in Lillevik, *The fight,* 66.
147. Interview 9.
148. Interview 16.
149. Interviews 8 and 28.
150. Interview 10.
151. KSA, "Interview with Kraków Smog".
152. Interview5; Małopolska, *XVIII/243/16*
153. See 110; Małopolska, *XXXII/452/17*.
154. Interviews 21 and 22.
155. Interview 6.
156. KSA, "Interview".
157. Riedel, "Green Conservatism".
158. McAdam, "Beyond Structural Analysis".
159. Maltby et al., "Activism in Air Pollution"; Marzecova and Husberg, "PM2. 5".
160. Buchanan, "Pollution and the Public".
161. Vachudova et al, "Civic Mobilisation Against".
162. Defined by Petrova and Tarrow as "the Ties—Enduring and Temporary—Among Organized Nonstate Actors and between Them and Political Parties, Power Holders, and Other Institutions".

Disclosure statement

Acknowledgment

Funding

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Appendix 1: List of interviewees

No.	Category of interviewee	Date of interview
1	Senior local government official (Central Poland)	28.10.2020
2	Regional government official (Southern Poland)	23.10.2020
3	Regional government official (Southern Poland)	23.10.2020
4	Regional government official (Southern Poland)	23.11.2020
5	Regional government official (Southern Poland)	8.03.2021
6	Regional government official (Southern Poland)	8.03.2021
7	Environmental activist (national)	30.10.2020
8	Environmental activist (national)	18.09.2020
9	Environmental activist (Southern Poland)	11.09.2020
10	Environmental activist (Southern Poland)	23.09.2020
11	Environmental activist (Central Poland)	07.10.2020
12	Environmental activist (National)	16.09.2020
13	Local government official & civil society activist (Southern Poland)	21.09.2020
14	Environmental activist (National)	22.09.2020
15	Environmental activist (National)	11.11.2020
16	Environmental activist (National)	12.01.2021
17	Air quality company in Poland	1.12.2020
18	Academic in Poland	30.09.2020
19	World Bank officer	06.01.2021
20	World Bank officer	2.11.2020
21	European Commission official	12.03.2021

Continued.

No.	Category of interviewee	Date of interview
22	European Commission official	19.04.2021
23	European Commission official	19.04.2021
24	EU institution official	16.02.2021
25	Civil servant	09.02.2021
26	Advisor to national politician, former activist	16.06.2021
27	Former senior national politician	17.06.2021
28	Senior regional politician (Southern Poland)	19.06.2021
29	Senior civil servant	23.06.2021
30	Senior local politician (Southern)	07.07.2021