

Poland

Local differences & the importance of cohesion

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The first squatting attempts in Poland were reported in 1991 in Wrocław¹ and squatting has spread to several Polish cities since.² As we will discuss further on in this article, squatting per se is not criminalized in the country and has been at times need-based, but mainly ideologically driven. Increasing attempts at re-privatization of the housing stock during the 2000s and complications in clarifying the ownership of buildings and land have contributed to the intensification of squatting in the country, by providing squatters with vacant buildings. Our ambition is to understand how the cohesion and durability of the squatting scene, that is, durability of relationships, their cohesiveness, and flexibility towards new members and influences, are affecting squatters' use of opportunity structures available to them in a particular setting. Opportunity structures are here defined as external structures that empower or constrain collective actors, and we are interested in how these are handled and used by squatters in two different settings. We hope to understand this by studying squatting in two Polish cities, Warsaw and Poznań, which are regarded as the most vibrant squatting environments.

The aim is to analyze opportunity structures that condition the emergence and development of squatting and how these opportunities are responded to and made use of by squatters. Our ambition is to understand why squatting has developed differently in the two cities by emphasizing the duration and cohesion of the squatting scene as pivotal for the different trajectories in squatting. With our cases we want to show that the

cohesion of the scene and its longevity mitigate and intensify some specific features of opportunity structures (political, legal, discursive, and economic) and result in somewhat diverse local developments of squatting.

The empirical foundations of this article consists of 40 interviews, of which 20 were conducted with squatting activists in Warsaw in 2013 and 20 in Poznań in the period of 2008–2013. Our interviews were semi-structured and conducted either at squats or in neutral locations, and lasted from 45 minutes to over two hours.³ For the protection of our interviewees we use a numbering system in the quotations. In our analysis the empirical material was cross-referenced with publications and videos released by and about the activists, in official documents, mainstream mass-media, social media and other Internet sites.

THE MAJORITY OF the squatters interviewed were in their twenties and thirties and many of them had a relatively long experience of squatting, mostly in Poland, but also abroad. Many of them were students, worked part time or in temporary arrangements, or owned small and project-based businesses. Their squatting

activism intersected with participation in anarchist groups, antifascist initiatives, and other activities that could be labeled as belonging to the leftist-libertarian family. Our ambition in the selection of interviewees has been to cover different perspectives on squatting in each city by choosing respondents with different experiences in squatting (different squats, duration of activism, gender and so on).

We begin our paper by

abstract

Two Polish cities, Warsaw and Poznań, are studied in the article to examine how external structures are handled and used by squatters in these two settings. The aim is to analyze opportunity structures that condition the emergence and development of squatting and how squatters respond to and utilize these opportunities. Our ambition is to understand why squatting has developed differently in the two cities by emphasizing the duration and cohesion of the squatting scene as pivotal for the different trajectories of squatting. It is argued in the article that the durability of the squatting environment abates tendencies to open the squatting scene to external coalitions and establish more institutionalized forms of political struggle.

KEYWORDS: squatting, Poland, opportunity structures, cohesion, durability.



The *Przychodnia* squat in Warsaw.

reviewing previous studies of squatting in post-socialist Europe and then get on to the topic of what conditions squatting in other parts of the world. We then present the theoretical framework guiding the analysis, by discussing the relations between the concepts of opportunity structures, along with the role of cohesion and durability for the use of opportunity structures by squatting activists. In the subsequent analysis, we argue that the stability and endurance of the squatting scene is crucial for more permanent squatting struggles. In the final section, we conclude that the durability of the squatting environment lessens the probability of opening to external coalitions and the use of more institutionalized forms of political struggle.

An under-researched part of Europe: Previous studies

Squatting in post-socialist Europe is under-studied and has rarely been treated and analyzed as a research topic. It has rather been indirectly described together with other social movements, collective actions, or cultural expressions, for instance the Central and Eastern European alterglobalization movement.⁴ There is, however, a steadily growing number of studies directly investigating the emergence and development of squatting in the region. Piotrowski⁵ studied squatting in three different countries in the area, Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic, and concluded that the main challenge for the development of squatting is the small size of left-wing movements and the squatting movement in particular in the region. Among the three countries, Poland was singled out as the one with most stable and vibrant squatting scene, largely due to the *Rozbrat* squat, founded in Poznań in 1994.⁶ Piotrowski argues that the relatively small scale (compared to their Western counterparts) of the Polish and Central and Eastern European squatting scenes was a result of the popular rejection of leftist ideology and radical politics.⁷

Both Żuk and Plucinski argue that squatting in Poland has been connected to the development of alternative culture in the

country during the 1980s.⁸ Its emergence during the 1990s and its novelty can partly be explained by the influences coming from the West after the systemic change. The structural conditions that Żuk distinguishes in his analysis of squatting's emergence in Poland are, the systemic change, the rise of capitalism, and the socio-economic changes that followed. A more recent glance at squatting is provided in our study⁹ in which we argue that squatting in Poland should be analyzed as a response – among others – to the housing situation in Poland (shortage of affordable housing, vacant buildings, privatization of the housing stock), to the lack of space for the development of alternative culture, and to the neoliberal urban governance reinforced in particular during the 2000s.¹⁰

There are many more studies on squatting in Western contexts (and in Western Europe and North America in particular), but those focusing on the structural conditions and opportunity structures facilitating/constraining squatting in specific contexts are in the minority. Pruijt describes how Amsterdam authorities have developed strategies to eliminate squatting by legalizing it, by turning the “buildings to established housing associations that concluded lease contracts with individual squatters”.¹¹ Katsiaficas as claims that the strategy used in Berlin was aimed at pacifying the squatting environment by creating a cleavage between the radical and moderate fractions of the squatting movement.¹² The activists that agreed to turn their squats into legalized *Wohnprojekte* had lost touch with the radical fraction of the movement, which refused to compromise with the authorities. Moreover, Holm and Kuhn argue that the squatting movement in Berlin in the 1980s contributed to the urban renewal of the city in a context of severe housing shortage, and to the legitimization crisis of housing policy.¹³ Guzman-Concha's quantitative study of squatting shows, furthermore, that the most common factors for the development of a strong squatting scene may be, youth unemployment, left-leaning environments, the presence of far-right groups and politics, and the degree of responsiveness of local authorities.¹⁴

Corr distinguishes various tactics used by squatters in different contexts. He mentions tactics in the spheres of legal regulations, media and cooperation, wider support, and so on.¹⁵ He describes how activists use constitutional law and litigation as a tactic to gain their goals. He also analyzes cases of state repression and how squatting and other land and tenants' movements have responded, arguing that repression "can bring into stark focus a previously obscured adversary, cementing solidarity between activists and those previously uninvolved"¹⁶ and in this way strengthen the movement. Martínez and Cattaneo describe on the basis of the Spanish case how the changing political climate has affected squatting and popularized this form of collective action, and see squatting as a reaction to structural inequalities, defining it as "an alternative way of living in the margins of the capitalist patterns, and a political experience of protesting and mobilizing through direct action".¹⁷ However, it is not only the openings in the *political opportunity* structures that condition squatting, and several researchers have shown that legal structures and squatters' responses to them may be equally important.¹⁸ A crucial factor in the cases described above has been, moreover, the wider support squatters could mobilize, including the support of local neighborhoods, wider society, and the media.

A majority of the aforementioned studies demonstrate how squatting and squatters respond to structural conditions. Most of them underline the economic vulnerability of squatters, the illegal nature of squatting, and the role of wider support (by the public and the media) in the success stories of squatting. Some show how squatters intervene in and help to change the structures of urban politics. Our ambition is to focus on the cohesion and longevity of the squatting environment and to investigate these characteristics' role in the development of squatting and the use of political, legal, economic, and discursive opportunity structures by squatters.

Opportunity structures and the relational perspective

In order to understand the conditions for the development of squatting in Poland and its different local trajectories, we use a theoretical structure known in social sciences as opportunity structures, which enlarge and restrict the ways in which collective actors function and develop. We propose to analyze collective action through the concept of opportunity structures.

Opportunity structures are in our understanding not limited to political dimensions; we also distinguish between political, legal, economic, and discursive opportunity structures for collective struggles. In our paper we stress the importance of social cohesion and durability permeating these opportunity structures, sometimes facilitating and sometimes mitigating the way in which these opportunities can be made use of by collective actors.

The *political opportunity structures* are usually defined as the degree of openness/closedness of the institutionalized political system, the stability of elites in the political system, the availability of elite allies, and the degree of state repression.¹⁹ They should also be understood as threats to which collective actors respond and react to. To this dimension, conditioning the work of social movements and other collective actors, we add the *legal opportunity structure*, which we treat as a separate type of opportunity structure, since collective actors can use it separately from the political opportunity structures in order to reach their goals.²⁰ *Economic opportunity structures* in our case refer to how collective actors use economic opportunities and strategies. The ability to mobilize resources can be regarded as crucial for the success or failure of collective actors to attain their goals of social/economic change.²¹ Economic opportunities, as well as other types of opportunity structures, can be related to legal and political opportunity structures.²² *Discursive opportunity structures* entail that which resonates as "reasonable" and "legitimate" among the wider public (or a specific target audience) in a specific context and have been used by researchers to analyze how "social movement frames are likely to have the greatest capacity to mobilize existing and new recruits, to convince the public of a movement's demands, and to persuade authorities to alter policy and practices in line with the movement's agenda".²³ Critics of the opportunity structures approach point out that the majority of research done using this approach is focused on organized groups aiming at political change and not on groups that are pushing for cultural change without identifying the state as its enemy (at least not explicitly).²⁴

WE CONSIDER THE political and legal opportunity structures to be the most important, and often intertwined, for the development of squatting on a national level, and more important than economic or discursive opportunity structures. However, looking into differences on a local level focuses our attention on the character of the squatting scene in terms of durability/establishment, and cohesion. Our theoretical contribution to the analysis of opportunity structures is a relational perspective with a focus on cohesion that permeates all opportunities and strategies undertaken by collective actors. We will argue that the cohesion and durability of the squatting scene are pivotal for the different development trajectories of squatting we have observed in Warsaw and Poznań. We suggest further that the stability and

endurance of the scene is crucial for a more permanent solution to squatting struggles.

Social relations take some time to build up and many scholars of social capital have emphasized their role in individuals' and groups' achievement of goals.²⁵ Our goal in this study is not to examine the social capital of squatting activists; rather we want to analyze how cohesion was built within the squatting scenes in the two cities and

“THE ABILITY TO MOBILIZE RESOURCES CAN BE REGARDED AS CRUCIAL FOR THE SUCCESS OR FAILURE OF COLLECTIVE ACTORS TO ATTAIN THEIR GOALS OF SOCIAL/ECONOMIC CHANGE.”

how they conceived and made use of opportunity structures. We use the concept of cohesion, to indicate the quality of relationships characterizing social groups. A high degree of cohesion among group members inclines them to put time and effort in each other and the group, to share knowledge, trust, and emotional involvement and to form a perception of collective identity. The durability of a group provides it with the stability needed for creating cohesive relationships. The more durable the relationships within a group are, the stronger trust, willingness to assist others, efficiency of communication, and sharing of knowledge becomes. When examining cohesion, we look for membership stability as opposed to rotation and turnover, inflow of new members to the group, and perceptions of unity versus “profiling” or internal diversification among squatters. When studying durability, we mainly focus on the lifespan of particular squats in each city along with the emergence of new squats. We argue that the more long-lasting and cohesive the scene has been, the more comfortable and less energy-demanding the social relations become. We claim that the less long-lasting the stability of the scene is, the more dynamic it becomes both internally and in relation to others. There are probably fewer rules governing relations and a greater probability of cooperation and coalition-building in relationships whose rules are newly established, developed, and codified. We believe that different conflicts within or between groups and individuals within a scene and conflicts with other actors pose important challenges to the ability to cooperate and build alliances.²⁶

Opportunity structures and squatting in Poland

In this section we focus on introducing how the different political, legal, economic, and discursive opportunity structures have posed constraints and/or opportunities for squatting in Poland. The political opportunity structure for squatting in Poland has in recent years been relatively favorable compared to other countries.²⁷ Since 2013, meetings have been initiated with the Minister of Transport, Construction, and Maritime Economy, Piotr Styczeń in which squatters, tenants and state authorities have discussed housing policies in the country.²⁸ Although the results of these meetings have been mostly insignificant in regard to housing policies, interactions of this kind between activists and decision-makers, with the support of the Civil Rights Ombudsman and media coverage, have resulted in the change of the Polish penal law, so that the harassment of tenants (carried out by so called “cleaners”) was made a criminal act in 2015. We can conclude that the political opportunity structures have not been completely closed for squatters in Poland. Polish squatters’ ambitions to challenge policies at the state level have been quite low, as they usually focus on challenging the local level of government.

Nevertheless, the political climate in Poland should be perceived as a threat to squatting rather than an opportunity. After 1989, Poland – together with most of CEE countries – witnessed a combination of influences of neoliberalism (in particular in economic terms) and right-wing conservatism. Right-wing youth



The Od:zysk squat in Poznań.

groups are more numerous and larger than the leftist ones, also the illegal occupation of property can be expected to receive little support from the general public.²⁹

Political structure is tightly intertwined with the legal structure, and the question of legalization of squatting is ever recurrent in the Polish case. Nevertheless the issue is solved each time on the local level, depending on the willingness and attitude of the local authorities towards squatting, and on the squatters’ willingness to cooperate with institutionalized actors and to institutionalize their own activities. What is important is that squatting is not criminalized in Poland – there is no law stating that squatting per se is a criminal act. However, there is a law against trespassing, anyone who trespasses risks fines, custodial sentence or up to one year’s imprisonment.³⁰

The *Act on the Protection of Tenants’ Rights* (2001/2010), the *Act on Housing Cooperatives* (2000) and the *Act on Property Rights* (1994) are important laws regulating the rights of tenants and use of property owned by others, and serve as substantial openings in the legal structure available to housing activists. The law on the protection of tenants gives the tenants the right to stay in a place, even if the owner wants to remove them, so that eviction must be preceded by a lawsuit. The owner is not allowed to enter the place unless the tenants let him in. However, in particular situations when the owner suspects an emergency or the destruction of property, she or he is legally allowed to enter the property, but only with the assistance of police. Squatters and tenants have often faced illegal practices by law enforcement and by private security companies and owners, however. At the same time the Polish squatters have become increasingly proficient in their use of litigation and knowledge of legal procedures.

As for economic opportunity structures, whenever economic support is needed, squatters use crowd-funding tools, benefit events, or loans within the squatting scene to cover their needs. Domestic economic opportunity structures were closed to Polish squatters, or more precisely: were not considered an important part of their struggles. Economic opportunity structures are

usually the field in which one of the key squatting principles – Do It Yourself (DIY) – is seen in action. DIY is not only a way to overcome budget restrictions, but also a form of prefigurative politics when politicized squatting understood is as an attempt to ‘decolonize everyday life’.³¹

The discursive opportunity structures for squatting in Poland have been for the most part negative towards squatting. In times of threats (evictions, attacks on squats, harassment of tenants by private landlords), media reports have been somewhat more sympathetic towards squatters. However, a common critique against mainstream media among squatters is their tendency to portray squatting as a “subcultural” phenomenon, depriving it its political meaning. Squatters testify that knowledge about squatting among the wider public is still limited and often associated with “uncivil” and “deviant” forms of collective action, interpreting squatting as unacceptable breach of property rights. In our specific case studies below, we will explain how squatters try to influence public opinion and strategically use the media in order to put pressure on the authorities. However, we will not give a systematic analysis of how media (or any other discourse) portray squatting, as that would require a separate study.

Squatting in Warsaw: dynamic but inconstant

In this section we describe the case of Warsaw’s squatting scene and how it has evolved chronologically, by examining shifting opportunity structures and how these were used by squatters in the city. We focus in particular on the cohesion and durability of squatting in the city and how it has affected the use of opportunity structures.

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

When the eviction of one of the most long-lasting local squats, *Elba*, took place in 2012, after over eight years of existence, it elicited great support in a demonstration following the eviction. Two thousand supporters gathering at a demonstration was an extraordinary number for this kind of radical left-wing movement in the Polish context. The remarkable support for the squat was followed by considerable local and national media attention and a willingness on the part of local politicians to start a dialogue with the squatters in

the city. The political situation was described by the squatters as “favourable: high interest from media; even the politicians reached out to somehow help this squatting movement”.³²

What happened was that local district authorities of Śródmieście proposed to talk to squatters when the eviction was followed by the opening of a new squat, *Przychodnia*, in a municipal building in the central part of the city. These talks were shortly moved to the city level, where the Center for Social Communication took over the meetings. The squatters intentionally invited the media to the talks with local authorities that “turned it into quite a publicized event”.³³ Another strategy when the negotiations with the local authorities began was to bring representatives of different squatting teams in the city as well as representatives of the tenants’ organizations, to the meetings with authorities. In that way the claims of the squatters were not only publicized by the invited media, but also broadened to deal with housing policy and tenants’ rights. The squatters interviewed perceived the position of the local authorities as pressured by the positive media coverage. The authorities were also perceived as responsible in their position as capital city for setting a good example for other Polish cities and maintain a positive image. “They could have smashed us, because they had the force, but then their image would have been destroyed”,³⁴ one of the squatters concluded. As a result of these talks, a new social center, *Aktywny Dom Alternatywny* [Active Alternative House] (*A.D.A.*) was opened in April 2014, after long negotiations between the squatters and the local authorities. The new space was not a squat, but a legalized space; the requirement was that the activists founded an association in exchange for a lease. The stability of a legalized space attracted some of the Warsaw squatters, especially those with previous experiences of evictions, while others perceived *A.D.A.* as complementary (and not strictly comparable, as it could never become a residential space and was legally obtained) to the activity of other squats in the city.

The legal situation of the other squats was quite different. There are two squats located centrally in Warsaw that are part of the complicated re-privatization processes going on in the city (resulting from the nationalization of land and buildings during state socialism). One squatted space is privately owned, another is in a municipally owned building that stands on privately owned land. The opening of one of these places was accompanied by an awareness of the legal status of the building and of not breaking the law against trespassing, as the space was opened for anyone to enter; “We were easily able to get inside, we didn’t even break any locks or anything”.³⁵

One of these squats initiated cooperation with tenants’ organizations in the city and legitimated its existence in the light of tenants’ rights. The rights of tenants have been invoked repeatedly by a group of squatters in Warsaw, and when the winter protection period³⁶ started, many of the city’s squatters let out a sigh of relief. Moreover, any attempts to trespass in

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The social center A.D.A., *Aktywny Dom Alternatywny* [Active Alternative House], in Warsaw.

the squats have been actively avoided by barricading the entrances and calling for media attention in cases of threats and for sympathizers and other activists to support the squats by acting as witnesses or by physically blocking access to the squats. Recently, in October 2014, a threat to auction off one of the squatted buildings came closer. The municipality wanted to put the building up for auction, as the owner is insolvent. But the auction was cancelled due to a blockade of the attempt to appraise the building and after the partial repayment of debts by the owner.

For the other squat, the legal situation looked different. Its official opening was moved forward from the originally scheduled date due to the positive media coverage of squatting at the time (2012). The legal aspect played an important role in the decision to open earlier, as the eviction of *Elba* was perceived as illegal and improperly handled by the police, presenting a favorable momentum for the squatters. The opening was a strategic move at a time when “it seemed to us that public opinion was on our side”.³⁷

THE ILLEGALITY OF the police operations in the *Elba* eviction, as well as the positive public opinion, demonstrated how legal opportunity structures were used by the squatters at a time when the discursive opportunity structures were favorable. To squat the municipal building was also a tactical choice because of its complicated ownership status, with “the land belonging to private owners, in a building belonging to and managed by the Office of Property Management”.³⁸ It also shows how deliberately the discursive opportunity structures were treated and perceived by the squatters and the role of mainstream media for the more positive image of squatters. Media strategies were well developed among the squatters in Warsaw and there were rules on who was to represent the squatters in mainstream media, what was to be said, which topics should be avoided, which journalists were “trustworthy”, and so on, in order to retain control over the message that was sent to the public. The main concern was to avoid an exoticization of squatting, or as one of the activists put it, “writing about [a squat] as a zoo full of monkeys”,³⁹ which was perceived as a tactic of denying squatting its political meaning.

The trailer camp’s legal situation is different as the trailers are privately owned by the activists and stand on squatted municipal

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

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

For many years now I’ve been noticing such tendencies among people ... and it’s great that when there are many places, as there have been in Warsaw for a while, everything is profiled. Some will feel better in *Syrena*, others in *Elbląska*, yet others in *Czarna Śmierć* or *Przychodnia*, and so on.⁴⁰

The eviction did not only result in a more pragmatic attitude among squatters in Warsaw. It was also interpreted as an opportunity to start squatting again and change some of the “old” attitudes. One such critique of the old environment addresses its opacity to new members and ideas (described by one of the squatters as “suffocating in their own world”).⁴¹ The eviction of 2012 and the opening of a new squat re-defined squatting rules. The opening of a legal space, *A.D.A.*, also contributed to broadening potential support for squatting in the city because

its activities were open to all interested persons, and because it targeted a broader audience of visitors than the squatted spaces. It provided a meeting space for squatters, former squatters, and anyone interested in visiting or on organizing an activity.

The main disputes in the squatting environment in the city concerned legalization and autonomy, and also the balance of political versus cultural activism. However, the attitude towards negotiations with local authorities was shared by most squatters in the city. When the negotiations were perceived as securing or prolonging squatting (by mutual agreements or legalization), or as giving it broader resonance, they were deemed positive. The pragmatic aspect of this attitude should be assessed in relation to the turbulent past of squatting in the city and the lack of stability. The instability in turn created a more dynamic and more flexible attitude, both among the squatters themselves and in their increasingly open relations to the authorities and other actors such as tenants.⁴²

The development of squatting in Poznań: Durable with static tendencies

In this section the case of Poznań and its squatting scene is presented. It is structured chronologically and aimed at investigating the durability and cohesion of squatting in the city in relation to shifts in local opportunity structures and their use by squatters.

Poznań hosts one of the oldest still functioning squats in Poland and in Europe, *Rozbrat*. Its name can be translated as an attempt to peacefully disconnect from reality and make peace with it. As the authors of the website for the place claim, “The original idea of *Rozbrat* was to set up a commune composed of people who did not approve of the world based on ‘the rat race’”. Then it has evolved and developed: the place itself was changing, different people got involved in the formation. The goal has broadened from residing to carrying on cultural, social and political work⁴³. Established in 1994, it became a stable institution on the local cultural and political maps.⁴⁴ The old industrial buildings located in a green area of town close to the city center were



Poster advertising a demonstration to defend Rozbrat in May 2009.



Mural at Rozbrat squat, Poznań.

first occupied for residential purposes by a few activists upon returning from trips around Europe. It became open to the public in 1995 and has since hosted concerts (around 900 according to the squatters), talks, lectures, exhibitions, sports events, and much more. Over many years, being the only alternative space in town, it has become a home for a bike shop, a food-not-bombs collective, an anarchist social club and library, a publishing house, and recently the martial arts club “Freedom Fighters”. Since the beginning, *Rozbrat* has been closely connected to punk rock culture (becoming an important venue for punk gigs) and to anarchists (mainly the *Anarchist Federation* and for a short while some splinter groups also), who hold their meetings there and have thus defined the place politically.

Now, out of around 20 people living there, a majority belong to anarchist or anarcho-feminist groups who already were politically engaged before living at the squat. When threats were issued in 2009 to have the grounds on which *Rozbrat* is located auctioned off, a massive campaign was launched that culminated in two demonstrations, in March and May 2009, that gathered around 1500 and 900 participants respectively (numbers rarely seen in Poland for this kind of left-wing mobilization). In the end the place was not sold and legally remains an asset of a small cooperative bank, as there were no potential buyers for the lot during the auction. The activists claim this was to a large extent because of their strategy “scaring the potential investors”⁴⁵ away, but it also coincided with a decline in the real estate market in Poznań.

IN 2013, A YOUNG group of activists tried to occupy a building in Poznań and create a squat called *Warsztat* [Workshop] but were evicted a few days before the official opening by a counter-terror squad of the police.⁴⁶ Previous squatting attempts in Poznań (*Magadan*, *Żydowska*) were either short-lived or lacked an underlying political message. The same group of activists that founded *Warsztat* later occupied an abandoned commercial building in the Old Town market and founded *Od:zysk* in 2013 (the name is a play of words: *odzysk* in Polish denotes “recycling” or “recovery”, *zysk* means “profit”). Although the group was closely connected to the anarchist and *Rozbrat* environments, it differed: the average age was much lower (in the early twenties) and the group seemed to be more focused on cultural and identity issues rather than class and workers’ struggles. *Od:zysk* organized several LGBT film screenings, a queer-fest and a DIY sex toy workshop. For the anarchists and squatters belonging to the “older generation”, “queer topics are secondary and a distraction from class struggles and issues of capitalism”.⁴⁷ The building was sold to a company by the bank owning the mortgage at an auction in 2014. After the auction, the new owner announced that he wanted to make the squatters leave on peaceful terms and included a financial offer. As of September 2015, the two sides have reached an agreement and the new owner of the building has declared that he will donate 125,000 PLN (about 30 000 EUR) to the Wielkopolskie Stowarzyszenie Lokatorów and that the squatters will leave the building as it is. This turn of events has caused many heated debates, within the activists’ milieu and in the



Demonstration in defense of *Rozbrat* in Poznań on March 20, 2010.



PHOTO: KOLEKTYW ROZBRAT

mainstream media. At the same time, the city authorities began to look for vacant dwellings where the squatters could move, but none of the places offered met the squatters' requirements (due to unclear legal status, or the buildings' function). The emergence of the new squatted social center "became a strong sign to the authorities and to the people of Poznań. It showed that there is a movement in the city and that it's quite strong".⁴⁸ The local media have approached the new initiative rather sympathetically:

The building was empty for many years and was decaying. A few months ago, in late autumn last year, a group entered the building who now call themselves *Kolektyw Od:zysk* – young anarchists, independent cultural animators, artists. Gradually they cleared the building and made necessary repairs, arranged the space for cultural and social activities, and settled down.⁴⁹

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

In early 2013, another place joined the alternative environment of Poznań. A group of activists from both squats bought a space in the city center and opened an anarchist bookstore and café named *Zemsta* [Revenge]. Organized as a social cooperative, it is comprised of people from both squats and has taken over the role of an "open" space, hosting numerous art exhibitions, talks, book presentations, film screenings, etc. *Zemsta* is financed through selling books, fairtrade coffee, and lately vegan lunches. As one of the founders described it, "This is a social cooperative. We established it as a political response, but in an economic context, and we are using it for particular goals [...] We want to create economic conditions that will allow us to put something in the pot. People go to protests, put up posters, but between activities you also need to live somehow and for some of us this space provides such an opportunity".⁵⁰ *Zemsta* is

therefore not only an example of prefigurative leftist-libertarian politics, but also provides a purely economic function, supporting some of the members of the scene and occasionally providing a space for activities, in particular art shows, film screenings, discussions, and lectures.

The new developments on the map of social activism in Poznań lead to a division of labor between the spaces. *Rozbrat* remains a punk-rock party and concert venue and the gallery there has been transformed into a martial arts gym, while many art events are now taking place at *Zemsta*, as are open public discussions. All the places are self-sufficient, relying on benefit events and "membership dues". Anarchist press material and books are also circulated, and other income-generating events are held (such as the bike shop). However, despite (or perhaps thanks to) this internal division of labor, the emergence of the new spaces has strengthened the scene's relations, allowing it to reach wider audiences and disarming potential internal conflicts focused on the direction of development.

The city of Poznań is dominated by conservative public opinion and the 16 years in office (1998–2014) of the former mayor, Ryszard Grobelny. The conservatism dates back to the late 19th century when the Polish nationalist party – *Narodowa Demokracja* – had a stronghold in Poznań and prepared the successful Wielkopolska Uprising of 1918, that resulted in the reunification of the Wielkopolska region with the rest of the country in 1919. As a voice of dissent in the public discourse (directed mostly against the local authorities, but also the Catholic Church and conservative elites), squatters and anarchists have a strong position in Poznań's media and public opinion, which is unusual for Polish cities. They are not only positively portrayed by some media (in particular *Gazeta Wyborcza*), but are also supported by some of the academics who are looking for opposition to the conservative local Academic Civic Club. The radical right-wing movement consists of few groups, each ranging from a handful to two dozen activist members, often harassed by the local anti-fascist group. Though their actions are usually limited, *Rozbrat* has faced two neo-Nazi attacks in 1996 and 2013. In the first, a person was injured and the perpetrators received prison sen-

tences. The second, during a family picnic at the squat, was successfully repelled. Because of the threat of police intervention and attacks by right-wing groups or nationalists, the buildings have been fortified, with many windows boarded up and doors opened for short time slots during public events. On June 7, 2015, during the celebrations of the championship victory of the local football club, around 40 neo-Nazis attacked *Zemsta*, breaking the windows and throwing a flare inside. Later a crowd of around 350 people attacked *Od:zysk*. The attackers broke windows, tried to break in and set the place on fire, and later clashed with the police who arrived on the scene.⁵¹ These acts were played down by the local authorities.

For years local authorities had a reputation of being largely unresponsive to grassroots mobilizations. With regard to squatting, the only exceptions were the actions of the former deputy mayor, Maciej Frankiewicz, who suggested negotiations with squatters and even visited *Rozbrat* once. However, these attempts ended with his tragic death in 2009. Relations with the police are a bit tenser as the squatters often complain about repression. Mostly, the detention of activists has resulted in court cases, and in the last 15 years all but one were won by the squatters, who not only have a sympathizing lawyer but have become more and more skilled in litigation and legal practice.

In December 2011, *Wielkopolskie Stowarzyszenie Lokatorów* (the Wielkopolska Tenants' Association, WSL) was established. It consisted not only of tenants, but also numerous other activists with squatters/anarchists comprising the core group. The legal framework of an association was used in order to gain legal rights (in particular, the right to request public information) and occasionally to collect material resources or put pressure on the media and public opinion. The creation of WSL has opened possibilities for alliance building between squatters and at the same time served as an attempt to position them as part of the civil society rather than a countercultural movement always opposing the authorities. It was also a part of a broader strategy described by one of the activists as follows: "We are looking for existing social conflicts, like that of tenants or some others, and we enter these conflicts as a player. Then we try to aggregate the conflict, make it more visible to the public. And we are trying to frame it in our way, so it is connected with our struggle".⁵² Cooperation with tenants allowed a framing of the privatization of municipal housing in anti-capitalist and anti-gentrification terms familiar to the squatters and anarchists. Local media usually treats the actions of the squatters not only as tenants' issues but as a liberal and leftist voice in discussions on the local level, as a sort of counterbalance to the dominant neoliberal-conservative discourse.

Conclusions

On the basis of our two cases, Warsaw and Poznań, we suggest that the stability and cohesion of the squatting scenes have resulted in squatters avoiding institutionalized channels to make use of political opportunity structures. They

demonstrate that when structural threats break the longevity of a scene the relations and attitudes between the activists and with others outside of the squatting scene, become more dynamic and open towards new members and towards profiling within the scene, legalization, and negotiation with representatives of the institutionalized political system. By comparing political opportunity structures in the two cities, we learned that cohesion and durability among collective actors affects the way they react to and use more institutionalized channels in their struggle. We observed that openness towards negotiations, cooperation, new members, and external influences characterized more unstable settings where the squatting scene was repeatedly threatened.

Legal opportunity structures are closely connected to political opportunities and were used somewhat differently by squatters in the cities studied. The more unstable situation in Warsaw forced squatters to look for legal solutions that could provide them with more stability (such as the negotiation of a legal space with the municipality, negotiation about lease on squatted land, and taking over a municipal building) and thus a more pragmatic attitude. This pragmatization of the scene in Warsaw was also reflected in more flexible demands on the cohesion of the scene. Discursive opportunity structures were used similarly by squatters in Warsaw and Poznań; however, the stability of the Poznań scene (along with some other factors such as the size of the counter-movement and, the size and history of the city) was reflected in more positive media coverage and media experience among the activists.

IN THE CASE OF Warsaw, we have argued that the re-configuration of the squatting scene after the closing of the squat *Elba* in 2012, resulted in several profiled squats (and one social center) opening up. Most of them set new rules, included new members, developed specific "profiles" among existing squats, and also opened up towards more institutionalized activity (in particular *A.D.A.*) which we interpret as a move towards a more flexible attitude among squatters in the city. In the case of Poznań, on the other hand, the stable existence of *Rozbrat* since 1994, the lesser threat posed by extreme right-wing movements, and the local acceptance (by some of the media as well as the public) of squatting in the city have created an established group of squatters with stable relationships, less prone to look for potential allies or influences from outside. In this way the position, ideology, and ability to cooperate among the squatters in Poznań were never overtly or repeatedly challenged, which further stabilized social cohesion within the local squatting environment over time.

We interpret the opening up towards new members and towards negotiations with local authorities in the case of Warsaw as a tactical move to make use of political opportunity structures available at a specific point in time. In the case of Poznań, we have observed that the durability of squatting resulted in an abated inclination of

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the scene to open to external coalitions, institutional activity or re-configuration. Re-configuration and more dynamic and flexible social relations tend to broaden the demands put forward, as well as their impact on, in particular, political opportunity structures available to squatters. ✖

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- 3 The criteria for choosing squatting activists for interviews were threefold: (1) identified themselves as squatters, (2) they had been a part of a squatting collective (recognized by others as squatters) living at a squat in the city at some point in time, and (3) were still active in the squatting scene in the city (although not necessarily living on a squat) at the time of the interview, in order to be able to reflect upon the recent developments within the movement. Interview questions covered activists' perceptions of their engagement, how they perceived the activity of their squats, and the more informal or personal features of their engagement and social relations. The interviews were transcribed and systematically coded by the authors (content analysis) in order to develop themes. Because of consent agreements, the interview material for each city was analyzed separately by the authors, and the codes and themes developed in the first stage of analysis were subsequently compared in a joint analysis.
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The remains of the *Klizma* squat.

