STRONG LEADERS, WEAK CIVIL SOCIETY? THE IMPACT OF PARTY LEADERSHIP ON DEPOLITICIZATION IN POLAND

Abstract:
The article investigates the impact of centralized party leadership on Poland's depoliticization of civil society. Focusing on political figures such as Jarosław Kaczyński and Donald Tusk, it explores how hierarchical governance and personal leadership styles have reshaped political parties, reduced grassroots participation, and marginalized independent civil society organizations. This transformation has led to diminished democratic engagement and heightened societal polarization. The study critically analyses the implications of these leadership trends for democratic norms and civil society resilience, offering insights into the broader challenges faced by post-communist democracies. Recommendations include fostering inclusivity in governance, revitalizing civil society, and mitigating polarizing leadership effects to support Poland's democratic trajectory.

1. Introduction
The interplay between political leadership and civil society in Poland underscores critical dynamics in the context of post-communist democratization. The emergence of strong, centralized leadership styles has significantly influenced the vitality of civil society, with profound implications for democratic governance, public accountability, and participatory

engagement. This relationship reveals how centralized leadership practices contribute to the depoliticization of civic engagement and public life, shaping the democratic trajectory of the nation.

Post-communist political leadership in Poland is characterized by the concentration of power within party structures and the personalization of authority. Leaders such as Jarosław Kaczyński and Donald Tusk exemplify these trends through their hierarchical leadership styles, which prioritize electoral success and party cohesion but often marginalize grassroots participation and reduce internal party democracy (Kasińska-Metryka, 2021; Ekiert & Kubik, 2017). This centralization diminishes the role of civil society as a space for public accountability and pluralistic dialogue, exacerbating political polarization and societal divisions.

Strong leadership has been widely explored in political science, particularly its implications for democratic backsliding and depoliticization. It's characterized by the concentration of decision-making power within a single individual or a small group, often accompanied by the personalization of political authority (Passarelli, 2015). This phenomenon has been observed in various political systems, including Poland, where leaders such as Jarosław Kaczyński have come to embody the centralizing tendencies of contemporary political parties. Such leadership styles often bypass traditional mechanisms of accountability and oversight, undermining institutional checks and balances critical to democratic governance (Kasińska-Metryka, 2021). While strong leadership can provide stability during times of uncertainty, it often emphasizes efficiency and decisiveness at the expense of inclusivity and participatory governance (Passarelli, 2015). In Poland, this phenomenon has been evident in the erosion of democratic norms and practices, as judicial independence, press freedom, and civil liberties have been weakened under the guise of reforms aimed at

consolidating state power (Piotrowski, 2020; Fomina & Kucharczyk, 2016).

Depoliticization serves as both a strategy and an outcome of centralized leadership. It involves shifting political decision-making from public arenas to technocratic or bureaucratic domains, effectively reducing citizen participation and oversight (Flinders & Buller, 2006; Hay, 2014). Strong leaders often utilize depoliticization as a strategy to neutralize dissent and maintain control over contentious issues. For example, by framing certain policy areas as matters requiring expert management rather than public deliberation, leaders can sideline opposition and limit democratic engagement.

In Poland, this dynamic is evident in the increasing centralization of power within political parties and the marginalization of civil society actors. Research indicates that strong party leadership often correlates with declining levels of civic engagement and political participation (Howard, 2003). This decline is particularly concerning in the context of Poland's post-communist transition, where civil society was once a vital force in resisting authoritarian rule and advocating for democratic reform. Political leaders have utilized depoliticization to frame contentious issues as technical challenges, sidelining public debate and reinforcing centralized control. For example, reforms in judicial governance have been presented as administrative necessities, bypassing meaningful civic deliberation (Żuk, 2020).

Civil society, traditionally regarded as a cornerstone of democratic systems, has experienced significant challenges in Poland's evolving political landscape. Defined broadly, civil society encompasses a wide array of organizations and networks, including non-governmental organizations (NGOs), community groups, labor unions, and advocacy coalitions. These entities serve as intermediaries between the state and individuals, empowering citizens to influence policy, advocate for their interests, and hold leaders accountable (Howard, 2003).

Once a vibrant force in resisting authoritarianism and advocating for democratic reform, Polish civil society has become increasingly fragmented and professionalized. While some organizations have adapted by focusing on service provision or engaging with international partners, others have actively resisted depoliticization through grassroots mobilization and advocacy. Protests against judicial reforms and restrictions on reproductive rights illustrate the resilience of civil society in defending democratic principles despite attempts to delegitimize such movements (Grabowska-Moroz & Sniadach, 2021; Arato, 1981). The interplay between strong party leadership and the declining strength of civil society raises critical questions about the health of Poland's democratic institutions and the long-term viability of its participatory mechanisms.

The weakening of civil society has far-reaching implications for democracy. Reduced civic engagement and public participation hinder the mechanisms necessary for holding leaders accountable and fostering collective action. Furthermore, aligning certain civil society actors with political factions undermines their independence, further eroding public trust and the legitimacy of civic organizations (Howard, 2003). The narrowing of civic spaces under strong leadership exacerbates these trends, creating a feedback loop in which depoliticization and centralization mutually reinforce one another.

Understanding the relationship between strong party leadership, depoliticization, and civil society is essential for addressing the broader challenges facing Poland's democracy. While not inherently undemocratic, strong leadership carries risks of marginalizing public participation and undermining institutional checks and balances. By examining these dynamics in Poland, this study contributes to the broader literature on political leadership and democratic resilience, offering insights into the interplay between centralized governance and the vitality of civil society.

The analyses presented in this article are based on a functional approach. Functionalism is a variant of systems analysis (Easton, 1957; Szacki, 2002; Dahl, Stinebrickner, 2002) that focuses on the interdependencies between phenomena, actors, and the functions they serve for each other, rather than on the structural delineation of elements, as is the case in classical systems analysis (Wróbel 1992). In this case, the functional approach is applied to reflect on the impact of strong party leadership on inclusivity, depoliticization, and the dynamics of civil society.

The authors recognize that these elements go through various phases, with the activity of civil society being weaker or stronger depending on the political context. The focus, however, is on the model of party leadership itself. This undertaking also necessitates a historical analysis to outline the context in which contemporary leadership operates (Tilly, 2001). Examples of political party leaders in modern Poland will be cited, albeit anecdotally, to fit within the scope of a scholarly article. Similarly, comparative analysis with countries from the region will be used only anecdotally, referencing cases that are relevant due to shared experiences, historical proximity, and cultural backgrounds (Dowding 2016). The goal is to provide a broader context for the phenomena under analysis.

It should also be noted that this article represents merely an outline of the issues, intended to serve as a starting point for further reflection and research on depoliticization and civil society in connection with the leadership model. A comprehensive analysis would likely require not one but several monographs. The authors are fully aware of the article's limitations and scope and consciously aim to set a direction for further research within the framework of concepts such as democratic backsliding, anti-politics, depoliticization, and civil society.

2. Centralization and Personalization: Transformations in Leadership Styles and Civil Society in Post-Communist Poland

The political and societal transformations in post-communist Poland have been profoundly influenced by evolving leadership styles and their impact on civil society. From the collaborative and inclusive approaches of the early transition period to the increasingly centralized and personalized models of recent decades, these shifts reflect broader regional trends in Central and Eastern Europe.

2.1. From Fragmentation to Centralization: The Evolution of Party Leadership in Post-Communist Poland

Since the post-communist transition, the evolution of party leadership in Poland highlights a significant shift toward centralization and personalization of authority within political parties. This development, consistent with broader regional trends in Central and Eastern Europe, has profoundly shaped the mechanisms of party governance, redefining relationships between leaders, party members, and the electorate.

In the immediate post-communist era, Polish political leadership reflected a fragmented and ideologically diverse landscape as new parties emerged to replace the communist monopoly. Early leaders, such as Lech Wałęsa and Tadeusz Mazowiecki, often came from dissident movements like Solidarność, embodying collective resistance to authoritarianism and commitment to democratic reform (Millard, 2009; Cf. Sielski 2020). However, the fluid nature of the political system in the 1990s, characterized by weak party institutionalization and coalition-driven governance, limited leaders' ability to centralize authority.

The early 2000s marked a turning point with the consolidation of dominant parties such as the Civic Platform (PO) and Law and Justice (PiS), which brought about more centralized leadership styles (Kasińska-Metryka, 2021; Pacześniak, 2022).

Leaders such as Jarosław Kaczyński of PiS and Donald Tusk of PO exemplify this transition. Kaczyński transformed PiS into a tightly centralized organization, with decision-making and ideological direction concentrated in his hands. This centralization ensured strict party discipline but marginalized dissent and limited internal pluralism (Passarelli, 2015; Górka, 2013). Similarly, Tusk leveraged his political capital to consolidate control within the PO, fostering electoral success while sidelining grassroots involvement and broader member engagement (Blondel & Thiébault, 2010).

Institutional factors, including Poland's proportional representation system and the reliance on party lists for candidate selection, have further incentivized centralized leadership. Strong leaders have used their control over candidate selection and resource distribution to reinforce loyalty and maintain power. State subsidies for political parties have strengthened the role of central leadership in allocating resources, thereby diminishing the autonomy of local party structures (Howard, 2003; Koźmiński, 2015).

While centralized leadership has contributed to party stability and electoral efficiency, it has also had significant implications for democratic governance and civil society. The concentration of authority within leaders has often sidelined grassroots participation and weakened the role of rank-and-file members in shaping policy. Local party structures, increasingly dependent on central leadership, have seen their influence diminish, exacerbating political disengagement at the community level (Kasińska-Metryka, 2021). Additionally, the personalization of leadership has deepened political polarization. Leaders like Kaczyński and Tusk have shaped political discourse around sharp ideological divides, mobilizing their bases while alienating broader constituencies (Piotrowski, 2020).

These trends mirror patterns of democratic backsliding observed across Central and Eastern Europe. Strong leaders

frequently employ populist rhetoric to consolidate power, delegitimize opposition, and justify weakening institutional checks and balances. In Poland, this dynamic has limited internal party democracy and contributed to broader challenges in sustaining democratic institutions and civil society (Fomina & Kucharczyk, 2016; Żuk, 2020).

The evolution of party leadership in Poland from the post-communist transition to the present illustrates a decisive shift toward centralization and personalization. While these trends have fostered organizational stability and electoral success, they have also raised concerns about the participatory nature of Polish politics and the resilience of its democratic institutions. Understanding these developments is critical to assessing the broader implications of leadership styles for Poland's political trajectory and depoliticization.

2.2. Fluctuations in Civic Engagement: The Evolution of Civil Society in Poland

The historical development of civil society in Poland reveals significant fluctuations in civic participation, shaped by the country's political transitions, societal transformations, and economic conditions. From its formative role in resisting authoritarianism during the communist era to its more fragmented and professionalized state, civil society in Poland reflects the complex interplay of grassroots activism, state-society relations, and broader socio-political dynamics.

Polish civil society's contemporary roots can be traced to the Solidarity (Solidarność) movement of the 1980s, which exemplified the power of collective action in challenging the communist regime (Arato, 1981; Gliński, 2011). As a broad-based social movement, Solidarność mobilized diverse segments of society, from workers and intellectuals to students and clergy, to demand political reform and greater civil liberties. This period represented a zenith of civic participation, characterized by high social trust, solidarity, and a shared commitment to democratic

ideals. Solidarity's success in pressuring the communist regime to negotiate the Round Table Agreements and pave the way for democratic elections in 1989 underscored the critical role of civil society in Poland's transition to democracy.

However, the post-communist era brought new challenges to the vitality of civil society. The rapid political and economic transformations of the 1990s, including the introduction of market reforms and the institutionalization of democratic governance, shifted the focus of many civil society actors. Organizations central to the anti-communist struggle faced difficulties adapting to the new democratic context, as their agendas became less unified and their constituencies fragmented (Howard, 2003; Gliński, 2011). Moreover, the professionalization of the non-governmental sector introduced a new dynamic, with many organizations increasingly relying on external funding from international donors, which often prioritized service delivery over grassroots mobilization (Piotrowski, 2020).

Civic participation in Poland during the 1990s and early 2000s also reflected broader trends of declining political engagement across post-communist societies (Kákai & Bejma, 2022; Gliński, 2011). This period saw a significant decrease in voter turnout, political party membership, and civic association participation, often attributed to disillusionment with the outcomes of democratic and economic reforms. While some civil society organizations thrived, particularly those focusing on social services and advocacy for marginalized groups, the overall landscape of civic participation became more fragmented and less politically engaged.

The rise of strong political leaders in the 2000s further influenced Poland's civil society trajectory. Leaders such as Jarosław Kaczyński and Donald Tusk leveraged their authority to centralize power within their parties and shape public discourse, often framing civil society actors as allies or adversaries in broader ideological battles. This polarization has

had a dual effect on civil society: On the one hand, it has mobilized specific segments of the population around contentious issues, such as judicial independence and women's rights; on the other, it has marginalized organizations that sought to remain apolitical or non-aligned (Kasińska-Metryka, 2021).

In recent years, civic activism has had a resurgence in response to perceived threats to democratic norms and institutions. Protests against controversial judicial reforms, restrictions on reproductive rights, and efforts to curtail media freedom have drawn large crowds, particularly among younger generations and urban populations. These movements highlight civil society's continued potential to counter political power, even in the context of declining institutional trust and increasing polarization.

Nevertheless, challenges remain for Polish civil society. The growing alignment of specific civil society organizations with political parties risks reducing their independence and credibility. At the same time, restrictive government policies and legal frameworks have sought to limit the activities of critical NGOs. Additionally, the decline of traditional civic organizations, such as labor unions and community associations, has left gaps in the infrastructure of civil society, particularly in rural and economically disadvantaged areas (Howard, 2003).

The historical development of civil society in Poland illustrates a dynamic and fluctuating landscape shaped by the country's political transitions and the evolving relationship between state and society. While civil society has demonstrated resilience and adaptability in the face of significant challenges, its role in fostering democratic participation and accountability remains contested (Korolczuk, 2022). Understanding these trends is essential for assessing the broader implications of civil society's trajectory for the health of Poland's democratic system.

2.3. Leadership Styles and Their Impact on Civil Society in Post-Communist Poland

The impact of political leaders on societal engagement in Poland offers critical insights into the evolving dynamics of civil society and democratic participation (Wiatr, 2022). Prominent figures such as Lech Wałęsa, Jarosław Kaczyński, and Donald Tusk illustrate distinct leadership styles that have shaped public discourse, political engagement, and civil society, reflecting broader trends in post-communist Poland.

Lech Wałęsa, as the leader of Solidarność and Poland's first democratically elected president, exemplifies the power of charismatic leadership in mobilizing collective action (Bugajski, 2002; Wiatr, 2022). His ability to unify diverse social groups against the communist regime underscored the transformative potential of inclusive leadership in fostering a vibrant civil society (Arato, 1981; Ekiert & Kubik, 2017). However, Wałęsa's presidency revealed the challenges of transitioning from a movement leader to a political figure. Marked by political fragmentation and declining public trust, his tenure reflected broader societal disillusionment with the complexities of democratic governance and economic reform in the early 1990s (Millard, 2009). Wałęsa's leadership highlighted the dual-edged nature of charisma—effective in mobilizing action but less suited for sustaining institutional stability in a fragmented political landscape.

Jarosław Kaczyński's leadership, in contrast, represents a highly centralized and ideologically driven approach. As the leader of the Law and Justice Party (PiS), Kaczyński has significantly influenced Polish politics by consolidating authority within the party and reshaping civil society to align with conservative and nationalist values (Kasińska-Metryka, 2021; Passarelli, 2015; Radecki, 2015). This approach has included state support for organizations promoting traditional family structures and restrictive policies targeting independent NGOs, especially those advocating for judicial independence and

women's rights (Piotrowski, 2020; Żuk, 2020). By narrowing the space for independent civic activism and polarizing public discourse, Kaczyński's leadership has contributed to democratic backsliding, eroding the pluralism necessary for a robust civil society.

Donald Tusk's Civic Platform (PO) leadership offers another model focused on pragmatism and political centrism. As Prime Minister, Tusk prioritized economic modernization and European integration, policies that appealed to urban and middle-class constituencies (Blondel & Thiébault, 2010). However, his technocratic approach often sidelined grassroots movements, emphasizing efficiency and policy outcomes over participatory governance. While Tusk's leadership contributed to Poland's political and economic stabilization, it alienated rural and working-class populations, many later turning to PiS's populist rhetoric (Fomina & Kucharczyk, 2016; Grabowska-Moroz & Sniadach, 2021). This dynamic underscore the limitations of leadership styles that prioritize institutional stability over broader societal inclusion.

Each leader's approach has left a distinct imprint on Polish civil society. Wałęsa's charismatic leadership during the democratic transition demonstrated the potential of collective action but exposed the vulnerabilities of fragmented civic structures. Kaczyński's centralized and ideologically charged style reshaped civil society to serve state interests while marginalizing independent voices. In contrast, Tusk's technocratic leadership fostered economic growth but often failed to engage grassroots constituencies meaningfully.

These cases reveal the complex interplay between leadership styles and societal engagement in Poland, with implications for democratic governance and the vitality of civil society (Koźmiński, 2015; Bugajski, 2002). While charismatic, centralized, or technocratic approaches offer different opportunities and risks, their legacies continue to shape civic participation and public accountability in contemporary Poland.

2.4. Shifting Leadership Dynamics: From Pluralism to Centralization in Post-Communist Poland

The evolution of leadership styles in Poland from the post-communist transition to the present reflects a shift from collaborative and pluralistic governance to more centralized and personalized approaches. This trajectory, shaped by political, economic, and social transformations, aligns with broader trends in countries transitioning from authoritarian regimes to democracies, where leaders balance inclusivity and efficiency in response to shifting societal needs and institutional pressures.

In the immediate aftermath of communism, Polish political leadership emphasized inclusivity and compromise, rooted in the Solidarność movement's tradition of collective action. Leaders such as Tadeusz Mazowiecki and Lech Wałęsa sought to navigate the fragmented political landscape while establishing democratic institutions (Arato, 1981; Ekiert & Kubik, 2017). Wałęsa's presidency symbolized the aspirations of the democratic transition but also revealed the challenges of charismatic leadership in addressing the complexities of political and economic reforms (Millard, 2009). His often divisive approach underscored the limitations of leadership styles reliant on personal appeal in times of systemic transformation.

As Poland's political system matured, leadership styles began to consolidate around stronger party structures and ideological alignment. During the 1990s and early 2000s, figures like Aleksander Kwaśniewski exemplified pragmatic governance, emphasizing economic stabilization, European integration, and coalition-building. Kwaśniewski's centrist approach reflected broader Europeanization trends and marked a period of institutional modernization (Blondel & Thiébault, 2010; Passarelli, 2015). However, this period also laid the groundwork for centralizing power within parties, a trend that became more pronounced in subsequent years.

The mid-2000s saw the emergence of highly centralized leadership styles, with Jarosław Kaczyński and Donald Tusk dominating Polish politics (Koźmiński, 2015). Kaczyński, as the leader of the Law and Justice Party (PiS), adopted a polarizing, top-down approach, consolidating power within the party and framing political debates around moral and nationalist themes. His leadership style appealed to conservative constituencies but marginalized dissenting voices and increased polarization in public discourse (Kasińska-Metryka, 2021; Żuk, 2020). This approach has had significant implications for democratic norms, civil society, and public accountability.

In contrast, Donald Tusk's Civic Platform (PO) leadership focused on technocratic governance and policy efficiency. Tusk prioritized economic modernization, infrastructure development, and deeper integration with the European Union, appealing to urban and middle-class constituencies (Blondel & Thiébault, 2010). However, his emphasis on top-down efficiency often excluded grassroots engagement, alienating rural and working-class voters who felt disconnected from the benefits of economic progress (Howard, 2003; Fomina & Kucharczyk, 2016). This disconnection highlights the challenges of balancing economic priorities with societal inclusivity.

As mentioned before, structural and institutional factors have reinforced the centralization and personalization of leadership in Poland. The proportional representation electoral system prioritizes party discipline and incentivizes hierarchical governance to secure electoral success. State funding for political parties has further concentrated power within party elites, reducing opportunities for internal democracy and grassroots influence (Passarelli, 2015; Piotrowski, 2020).

Leadership polarization has deepened recently, with Kaczyński's PiS and opposition parties engaging in increasingly confrontational strategies. This polarization has shaped public narratives, influenced democratic institutions, and constrained civil society's capacity to counter state power independently

(Ekiert & Foa, 2016; Grabowska-Moroz & Sniadach, 2021). Leaders have leveraged their authority to reshape the political landscape, consolidating control over state apparatuses and media while exacerbating societal divides.

The evolution of leadership styles in Poland reflects a broader shift to centralized and personalized approaches. While these changes have provided stability and policy efficiency in some contexts, they have challenged democratic consolidation and societal engagement. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for assessing their impact on Poland's political trajectory and the resilience of its democratic institutions.

3. Modern Leadership in Polish Political Parties: Hierarchy, Influence, and Challenges

The contemporary political landscape in Poland is deeply influenced by hierarchical and centralized leadership styles, exemplified by figures like Jarosław Kaczyński or Donald Tusk.

Jarosław Kaczyński's Law and Justice Party (PiS) leadership has transformed the party into an extension of his ideological vision. Despite holding no formal government office since his term as prime minister (2006–2007), Kaczyński wields substantial influence over key aspects of party operations, including candidate selection, policy priorities, and strategic direction (Hartliński, 2019; Kasińska-Metryka, 2021). This centralization underscores his dominance and the integration of ideological consistency with organizational discipline. Under his leadership, PiS has positioned itself as a defender of Poland's sovereignty and traditional values, often invoking nationalist and Catholic themes to galvanize its base (Piotrowski, 2020; Żuk, 2020).

One hallmark of Kaczyński's leadership is his framing of political debates in stark moral terms, creating a polarized dichotomy between "true patriots" and adversaries of national interests. This strategy has deepened divisions in Polish society, aligning public discourse with PiS's ideological objectives.

Internally, PiS operates under strict hierarchical control, where dissent is systematically marginalized to maintain party cohesion. While effective in consolidating power, this approach limits internal pluralism and suppresses democratic debate within the party structure (Passarelli, 2015).

Externally, Kaczyński's leadership has reshaped the civil society landscape. PiS has selectively supported organizations aligned with its ideological goals, such as those promoting conservative family values, while restricting NGOs advocating for women's rights, judicial independence, and minority protections. Regulatory measures have disproportionately affected critical civil society actors, reflecting a broader strategy to consolidate ideological dominance and silence dissent (Howard, 2003; Kasińska-Metryka, 2021).

Judicial reforms under Kaczyński's leadership exemplify this centralization (Pytlas, 2021). Framed as anti-corruption measures, these reforms have increased government control over judicial appointments and disciplinary actions, raising concerns about the erosion of judicial independence. Critics argue that these changes undermine checks and balances, essential for democratic governance, and align with patterns of democratic backsliding observed under PiS (Fomina & Kucharczyk, 2016; Kasińska-Metryka, 2021).

Kaczyński's leadership has also influenced Poland's media landscape. State-owned media have been increasingly utilized to disseminate pro-government narratives, vilify opposition figures, and amplify PiS's ideological agenda. This control over media messaging has limited public access to diverse perspectives, exacerbating societal polarization and reinforcing political divisions (Piotrowski, 2020; Żuk, 2020).

Despite these critiques, Kaczyński's leadership has effectively secured PiS's electoral dominance. His messaging resonates with key voter demographics, particularly rural and older populations, who view PiS as a protector of national identity and traditional values in the face of globalization and

cultural. This connection with marginalized segments of society has solidified PiS's political base, enabling sustained electoral success despite significant domestic and international criticism.

Donald Tusk's Civic Platform (PO) leadership exemplifies a hierarchical and centralized party governance approach marked by pragmatism and efficiency. As a key figure in Polish politics, Tusk's tenure as PO leader and Prime Minister prioritized economic modernization and deeper integration with the European Union, reflecting a strategic focus on positioning Poland as a competitive and modern European state. However, these objectives came at the cost of grassroots engagement and inclusivity, revealing inherent tensions in centralized leadership styles.

Tusk's consolidation of power within the PO was instrumental in maintaining internal cohesion and electoral success during the mid-2000s (Blondel & Thiébault, 2010). By leveraging his political capital, Tusk centralized decision-making processes, enabling swift and coordinated responses to political challenges. However, this concentration of authority marginalized rank-and-file members and limited grassroots participation, fostering dissatisfaction among reform-oriented factions within the party (Passarelli, 2015).

As a leader, Tusk adopted a pragmatic, technocratic style of governance that emphasized policy efficiency and long-term economic objectives. His administration prioritized infrastructure modernization, foreign investment, and fiscal stability, aligning with the aspirations of urban and middle-class voters. This focus on high-level policy outcomes bolstered Poland's economic standing and deepened its European integration but alienated rural and working-class communities who felt excluded from these reforms (Howard, 2003; Fomina & Kucharczyk, 2016). This disconnection underscores the challenges of hierarchical leadership styles in addressing diverse societal needs.

The hierarchical structure of PO under Tusk facilitated strategic successes but contributed to perceptions of elitism and detachment from grassroots concerns (Radecki 2015). Critical policy decisions and candidate selections were concentrated within a small leadership circle, reinforcing the perception of PO as a party of political elites disconnected from marginalized voter groups (Piotrowski, 2020). This dynamic became particularly evident during the global financial crisis, as economic disparities widened and public discontent with political elites grew.

Despite these challenges, Tusk's leadership delivered notable domestic and international policy achievements. His emphasis on modernization and economic stability solidified Poland's role within the European Union and contributed to steady economic growth. However, the centralization of power and the alienation of key constituencies exposed the limitations of his leadership approach, leading to internal fragmentation within PO and declining electoral support after his departure to the European Council.

The contrasting leadership styles of Donald Tusk and Jarosław Kaczyński reveal the broader implications of hierarchical governance in Polish politics (Hartliński, 2022; Pytlas, 2021). Both leaders have achieved significant strategic and electoral successes by consolidating authority within their parties, but their approaches have also weakened internal democracy and societal engagement. Kaczyński's ideological centralization and Tusk's technocratic pragmatism highlight the trade-offs between strong leadership and participatory practices, fostering polarization and limiting consensus-building in Poland's political landscape (Kasińska-Metryka, 2021; Żuk, 2020).

3.1. Beyond PiS and PO: Leadership Styles of Other Political Figures in Poland

Hierarchical leadership styles dominate contemporary Polish politics, with leaders consolidating power within centralized

structures to maintain party discipline and advance their political agendas. Figures such as Władysław Kosiniak-Kamysz, Szymon Hołownia, and Krzysztof Bosak illustrate how centralized decision-making and top-down governance have become defining features across ideological divides. While these approaches ensure party stability and strategic coherence, they often depoliticize society.

Kosiniak-Kamysz, as leader of the Polish People's Party (PSL), has adopted a hierarchical approach aimed at maintaining PSL's relevance in a changing political landscape. By positioning the party as a centrist force appealing to rural constituencies, Kosiniak-Kamysz has ensured organizational stability. However, decision-making within PSL is concentrated in the leadership circle, sidelining local branches and grassroots activists in electoral strategies and coalition negotiations (Kasińska-Metryka, 2021; Piotrowski, 2020).

Similarly, Szymon Hołownia's leadership of Polska 2050 exemplifies a centralized and highly personalized approach. As a political outsider, Hołownia built a movement around his charisma and media presence, presenting pragmatic solutions and centrism. However, internal critiques highlight the limited democratic mechanisms within Polska 2050, with significant decision-making authority resting solely in Hołownia's hands.

Krzysztof Bosak's leadership within the far-right Confederation emphasizes ideological rigidity and centralized authority. Bosak's role is pivotal in maintaining the party's nationalist and libertarian identity, ensuring tight control over messaging and strategy. While this approach resonates with a specific voter base, it restricts internal diversity and broader societal appeal (Fomina & Kucharczyk, 2016; Howard, 2003).

Across these parties, hierarchical leadership prioritizes strategic coherence and electoral competitiveness but reduces participatory opportunities for party members and societal stakeholders. Decision-making authority is concentrated in small leadership circles, sidelining grassroots input and civil society

engagement. This centralization effectively allows parties to navigate Poland's polarised political environment and marginalizes diverse perspectives, weakening internal adaptability (Howard, 2003; Kasińska-Metryka, 2021).

All the above leadership styles reflect systemic trends in Polish politics, where centralization and personalization define party operations. Despite ideological differences, leaders such as Kosiniak-Kamysz, Hołownia, and Bosak have employed hierarchical approaches to achieve political goals, often at the expense of participatory democracy. Understanding these dynamics is essential for evaluating the broader implications of hierarchical governance on Poland's political landscape and democratic institutions.

3.2. Personalization of Leadership

The personalization of leadership has become a defining characteristic of contemporary Polish political parties, with party identity and direction increasingly tied to the leader's persona (Jacuński et al., 2021). Jarosław Kaczyński exemplifies this phenomenon; his authority within the Law and Justice Party (PiS) overshadows institutional processes, making him the primary architect of the party's ideology and strategy. Party decisions, public messaging, and strategic directions consistently reflect his views, relegating collective governance to a secondary role in favor of centralized, top-down control (Kasińska-Metryka, 2021; Żuk, 2020).

Donald Tusk's leadership of the Civic Platform (PO) similarly illustrates the dynamics of personalization. During his tenure, PO's political success heavily relied on Tusk's political capital and ability to project stability and pragmatism. His leadership style centralized decision-making, aligning party strategy with his vision while sidelining broader party participation (Blondel & Thiébault, 2010; Fomina & Kucharczyk, 2016).

Emerging leaders such as Szymon Hołownia have also embraced this. The Polska 2050 movement is closely linked to

Hołownia's public image and media presence, reinforcing the centrality of individual leadership over institutional structures. Similarly, all of those leaderships how leaders dominate decision-making and align party priorities with their personal political brands, leveraging their popularity to navigate Poland's polarized political environment (Piotrowski, 2020; Passarelli, 2015).

While personalization consolidates voter loyalty and strengthens party discipline, it also introduces significant vulnerabilities. Parties become heavily reliant on their leaders' sustained appeal and capacity to manage challenges, both internally and externally. This dependency often undermines internal party democracy, as the dominance of individual leaders curtails opportunities for participatory debate and dissent within party structures (Howard, 2003; Millard, 2009). Furthermore, personalization exacerbates the polarization of public discourse by framing political competition as a clash between individual leaders rather than substantive policy debates, reducing the quality of democratic engagement (Blondel & Thiébault, 2010; Żuk, 2020).

Personalization has emerged as a unifying trend across Polish political parties, regardless of ideological orientation. Kaczyński, Tusk, Hołownia demonstrate how centralized authority and personalized leadership define party governance, shaping their internal dynamics and public appeal (Jacuński et al., 2021). While these approaches achieve organizational coherence and electoral success, they raise critical questions about inclusivity, adaptability, and the democratic vitality of political parties.

4. Centralized Party Leadership and its Impact on Civil Society and Democracy in Poland

The centralization of power within political parties in Poland significantly impacts public participation, civil society, and democratic engagement. This trend, characterized by

hierarchical decision-making and top-down control, often sidelines grassroots involvement and societal input. Parties increasingly serve as vehicles for their leaders' ambitions rather than inclusive organizations promoting civic engagement and policy deliberation.

Party centralization is specific for almost all political party leaders in Poland. Leaders concentrate authority within small leadership circles, controlling candidate selection, policy agendas, and internal party discipline. While these practices ensure party stability and electoral competitiveness, they marginalize rank-and-file members and weaken participatory governance (Kasińska-Metryka, 2021; Blondel & Thiébault, 2010).

The relationship between centralized parties and civil society reflects another dimension of this dynamic. Centralized parties often co-opt civil society organizations that align with their agendas while marginalizing critical or progressive actors. For example, PiS fosters conservative NGOs promoting traditional values while undermining organizations advocating for women's rights and judicial independence (Howard, 2003; Żuk, 2020). This selective engagement stifles diverse voices in public discourse, reducing civil society's capacity to hold political leaders accountable.

Centralization also drives depoliticization by framing political decisions as technical matters for elite resolution rather than subjects of public debate. Judicial reforms under PiS and economic modernization under Tusk exemplify how such framing sidelines public deliberation, limiting societal participation and fostering political apathy (Kasińska-Metryka, 2021; Blondel & Thiébault, 2010). This exclusionary dynamic erodes trust in political institutions, reinforcing the perception of parties as elitist entities disconnected from citizen concerns.

Civil society's response to centralization has varied. Many organizations have adapted by professionalizing operations, shifting toward service provision to survive regulatory constraints. While this has ensured continuity, it has distanced

these organizations from grassroots advocacy (Howard, 2003; Ekiert & Kubik, 2017). Resistance remains a strong element, as exemplified by movements like the Women's Strike, which mobilize against judicial overreach and restrictions on reproductive rights (Grabowska-Moroz & Sniadach, 2021). However, the polarization of public discourse has fragmented civil society, limiting coalition-building and amplifying divisions between urban and rural activism (Żuk, 2020).

At the same time, restrictive regulations and narratives targeting NGOs have weakened segments of civil society. Government policies portray independent organizations as foreign-influenced, reducing public trust and exacerbating funding challenges. Polarization further undermines collaboration, making it difficult for civil society to present a unified front against centralization or advocate for systemic reforms.

Despite these challenges, civil society demonstrates resilience. Digital platforms and international partnerships have enabled organizations to navigate restrictions and sustain advocacy efforts. Grassroots campaigns and protests highlight the enduring capacity of civil society to defend democratic values under significant pressure (Piotrowski, 2020; Grabowska-Moroz & Sniadach, 2021).

The influence of contemporary political party leaders in Poland on democracy and civil society underscores critical challenges to the functioning of democratic institutions and the vibrancy of civic engagement. Leaders' reliance on hierarchical and centralized governance and depoliticization strategies has reshaped the relationship between state and society, with significant implications for public accountability and democratic consolidation.

Political leaders in Poland, such as Jarosław Kaczyński and Donald Tusk, have profoundly influenced democratic norms through their leadership styles and strategic priorities. Centralized decision-making and the personalization of

leadership have heightened polarization, eroded institutional checks and balances, and marginalized civil society actors. For instance, under the Law and Justice Party (PiS), judicial reforms have undermined the independence of courts, challenging democratic principles and weakening public trust in the rule of law (Fomina & Kucharczyk, 2016). Similarly, the consolidation of power in the Civic Platform (PO) during Tusk's tenure, while less overtly disruptive, contributed to perceptions of political elitism, alienating segments of the electorate and weakening grassroots connections (Blondel & Thiébault, 2010).

The centralization of power within parties has also transformed the role of civil society in Polish democracy. Independent civic organizations, traditionally vital for fostering democratic engagement and accountability, have faced increasing pressure from political leaders. PiS's selective support for aligned NGOs and restrictive measures against critical organizations illustrate how civil society's autonomy has been curtailed to serve political objectives. This dynamic has fragmented civil society, with some groups co-opted into partisan agendas while others struggle to maintain their independence under financial and administrative constraints.

The process of depoliticization—shifting political issues out of the public sphere and into technocratic or bureaucratic domains—has further weakened civil society and hindered democratic consolidation. For example, reforms to Poland's judicial system have been presented as necessary administrative adjustments rather than fundamental political decisions, minimizing public debate and scrutiny (Flinders & Buller, 2006).

A weakened civil society exacerbates the consequences of depoliticization by limiting citizens' capacity to organize, advocate, and hold leaders accountable. Independent NGOs, particularly those working on human rights, environmental advocacy, and social equality, have faced significant restrictions, including funding limitations and regulatory barriers (Ekiert & Kubik, 2017). These measures have constrained their operational

capacities and diminished their credibility in the eyes of the public, often due to state-led narratives framing such organizations as foreign-influenced or disconnected from national interests.

The decline of civil society's influence has broader ramifications for democratic consolidation. A vibrant civil society is essential for creating spaces where citizens can engage in collective action, articulate diverse perspectives, and challenge state power. Its weakening reduces the pluralism necessary for a healthy democracy and allows centralized political actors to operate with reduced accountability. This dynamic is particularly evident in Poland, where public trust in democratic institutions has declined alongside the weakening of civil society (Fomina & Kucharczyk, 2016). The narrowing of civic spaces and the concentration of political authority have created a feedback loop in which depoliticization further marginalizes civil society, and a weakened civil society exacerbates the effects of depoliticization.

Depoliticization also undermines public accountability by reducing opportunities for citizens to influence policy and governance. When political leaders bypass public deliberation and concentrate authority within their parties, they limit transparency and responsiveness. This trend is evident in how major political decisions, such as judicial reforms and media regulation, have been implemented without meaningful public consultation, reinforcing perceptions of political exclusion and eroding trust in governance (Żuk, 2020).

The interplay between Poland's political leadership, depoliticization, and civil society illustrates a broader pattern of democratic backsliding. While centralized leadership can provide stability and strategic direction in polarized environments, it also risks undermining the participatory foundations of democracy. In Poland, the narrowing of civic spaces and the exclusion of independent actors from political

processes have limited the mechanisms through which citizens can engage with and influence governance.

Addressing these challenges requires rethinking the relationship between political parties, civil society, and the public sphere. Strengthening civil society's autonomy, fostering inclusive political dialogue, and ensuring transparency in decision-making are critical for mitigating the effects of depoliticization and rebuilding democratic trust. As Poland navigates these tensions, its civil society's resilience and political leaders' accountability will play a decisive role in shaping the country's democratic future.

The influence of political party leaders on democracy and civil society in Poland has highlighted the vulnerabilities of centralized and hierarchical governance models. Depoliticization, coupled with the weakening of civil society, poses significant challenges to democratic consolidation and public accountability. Understanding these dynamics provides valuable insights into the broader implications of contemporary political leadership for democratic resilience and civic engagement.

5. Conclusion

The analysis of contemporary Polish political leadership highlights a clear connection between strong party leadership and the depoliticization of civil society. Leaders such as Jarosław Kaczyński, Donald Tusk, and others operate within hierarchical and centralized party structures, concentrating authority in ways that diminish public participation and marginalize grassroots engagement (Jacuński et al., 2021). This centralization has facilitated depoliticization by framing critical policy decisions as technical or managerial issues, thus excluding them from meaningful public debate and democratic scrutiny (Flinders & Buller, 2006).

The long-term impacts of strong leadership on political stability and democratic resilience present a dual-edged

dynamic, particularly in post-communist contexts such as Poland. Strong leadership can enhance political stability by consolidating authority, ensuring organizational coherence within political parties, and fostering decisive governance. Leaders such as Jarosław Kaczyński and Donald Tusk exemplify this trend, leveraging centralized authority to maintain party discipline and secure electoral dominance. These leadership styles have enabled the swift implementation of policies, especially during political or economic uncertainty periods, thereby providing a semblance of stability in polarized environments (Blondel & Thiébault, 2010; Kasińska-Metryka, 2021). However, this stability often comes at the cost of democratic resilience, as the concentration of power undermines institutional checks and balances and reduces opportunities for participatory governance.

Strong leadership tends to weaken democratic norms by marginalizing dissent, centralizing decision-making, and fostering the personalization of power. In Poland, this has been evidenced by the erosion of judicial independence and the media's role as a watchdog, further exacerbated by depoliticization strategies that frame contentious issues as technocratic rather than democratic debates (Flinders & Buller, 2006; Żuk, 2020). Furthermore, the reliance on hierarchical leadership models diminishes the adaptability of political institutions, as parties become overly dependent on their leaders' personal appeal and strategic vision, leaving them vulnerable to crises when leadership changes or public support wanes (Passarelli, 2015; Howard, 2003). This trade-off underscores the tension between achieving short-term political stability and cultivating the robust democratic frameworks necessary for long-term resilience and public accountability. Understanding these dynamics is critical for assessing the sustainability of governance models in transitional democracies.

These dynamics have increasingly constrained civil society, which is traditionally a critical counterbalance to state power. In

particular, independent NGOs advocating for human rights, judicial independence, and gender equality have faced regulatory and financial obstacles undermining their capacity to operate effectively. At the same time, selective state support for ideologically aligned organizations has fragmented civil society, reducing its collective ability to challenge political authority or foster democratic accountability (Ekiert & Kubik, 2017).

The consequences of these trends are profound. Depoliticization weakens the mechanisms of public accountability and democratic engagement, creating a feedback loop in which reduced civic participation further entrenches hierarchical leadership and centralized decision-making. This dynamic not only erodes trust in democratic institutions but also limits the diversity of voices necessary for a healthy public sphere, exacerbating political polarization and societal divisions (Żuk, 2020).

Addressing the challenges stemming from strong party leadership and depoliticization processes requires a comprehensive approach that prioritizes the revitalization of civil society and fosters greater inclusivity in governance. A key element of this strategy involves strengthening the legal protections for civil society organizations (NGOs). Policymakers should focus on creating frameworks that ensure operational independence while reducing bureaucratic barriers and safeguarding NGOs from politically motivated interference. Drawing from successful models in other European nations, these frameworks could emphasize transparency without imposing excessive regulations, thus enabling organizations to effectively contribute to public life (Fomina & Kucharczyk, 2016).

Equally important is promoting civic education and public engagement as a long-term solution to counter depoliticization. Educational initiatives tailored to highlight the role of civil society, and the importance of public deliberation and citizen activism can play a transformative role. Such efforts, particularly targeting younger generations, help build a

foundation for sustained democratic participation, ensuring that future voters and activists are equipped to engage meaningfully in the political process (Howard, 2003).

International cooperation offers another crucial avenue for supporting civil society in Poland. Strengthening partnerships with global advocacy networks, European institutions, and international NGOs provides essential resources and amplifies the impact of local advocacy efforts. Collaboration with these entities can enhance operational capacities and offer protection against domestic political pressures. Prioritizing funding for grassroots initiatives and organizations serving marginalized communities ensures that these partnerships remain inclusive and equitable.

In parallel, fostering inclusive governance practices is critical to bridging the gap between political institutions and society. Political parties and leaders could benefit from incorporating civil society actors into policy development and decision-making processes. Mechanisms such as public consultations, participatory budgeting, and multi-stakeholder dialogues can create opportunities for meaningful engagement. These approaches enhance trust in governance and reduce societal polarization by bringing diverse voices into the political process (Grabowska-Moroz & Sniadach, 2021).

Addressing polarization in public discourse is an essential component of this strategy. Efforts to reshape the role of media and political rhetoric are vital to countering the divisive narratives often propagated by centralized leadership. Supporting balanced journalism and fostering the growth of nonpartisan media outlets can provide the public with diverse perspectives, counteracting the polarizing effects of one-sided narratives. Moreover, creating spaces for open and constructive dialogue between differing societal groups can help bridge ideological divides and contribute to a more cohesive public sphere.

These interconnected efforts illustrate the importance of a multifaceted and collaborative approach to tackling the dynamics of centralized leadership and its impact on civil society. By prioritizing inclusivity, international collaboration, and participatory governance, both political institutions and civil society organizations can strengthen democratic resilience and rebuild public trust in an increasingly polarized environment.

Addressing the interplay between strong party leadership, depoliticization, and civil society is critical for safeguarding Poland's democratic institutions and fostering an inclusive public sphere. By integrating robust policy measures and advancing research into these dynamics, stakeholders can work toward revitalizing civil society and mitigating the challenges of centralized political leadership

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