

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Klon/Jawor Association report "The Chilling Effect on NGO Advocacy in Poland" presents the findings and conclusions from the 2022 qualitative study on advocacy initiatives undertaken by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Poland. The survey conducted on a representative sample of Polish associations and foundations ("The Capacity of NGOs in Poland 2021") found that the share of organizations that engage with advocacy activities in Poland has been declining. The report "The Chilling Effect. ..." is an analysis of empirical material including 25 individual in-depth interviews with representatives of advocacy organizations and aims at identifying the reasons for the decrease in advocacy among NGOs in Poland.

Social organizations fulfill many functions in democratic states. They provide social services, mobilize citizens around important issues, monitor public authorities and conduct advocacy towards social change. Advocacy activities aim for systems change, which is primarily achieved by consulting and advocating for changes in law or the practice of its application.

The conditions for conducting advocacy activities in Poland are changing. The decrease in advocacy opportunities is largely the result of the current socio-political situation in Poland. Representatives of social organizations observe that the practice of lawmaking has been changing, the pace of the legislative process is very high, public consultations are either "bypassed" or are conducted in a perfunctory manner (e.g. they serve to legitimise already decided upon solutions). On the other hand, if consultations are taking place, NGOs' representatives are concerned about the vagueness of the process, its heightened speed and lack of transparency. Organizations also experience difficulties participating in public debates due to the decline in the number of discussion fora and instruments for dialogue.

A serious barrier to advocacy efforts is political polarization, which negatively impacts Polish society and its civic sector alike. Divisions fueled by the political class exacerbate the problems that have hitherto inhibited representatives of the NGO sector to "speak with a common voice". As a result, there ensues competition between organizations or lack of ability to cooperate. In addition, new actors are appearing "on the advocacy scene" and their intentions are often perceived as serving particular elites or businesses, not the common good.

Other factors that adversely affect NGOs' advocacy in Poland are problems with funding for advocacy projects. There is a shortage of funds earmarked for advocacy. Organizations are thus forced to conduct advocacy activities in addition to their other tasks and without remuneration. Moreover, NGOs struggle to obtain funding that would allow them to remain impartial in their advocacy activities. Challenges with acquiring financial resources translate into problems with NGOs' human capital, such as staff shortages and team overload. At the same time, the above-mentioned features of the public sphere in Poland also create frustration, feeling that one lacks agency, and burnout among social activists.

Such circumstances make it difficult for civil society organizations to carry out advocacy. Hence some organizations experience a "chilling effect" and identify advocacy (or some elements of it) as a potentially risky activity and, fearing adverse consequences, abandon it or reduce or modify their activities in this area. The "chilling effect" from the title of the report is a description of the unfavorable climate for advocacy engagement that characterize contemporary Poland.

Organizations respond in different ways to the changing conditions for advocacy. We distinguished 4 types of organizations that differ significantly in their experience (though not always in their assessment) regarding the conditions for conducting advocacy in Poland. The first group consists of organizations that have not experienced an increase in restrictions and difficulties regarding advocacy. The second group of organizations reports a reduction in their ability to conduct advocacy activities, but for various reasons they consider these circumstances to not significantly affect their work. Organizations in the third group keep trying to be involved in advocacy, but were forced to change their current forms of activity to be able to do so. The fourth group is composed of organizations that have been forced to change the nature of their advocacy work. We describe each of these groups with a metaphor representing the "advocacy journey" of the particular group of organizations. Thus, advocacy organizations can be arranged on a spectrum from 1) an unobstructed road (meaning no need to change course in the area of advocacy efforts), to 2) experiencing minor impediments to passage to 3) closure of one lane's permeability, to 4) organizations experiencing passage closures that result in the need to seek detours. This means that organizations in the fourth group have to "get out of the way" of their previous advocacy efforts: change their methods, and often their intermediate goals, in order to achieve the organization's mission in the long term.

In the report, we describe in more detail the ten categories of factors limiting the advocacy of civic organizations and the four types of organizational response. We also discuss the funding for advocacy, i.e. NGOs' sources of funding, various strategies and funding dilemmas. The report is enriched by numerous quotes from interviews and a conceptual introduction and comments by professor Galia Chimiak from the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology at the Polish Academy of Sciences. As a result, the phenomena described on the basis of the research material are embedded in a broader sociological and global contexts, as well as processes such as decoupling, SLAPP, astroturfing or the boomerang effect.

The conduct of advocacy activities by NGOs is possible when there are conditions for real dialogue with public authorities, decision-making processes are open and participatory, and there are functioning systemic solutions to allow the contribution by civic organizations. The analysis of the research material presented in the report provides evidence that these conditions are being obstructed in Poland. That explains the empirical finding regarding the decline of advocacy activities among civil society organizations in Poland.



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Download the Klon/Jawor Research report
"The Chilling Effect on NGO Advocacy in Poland":



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