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Building civil society in post-1989 Poland by implementing the principle of openness of public life in non-governmental organisations in the Mazowieckie Voivodeship

Introduction

The concept of civil society is an ambiguous idea, which explains why the literature on the subject offers a variety of definitions of it. The key factor in defining civil society is the perception of this concept through the prism of various areas of life. Nowadays, the cornerstone that upholds the idea of civil society is active participation in public life, which is a voluntary action performed for the benefit of society. Giovanni Sartori believes that civil society is one of the types of democracy in a country, thus being a manifestation of citizens' freedoms.¹ Here, freedom is

¹ K. Podemski, "Społeczeństwo obywatelskie w Polsce 25 lat po wielkiej zmianie", *Ruch Prawniczy, Ekonomiczny i Socjologiczny*, vol. LXXVI, no. 2, 2014, p. 90, <https://doi.org/10.14746/rpeis.2014.76.2.8>.

understood as the right to fully participate in the public life of a democratic state. All this makes civil society a pillar of democracy.

The goal of this article is to discuss the ways in which access to public information in non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in the Mazowieckie Voivodeship has been operating since 1989. Based on specific research carried out by the authors, it looks at the extent to which one of the basic elements of civil society – the principle of transparency in public life – has been enforced in non-governmental organisations more than 30 years following the political and economic transformation of 1989. The subject of the analysis are selected issues that attempt to provide an answer to the questions of whether the concept of civil society and the transparency of public life related to it are currently a mere slogan of political propaganda, or whether they are a truly important element in a democratic state. An attempt has also been made to look at the extent to which NGOs implement and use the right of access to public information, and the role of non-governmental organisations in contemporary communities.

The article presents issues related to the revival of social participation after 1989, which will be confronted with its present situation, i.e. over thirty years later.

Civil society and the right to information in Poland

Admittedly, the second half of the twentieth century saw an unexpected renaissance of civil society. At that time, it became a kind of social phenomenon. Civil society revived mainly in the countries of the Eastern European bloc, including Poland.² Nowadays, civil society is identified with the ideas of participatory democracy, which is steeped in the idea of voluntary participation in public life. The political transformation was a breakthrough time and gave Poles the opportunity to fully participate in building a democratic state. An important moment on this time line were the so-called Round Table talks of 1989, whose participants had high hopes for opening up new areas for civil society to thrive in Poland. During the sessions, negotiations and talks were held in search of a social consensus, as well as in the area of the right to information and civil society. Those talks gave hope that a society of active citizens would be able to function in Poland, in line with the principle of acting not for a particular profit, but in the interest of the common good.³

In the assumptions of the then government and the then opposition, the Round Table talks were driven by rather opposite goals. For Polska Zjednoczona Partia

² K.Z. Sowa, "Społeczeństwo obywatelskie a polityka – uwagi o historycznych uwarunkowaniach i perspektywach społeczeństwa obywatelskiego w Polsce", *Państwo i Społeczeństwo*, no. 1, 2008, p. 5.

³ Z. Woźniak, "Pokłosie Okrągłego Stołu – Przeszłość Dla Przyszłości", *Ruch Prawniczy, Ekonomiczny i Socjologiczny*, Year LXXI, issue 2, 2009, p. 363.

Robotnicza (PZPR, the Polish United Workers' Party), the talks were to be a summary of the process leading to an agreement resulting in the admission of more representatives of "Solidarność" (lit. "Solidarity") people to the ruling elite. It was assumed that over time such a representation of the opposition could be effectively neutralised. However, the opposition's goal was different. In fact, they called for the re-legalisation of "Solidarność." Moreover, the Round Table was to be an impulse for profound systemic changes and an indication of the main directions of prospective reforms. According to the participants of the talks, they were to become the guarantor of building democracy in Poland. The opposition activists emphasised the necessity to create space for building a civic society and the activity of Poles. The political legacy of the "Solidarność" opposition was the democratisation of life, self-governance, transparency, truth and morality in politics, as well as greater accessibility and subsidiarity of the state. The changes in political and social life that took place as part of the political transformation after 1989 and the events related to them resulted in a lively discussion on civil society in Poland.⁴

As mentioned above, civil society is an ambiguous concept, which implies that the literature on the subject offers several definitions of the idea. A general explanation of civil society suggests that it ought to be referred to all non-state institutions, organisations and associations operating in the public sphere. These are structures that are relatively autonomous from the state: they arise from below and are generally characterised by the voluntary participation of their members.⁵ An important element in the definition of civil society is the inclusion in its activities of the possibility of making choices in social, political, economic and personal life.⁶

A key factor in defining civil society is the perception of this concept through the prism of various areas of life.⁷ Nowadays, the basis of the idea of civil society hinges around participation in public life, which is a voluntary action for the benefit of society. It is an expression of the freedom of citizens. This freedom is understood as the right to fully participate in the public life of a democratic state. Civil society is thus a pillar of democracy.

A survey conducted by Centrum Badań Opinii Społecznej (CBOS, Public Opinion Research Center), a major Polish opinion poll centre, in the years 2001–2020 shows an upward trend in the involvement of Poles in a wide range of activities for NGOs. According to the research release no. 37/2020, the activity

⁴ K. Kocurek, "Istota i kształtowanie się społeczeństwa obywatelskiego", *Zeszyty Naukowe Uniwersytetu Ekonomicznego w Krakowie*, no. 806, 2009, p. 16.

⁵ E. Wnuk-Lipiński, *Socjologia życia publicznego*, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar, 2005, p. 119.

⁶ A. Siciński, Społeczeństwo obywatelskie jako przedmiot badań społecznych w Polsce, [in:] *Socjologia polityki w Polsce. Materiały konferencji naukowej*, ed. O. Sochacki, Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo Gdańskie, 1991, pp. 39–48.

⁷ K. Kocurek, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

of Poles in different types of civic organisations and their currently declared involvement in the activities of non-governmental organisations is stable and even higher compared to the beginning of the twenty-first century: the percentage of “yes” answers to the question “Do you devote your free time to activity in any organisation, association, movement, club or foundation?” in 2002 was 1 percentage point, while in 2020 it was 15.⁸

The Office of Analyses and Documentation of the Polish Senate has prepared a thematic study on civil society and its institutions. The idea of civil society rests on the conviction that there should be specific mechanisms in place to enable the development of civic attitudes and social self-organisation, independent of politics. Does civil society in Poland have a strong position? According to the study *Spoleczeństwo obywatelskie i jego instytucje* [Civil Society and its Institutions], the reasons for the weakness of this type of society should be sought in the formation of a democratic state governed by the rule of law (e.g. the dissolution of the Komitet Obywatelski “Solidarność” [Solidarity Committee], or the creation of a bureaucratic apparatus operating at the level of local and regional authorities).⁹

More than 30 years after the political transformation, it is possible to claim that it was a breakthrough time, which gave Poles a chance and a full catalogue of instruments (tools) to create a civil society. In this study, focus is placed on how NGOs function and analyse how access to public information functions in these institutions. The review of the literature on the subject and the doctrine shows a multitude of studies on the concept of civil society. However, it also points to the lack of an exhaustive study that looks at the matter in question on the basis of the Access to Public Information Act of 6 September 2001 (Ustawa z dnia 6 września 2001 r. o dostępie do informacji publicznej) in NGOs.¹⁰ Therefore, the basic elements that make up civil society have been thoroughly scrutinised, pointing to the correlations between them.

In the literature on the subject, the concept of social participation is defined as the participation of citizens in managing the affairs of the community of which they are members. In a broad sense, social participation is the basis of civil society, whose members voluntarily take part in public activities. This form of work in the social domain plays a particularly important role in local communities. Thus, civil society is a society that is active and self-realising. It is a society that operates independently of state authorities, but within the limits of the law. The main pillar of the development of civil society is the principle of transparency in public life, guaranteed by

⁸ *Aktywność Polaków w organizacjach obywatelskich*, research release no. 37, CBOS, Warszawa 2020, p. 2.

⁹ A. Krasnowolski, *Spoleczeństwo obywatelskie i jego instytucje*, Kancelaria Senatu, Warszawa 2014.

¹⁰ Ustawa z dnia 6 września 2001 r. o dostępie do informacji publicznej, Dz.U. [Journal of Laws of the Republic of Poland] 2001, no. 112, item 1198, consolidated text.

the Constitution. The openness of the operation of public authorities is a key condition for the functioning of democracy in the state and a fundamental value of the rule of law.¹¹ The essence of the right to public information is the fact that it is regulated in the content of the fundamental act, which is the highest ranking act in the Polish legal system. Establishing the right to public information in the Constitution has made it possible for citizens to apply it directly.¹² In fact, under article 61 section 1 of the Constitution of the Republic of Poland (*Konstytucja Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej*), the activity of public authorities in Poland is open, and every citizen has the right to access information.¹³ The concept of transparency in public life and the right to access information are understood as the citizens' privilege to be informed about matters concerning the activities of the authorities, the performance of public tasks and the functioning of the state. Access to public information is also one of the forms of civic activity that contributes to the development of democracy, both at the local and central level.¹⁴

Looking at the concept of NGOs, reference should be made to the United Nations, where this concept was used in Resolution 288B (X) of 27 February 1950 to define non-state actors "every civic, voluntary group of the type a non-profit that is organized locally, nationally or internationally. It is task-oriented and run by people with similar interests."¹⁵ They provide analyses, expert opinions, serve as an early warning mechanism, help monitor and implement international agreements. Some NGOs have specific issues such as human rights, the environment or health.¹⁶ In the case of the provisions of Polish law, i.e. the Public Benefit and Volunteer Work Act of 24 April 2003 (*Ustawa z dnia 24 kwietnia 2003 r. o działalności pożytku publicznego i o wolontariacie*), the definition of non-governmental organisations can

¹¹ M. Dalka-Noga, "Biuletyn Informacji Publicznej jako forma dostępu do informacji publicznej", *Studia Iuridica Toruniensia*, vol. XIII, 2013, p. 16.

¹² A. Jabłońska, Udostępnianie informacji publicznej jako podstawowe prawo społeczeństwa informacyjnego, [in:] *Dostęp do informacji publicznej. Wybrane aspekty teorii i praktyki*, eds. A. Lusińska, A. Kalinowska-Żeleźnik, Gdańsk: Polskie Towarzystwo Ekonomiczne, [cop. 2014], p. 81.

¹³ *Konstytucja Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej z 2 kwietnia 1997 r. uchwalona przez Zgromadzenie Narodowe w dniu 2 kwietnia 1997 r., przyjęta przez Naród w referendum konstytucyjnym w dniu 25 maja 1997 r., podpisana przez Prezydenta Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej w dniu 16 lipca 1997 r.*, Dz.U. 1997, no. 78, item 483.

¹⁴ A. Surówka, "Prawo dostępu do informacji publicznej w orzecznictwie sądów administracyjnych", *Przegląd Prawa Konstytucyjnego*, no. 3, 2013, p. 145, <https://doi.org/10.15804/ppk.2013.03.07>.

¹⁵ K. Rogaczewska, *Organizacje pozarządowe w polityce międzynarodowej*, Wrocław 2015, p. 5. It then abandoned the assumption that organisations need to have an international dimension; they can operate at the regional, national and international level. D. Moroń, *Organizacje pozarządowe – fundament społeczeństwa obywatelskiego*, Wrocław 2012: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, p. 16.

¹⁶ D. Moroń, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

be found in article 3 section 2. It reads that “non-governmental organisations are: 1) not units of the public finance sector, within the meaning of the Public Finance Act; 2) not operating for profit, i.e. legal persons or organisational units without legal personality, to which a separate act grants legal capacity, in including foundations and associations [...]”.¹⁷ Thus, they are legal entities not created by public authorities, by way of normative and legal acts.

NGOs are an important factor in the functioning of the state. They not only create a civil society, but also activate and integrate local society. They were established to pursue important social goals. The NGO sector is diversified in terms of legal features. There is no single definition of “non-governmental organisations” in the literature on the subject, which indicates that researchers are interested in this subject. Dorota Moroń points out after Lester M. Salomon and Helmut K. Anheier their constitutive features. First, they need to have an organisational form: some of them have a legal personality regulated by the statute (associations and foundations) and others do not (e.g. ordinary associations). Second, they ought to be independent from public authorities, not belonging to the public sector: NGOs are not public administration bodies, although they cooperate actively with the local and regional authorities. Third, they conduct a non-profit activity: once an NGO had received income, it allocates it for the implementation of its statutory goals; at the same time there is a ban on transferring it to its members and founders. Fourth, a major component of their functioning is self-governance, which consists in making independent decisions within the limits of the law. Fifth, a key element that defines them is voluntariness: belonging to NGOs is a form of development and activity for citizens, not an imperative.¹⁸

Even before the Public Benefit and Volunteer Work Act came into force, Piotr Gliński presented a comprehensive definition that stressed independence and non-profit activities, which are primarily private initiatives, independent and non-profit, as well as those based on a significant participation of volunteering with a major role in shaping human attitudes off those who take part in NGOs’ schemes.

According to these assumptions, non-governmental organisations are private organisations – also in the social sense, i.e. as group institutions; “non-public” ones – i.e. non-governmental, non-local governmental and non-state bodies; not-for-profit operating organisations; independent organisations (primarily from government agencies, but also from business, sponsors, etc.); largely voluntary [...]; and those focused on changing people’s mindset and behaviour patterns.¹⁹

¹⁷ Ustawa z dnia 24 kwietnia 2003 r. o działalności pożytku publicznego i o wolontariacie, Dz.U. 2010 no. 234, item 1536, consolidated text.

¹⁸ D. Moroń, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

¹⁹ P. Gliński, Współpraca organizacji pozarządowych z innymi sektorami, [in:] *Opiekuńczość czy solidarność? Obywatelskie formy współpracy z władzami lokalnymi oraz pomocy społecznej*, ed. G. Skąpska, Kraków: Fundacja „Międzynarodowe Centrum Rozwoju Demokracji”, 1998, p. 55.

For political and administration sciences, NGOs are the basis for local activities and civil society. Bryant A. Hudson and Wolfgang Bielefeld claims that “NGOs are organisations that (1) provide useful (in a certain sense) goods and services, thus serving specific social goals, (2) cannot distribute profits on their own behalf, (3) are voluntary, which means that they are created, maintained and disbanded by a voluntary decision and on the initiative of its members or management, and (4) whose operation is rational and often rests on strong ideological foundations.”²⁰

The principle of openness and the right of access to public information, set out in the Constitution, comes to the fore in the Access to Public Information Act of 6 September 2001. It defines what constitutes public information, distinguishes the entities obliged to disclose it, and presents the forms of disclosing and requesting public information.²¹ Taking into account the wide scope of the concept of public information, it is assumed that it is any information that relates to public authorities, actual activities of public bodies and persons holding a public function. Therefore, there is a rather broad catalogue various types of content that constitutes public information. The Act begins with the definition of public information. The legislator defines public information as “any and all information on public matters” (cf. the Act, Dz.U. [Journal of Laws of the Republic of Poland] 2020, item 2176).²² In the light of the provisions of the Act on access to public information, the authorities obliged to disclose public information are also public organisations, provided that their activities are – albeit in part – financed from public funds. Moreover, the constitutional principle of transparency in public life is the basis for building a civil society in which the activity of NGOs plays a significant role.

Methodology

As part of the research conducted by the authors of this study, a questionnaire was administered on the functioning of the right to access public information in non-governmental organisations.

There are 21,000 NGOs registered in the Mazowieckie Voivodeship. The survey has been conducted via e-mails and messages sent on the social networking site Facebook (584 messages in total). It was a difficult task due to the lack of contacts, including e-mails, in the Internet and the inability to obtain them from the county councils (referring to the General Data Protection Regulation – GDPR). Therefore, an important element of the study has been the creation of a database of e-mail addresses and/or profiles on Facebook, which is very time-consuming. Through the county council offices, the authors obtained only basic data on NGOs: their

²⁰ D. Moroń, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

²¹ Ustawy z dnia 6 września 2001 r., *op. cit.*, art. 1 section 1.

²² *Ibidem.*

name, address, and date of registration. The survey was anonymous and consisted of 24 questions, including 10 open questions (only selected results are presented in the article).

The research findings are a form of communication about the results so far. These are preliminary results of empirical research, but they allow to draw certain conclusions.

The aim of the survey was, *inter alia*, to show the structure of NGOs in the Mazowieckie Voivodeship and the areas of activity of these organisations. In addition, one of the main assumptions of the study was to determine the knowledge of the right to access information in non-governmental organisations and how access to public information functions in these organisations.

The survey began on 8 November 2021. The respondents were all NGOs of the Mazowieckie area and were dominated by non-governmental organisations which operate in such fields as education and upbringing (45.2%), culture and arts (41.9%) as well as local development in the social and material dimension (35.5%). As the main addressees of their activities, the surveyed NGOs indicated the inhabitants of local communities (71%), as well as “children and youth” (61.3%).

The dominant source of financing the activities of the surveyed entities is a membership fee (48.4%). In an open question regarding the purpose of the activities of NGOs, the respondents indicated that:

- “in order to change the immediate environment with our actions for the better,”
- “fighting the local system,”
- “cultivating customs, integrating the local community,”
- “adding new jobs for people at risk of exclusion.”

The open question “What impact, in your opinion, does the activity of your non-governmental organisation have on the environment?” allowed the surveyed NGOs to evaluate their own activities: “Very big – we facilitate training programmes for players from smaller towns, as well as participation in competitions and tournaments in the country and abroad. Our players represented our country in the international arena at the European Championships,” “we are the only social organisation in the region. The local social assistance centre (MOPS) sends its clients to us with the slogan ‘they will help you’. We have often provoked a large social discussion about the management of the commune,” “Positive – we have created new jobs in the countryside, we provide meals of proven quality to nurseries, schools, and kindergartens.”

Referring to the transparency of public life, one of the questions was “Does your organisation have knowledge of what is public information?” 87.1% of the respondents replied “yes,” and 12.9% provided a negative answer. The respondents indicated how they understood “public information.” For them, “it is information issued by the government, sometimes, in some countries, by courts and other bodies,

including associations or foundations”; “these are all kinds of information on the organisation and activities of the Club, with particular emphasis on the public funds that the Club acquires. Providing public information equals openness of action”; “this is the information that should be referred to anyone interested, e.g. a bus timetable, information about the statute of the Association and its Management Board, etc.” 74% of the surveyed NGOs indicated that they did not receive an application for disclosure of public information, which shows little interest of citizens in access to information on the activities of the organisation in the application procedure. The analysis of the answers to the question where the NGO publishes information about its activities has allowed to draw the following conclusions. First, 45.2% of surveyed organisations publish information on a social networking site. Second, 9.7% of the surveyed organisations do not publish any information about their activities. Third, almost one third (32.3%) publish information about their activities on their website.

The study has shown a new form of providing public information that is not mentioned in previous studies, i.e. social networks, which have turned out to be the most common and popular channel of public communication. Considering the growing number of users of social networking sites and the age range of users, this method of disclosing information about one’s activity can be very effective.

As regards, the frequency of publishing information, 42% of respondents disclose information once a month, 32% once a week, and some organisations do it once a year, so the frequency is not high. The survey has revealed a large variety of information published mainly on social networks, including:

- the bad situation of the commune’s education system, state of indebtedness of the commune, or propaganda of success;
- information about the competition “SHARE YOUR MEMORIES ABOUT Elektryczne Koleje Dojazdowe (EKD, Electric Commuter Railway) / Warszawska Kolej Dojazdowa (WKD, Warsaw Commuter Railway)”;
- a concert;
- a project for old-age pensioners;
- information on the latest social/cultural event with the participation of members of the association;
- organisation of a sports event: Amateur Volleyball League;
- announcement of some delays; the last one concerns local and social tourism;
- preparations for the international volunteer day;
- food tasting festival;
- reports of workshops;
- a public fundraising initiative organised for a boy suffering from leukaemia;
- fire-fighting activities in a building;
- getting a grant from the “Strengthen your surroundings” scheme;

- theatrical activities, such as e.g. a puppet theatre;
- “Depression in children and adolescents” conference;
- debt;
- promotion of physical activity and fitness;
- organisation of a concert;
- current activities and vacancies;
- summaries of summer camps and other types of trips;
- promoting karate as a sport that teaches and educates;
- other types of public information disclosed by the organisation in cooperation with its partners.

Conclusions

The Round Table talks have undoubtedly paved the way for civil society, providing the possibility of launching a vast array of non-governmental organisations. They have also contributed to the increase in the transparency of public life. However, the question should be asked whether the potential of rights and privileges obtained at that time is being fully used. It would seem that today we have a full catalogue of legal tools for participating in public life. Yet the activity of citizens is not yet high enough to stop its development. According to Zbigniew Woźniak, the chance for the completion of the systemic transformation in Poland for contemporary society is to carry on with the big project of socialisation of the state. According to the author, the development of civil society can take place through the development of democratisation and the expansion of various areas of real social dialogue, clarifying what the principle of subsidiarity is, completing the full process of decentralising state structures and decision-making by authorities at various levels of government, and enhancing social participation and initiatives of active citizens by giving them the opportunity to expand the areas of meeting the needs of society, especially where this help is most needed. Nowadays, a democratic state guarantees the activity of active citizens, which manifests itself in many different forms of participation. Nevertheless, the third sector is a complementary activity of the local and regional authorities or it “fights with the local system”, as pointed to in one of the answers provided to the open question “Why was your non-governmental organisation established?” in the survey conducted for the purpose of this study.

The basic form of NGOs operating in the Mazowieckie Voivodeship is an association. Foundations and sports clubs are also a significant part. NGOs have a wide spectrum of activities. The areas of their activity are, among others, culture, sport, education, health protection, or local development.

The survey has allowed the authors to draw the conclusion that the activities of NGOs covered by the survey are addressed to all citizens. At this moment, the

study allows us to conclude that access to public information in non-governmental organisations may fulfil several functions. First, it can be an organisation's control tool over other public entities. Second, the activity in publishing information can act as a PR tool. Another function is the reporting function on the activities of a given organisation. An important conclusion is that the activity seen in the field of public information is rather low. Also, the activities of NGOs seem to dominate at the local level.

Another important conclusion is the instrumental use of the GDPR to hinder contacts with NGOs. Covering the GDPR by council counties causes complications in finding e-mail addresses or profiles on Facebook for the third sector. Currently, there is no database of non-governmental organisations that would be systematically run, for example, by one public entity.

The results of the analysis presented in this article will be the starting point for further research in this area. The research is in progress given the preparation of the database of contacts between NGOs in the Mazowieckie Voivodeship. Subsequent areas of the analysis will relate to the transparency of public life and the definition of the roles of non-governmental organisations.

The essence of the relationship between access to public information and NGOs in general terms of the issues of civil society and participation is also noticeable. It turns out that most of the organisations covered by the research are obliged to publish information about their activities, which is due to the method of their financing. Being active in informing about their activities – even for organisations that do not have such an obligation, but are still public – could have a positive effect on the perception of this activity among people. Education from an early age can be crucial in developing civil society. Educating children and young people, as well as activating them and working for the benefit of their “small homelands,” may play a huge role in their civic awareness in the future. Civic education is extremely important and may be forgotten or overlooked in school curricula. What is also important in the development of civil society is the way in which the relations between the rulers and the citizens function. This is of particular importance at the local level.

Admittedly, open and willing to help public authorities become a driving force for civic activity. Their legal support would also be of great importance here. When transferring public funds to NGOs, it would be worth informing these organisations about the effects of the obligation to disclose public information. A major example of active information about its activities from the authorities could also contribute to active information about its activities by NGOs. Disclosing public information about publicly funded activities could strengthen public confidence in a given organisation in a major way. It is about the active promotion of information on the activities of the organisation. Such information, based on the idea of transparency and clarity of purpose, can play a large role in the development of these organisations.

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Building civil society in post-1989 Poland by implementing the principle of openness of public life in non-governmental organisations in the Mazowieckie Voivodeship

Abstract

Nowadays, civil society is often regarded as tantamount to participatory democracy, which rests on the idea of voluntary participation in public life. The political transformation of the early 1990s was a watershed time that gave Poles the opportunity to participate fully in building a democratic state. The starting point for the thoughts and findings shared in this text are the results of a survey conducted among non-governmental organisations that operate in the Mazowieckie Voivodeship in Poland. The authors have conducted quantitative research on the functioning of the right of access to public information in NGOs. The first part of the study presents the origins of modern civil society, followed by an analysis of the extent to which public participation and openness of social life were an important element of the Round Table Talks held in 1989. The second part of the text is devoted to the description of the research methodology applied. The third part outlines the results of the research carried out so far, pointing to the major areas of NGO activity, as well as to the way in which access to information functions in these organisations. The text highlights the impact of the political changes of 1989 in Poland on the contemporary possibilities of citizens in participation in public life, and the extent to which society is active and willing to exercise its rights. Emphasis has also been placed on the interrelationship between the two core elements of civil society: openness of public life, i.e. access to information, and the activities of NGOs.

Key words: civil society, non-governmental organisations, public information, openness of public life, Mazowieckie Voivodeship