

Kaja Klencka<sup>1</sup>

## New Movements and Old Dilemmas. Analysis of the Institutionalisation Processes in the Fridays For Future Movement in Poland

The aim of this article is to analyse the Fridays For Future movement (FFF) in Poland from the perspective of organizational dilemmas faced by social movements. Referring to the concept of institutionalisation, I describe the tension between the practice of democratic principles and the pursuit of effective political protest present in the FFF movement. Based on in-depth individual interviews with FFF activists, as well as the existing data, I describe the organisational dilemmas faced by FFF in four different fields: standardisation of decision-making procedures within the movement (1), establishing relations with traditional, professional organizations of the ecological movement (2), mobilisation of social support (3), access to policy makers (4).

**Keywords:** climate crisis, institutionalisation, sociology of social movements, Fridays For Future

Nowe ruchy i stare wyzwania. Analiza procesów instytucjonalizacji  
w Młodzieżowym Strajku Klimatycznym\*

Celem artykułu jest analiza Młodzieżowego Strajku Klimatycznego (MSK) z perspektywy dylematów organizacyjnych ruchów społecznych. Odnosząc się do kategorii instytucjonalizacji, pokazuję obecne w MSK napięcie między realizowaniem założeń demokratyczności a dążeniem do efektywnego protestu politycznego. Opieram się na pogłębionych wywiadach indywidualnych z działaczami MSK i analizie danych zastanych, aby opisać dylematy organizacyjne tego ruchu na czterech różnych polach: unormowania struktur decyzyjnych wewnątrz ruchu (1), nawiązywania relacji z tradycyjnymi, sprofesjonalizowanymi

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<sup>1</sup> University of Warsaw, Faculty of Sociology, DELab UW, k.klencka@delab.uw.edu.pl.

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organizacjami ruchu ekologicznego (2), mobilizowania poparcia społecznego (3), związków z aktorami polityki instytucjonalnej (4).

**Słowa kluczowe:** kryzys klimatyczny, instytucjonalizacja, socjologia ruchów społecznych, Młodzieżowy Strajk Klimatyczny

## Introduction

The year 2019 was exceptional in terms of the unprecedented scale and coordination of social mobilisation around the climate crisis. The youth protest movement Fridays For Future (FFF), launched with the strikes by Swedish activists in August 2018, gained huge recognition. Young Swede, Greta Thunberg, became the face of the new climate movement, and FFF offshoots rapidly spread to other European countries. The Youth Climate Strike (Młodzieżowy Strajk Klimatyczny, MSK), Polish offshoot of the FFF movement, launched in late 2018, quickly spread to the country's major cities and gained media visibility. In the following months, thousands of young Polish men and women took part in climate strikes.

In 2020, the pandemic halted the rapid growth of the movement, and the reduction in opportunities for street protest prompted MSK to seek new forms of action. These recent events provide an excellent opportunity to reflect on the circumstances surrounding the creation, formation and possible future of MSK. I would like to look at these issues from the perspective of the organisational dilemmas of social movements. Treating organisational structure as a field for negotiating norms and values (Jasper 2015), I will examine the organisational assumptions of MSK, paying particular attention to their impact on the potential effectiveness and sustainability of the movement's activities.

In the present paper, I will discuss selected aspects of the MSK, pointing out how its nature as a youth, informal movement, operating outside the realm of institutional politics, influences the processes of formalisation of norms and organisational structures taking place within it. Keeping the right balance between ensuring the movement's independence and identity and its effectiveness is an ongoing dilemma, which all social movements have to face: I see this tension as an almost defining part of a social movement. In this view, even a grassroots movement such as MSK cannot avoid some degree of formalisation or institutionalisation of norms in order to increase its efficiency. I will be studying this tension in four different fields: standardisation of organisational and decision-making structures within the movement (1), establishing relations with traditional, professional

organizations of the ecological movement (2), mobilisation of social support (3), access to policy makers<sup>2</sup> (4).

## Methodology

The research material includes a review of the literature on the subject, content provided by MSK on its website and the movement's social media profiles, as well as ten individual interviews conducted with the MSK members: high school students and university students (two interviewees from each of five different cities in Poland).

All interviews took place in January–February 2021 and were conducted in the video conference mode due to the ongoing pandemic. Respondents were aged between 16 and 20 years<sup>3</sup> and recruited with the use of the snowball method following contacts obtained through social media. They came from four voivodeship cities, including Warsaw, and one medium-sized city. All respondents joined the MSK between March and October 2019, which is when the movement was formed.

Such a selection of respondents does not allow for a full characterisation of the MSK's activities at the local level, but it does allow for a broader view of the movement as a national organisation from the perspective of those who are familiar with the specifics of their city and the ways in which the local MSK group operates. The majority of respondents have an important role within their local group: they were involved in the establishment of the MSK in their city or stand out with their activity at the local or supra-local level.

## Social movement institutionalisation theory

In the present paper, I draw on the achievements of the resource mobilisation theory, as well as the cultural and identity analyses to see what organisational dilemmas accompany the processes of emergence, formation and eventual formalisation of the MSK movement. I therefore consider the organisation and organisational structure as an important resource of social movements, which is,

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<sup>3</sup> In the case of two minors, consent to participate in the study was given by their parents in addition to the subjects themselves, in accordance with the recommendation of the Code of Ethics for Sociologists adopted by the Polish Sociological Association (see *Kodeks etyki socjologa* 2012).

at the same time, a field for negotiating meanings and values, which significantly influences the effectiveness of the movement.

Many researchers, especially representatives of the resource mobilisation theory, attributed the effectiveness of the social movements to the development of structures with a greater degree of formalisation of norms and centralisation of decisions. The resource mobilisation theory analyses the organisational structures of a social movement in the context of the benefits and successes it can obtain or achieve. First formulated in 1977 (McCarthy, Zald 1977), it initiated research into the characteristics of specific social movement organisations, focused in particular on their degree of formalisation and professionalisation (Caniglia, Carmin 2005: 202–203). This perspective focuses on the analysis of the organisational structures and processes taking place within the social movement and the groups that constitute it. Furthermore, it indicates that effective forms of collective action are enabled by the availability of adequate resources to transform initial political discontent into an active social force. Different types of organisation and formalisation allow the mobilisation of different resources and have impact on their effective use.

In classical terms, institutionalisation is understood as a change within the organisation of a social movement leading to internal formalisation and the transformation of the movement into a specialised structure. Institutionalisation represents here the final stage in the development cycle of a social movement (della Porta, Diani 2006: 190) and is a way of adapting to the environment, increasing the likelihood of sustaining continuity of movement during periods of lower mobilisation (Staggenborg 1988: 597–599). Detailing the history of the environmental movement in Poland up to the mid-1990s, Piotr Gliński sees the success of the movement precisely in the structural changes leading to increasing formalisation and professionalisation of activities. This development is necessary if only because of the need for financial resources, thus the need for legal personality, or the need to maintain contacts with the institutional environment, above all with public administration institutions of various levels (Gliński 1996: 333).

However, the formalisation of structures can also bring negative aspects, including the phenomenon of co-optation, when the adoption of formalised or bureaucratic structures within a social movement is associated with a shift towards conservative views and strategies. When movements become institutionalised in the sense that their framework, rhetoric and goals are adopted by mainstream organisations, this can be seen as a kind of the movement's co-optation. On the other hand, it can be a sign of its success in spreading the ideas it promotes (Staggenborg 2013).

It should be noted, of course, that the effectiveness of the social movement's actions can be understood in different ways. Gliński (1996: 29) lists a number of objectives that the movements can pursue. For the purposes of my research, the most important indicators are: the achievement of the movement's directly articulated

goals, ensuring its stability and continuity, the ability to resolve internal divisions, the ability to mobilise public support, and the ability to establish beneficial relations with the movement's environment. Effectiveness depends on the nature of the movement and the goals it wants to achieve, but also on the socio-political context in which it operates.

It should be noted here that analyses in the field of the resource mobilisation theory tend to focus exclusively on the professionalised social movement organisations. This is clearly a limitation, as most social movements are not institutionalised in the sense outlined above: some of them disintegrate or radicalise their goals and forms of action (della Porta, Diani 2006: 191), others consciously reject formal structures. However, Frank den Hond et al. (2015: 291–292) argue that the organisational theory is applicable not only to the analysis of these professionalised entities, but also to movements or initiatives with a loose structure. These researchers propose the use of the category of partial organising (see Ahrne, Brunsson 2011) to analyse the presence of selected elements of formal organisation in a movement, which may change over time and be subject to internal conflicts and tensions (den Hond et al. 2015: 292–293). In this perspective, institutionalisation will therefore not be understood as the final stage of the movement's evolution, in which it takes the form of a professionalised organisation, i.e. a limited entity with formal rules, but as a non-linear process.

Gliński proposes a similar understanding of institutionalisation defined as “not so much the construction of hierarchical organisational structures, stifling any spontaneity in the movement's activities and fostering the processes of its oligarchisation, but rather a dynamic and generally conscious process of structural change in the organisation of the movement” (Gliński 1996: 331–332). In Gliński's view, the constant tension between the degree of institutionalisation and the dynamism and vitality of the movement is the essence of the formal identity of the social movement. There are many patterns to this relationship, and spontaneity does not preclude the existence of formalised structures and vice versa (Gliński 1996: 27–28).

This view is useful for the study of a movement such as MSK, where the values associated with its informal and democratic nature shape its organisational structure. This perspective allows us to look at the movement's organisational structures from the perspective of the tension between the effort to make operations more efficient and the effort to sustain value. It is worth emphasising here that while partial organisation may result from an inability to mobilise sufficient resources, it may also be a conscious choice resulting from ideological or strategic considerations (den Hond et al. 2015: 300).

In the case of a movement such as MSK, both the movement's goals and its organisational structure are determined largely by the values relevant to the movement's very identity. They also directly affect the nature of the relationship with

the institutional environment and the way external resources are sourced. This relationship between values and organisational forms is captured very well by the theory of new social movements. Supporters of this theory point to the relevance of organisational forms, stating that they are themselves a contested terrain because they express and represent the demands and values common to the movement. In this view, organisation is not only an instrumental resource for maximising utility, but also a resource for legitimising the practice of protest, as well as expressing collective identities and goals (Lahusen 1996: 36).

Summarising the different theoretical approaches of classical theories of new social movements formulated since the 1980s, Steven Buechler (1995: 448) states that one of the distinguishing features of such movements is “the combination of ideological bonds and political style”. This means upholding a particular identity or value within the movement and a style of political action that involves distancing oneself from institutionalised politics. New social movements generally operate within a bottom-up, informal organisational structure and adopt anti-hierarchical principles. A structure of this kind strives for the democratic participation of all members in the decision-making process.

Of course, in some respects MSK is far from the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s described by the early theorists of the new social movements. It would be more accurate to consider it as a global movement (Wieviorka 2011: 85), which is characterised primarily by a focus on global challenges not limited to the nation-state framework – in this particular case, the problem of climate change. However, MSK is also characterised by the attitude of distancing itself from institutional politics, which is derived from the tradition of the new social movements, and the appreciation of the value of direct democracy.

### MSK as a new climate movement

MSK is an example of a social movement that came about as a result of spontaneous collective action, inspired by similar activities taking place simultaneously in other European countries. The first MSK strike took place in September 2018 in Warsaw, and the movement quickly spread to other cities as well. In September 2019, demonstrations took place in 68 cities. In March 2019, some 6,700 protesters took part in the largest event in Warsaw; this number reached 12,000 in September (Davies et al. 2020: 187). The emergence of MSK is part of a broader wave of grassroots social mobilisation in favour of the fight against climate change, which began to develop particularly intensively in Poland in 2018.

In 2018, the transnational Extinction Rebellion (XR) movement began operating in Poland and the Camp for Climate (Obóz dla Klimatu) initiative, inspired

by similar actions undertaken in other European countries, including the German Ende Gelände camp, was launched. MSK can be considered as part of a wave of new climate activism in Poland that stands out from the entire environmental movement (Císař 2022: 38–40). The groups mentioned are inspired by or part of transnational activist networks sharing similar values and forms of action. The new movements declare an interest primarily in issues related to the state of the climate, ignoring other environmental struggles and particular environmental concerns. They are demanding systemic solutions – above all the energy transition and a giving up coal – and a profound social change leading to the emergence of a low-carbon society.

MSK is in a sense an ‘imported’ movement, inspired by foreign initiatives rather than the professionalised environmental groups that have been active in Poland for years. The first MSK strikes were organised without relying on the previous organisational structure of the Polish environmental movement. A research team analysing participants in the MSK strikes in Warsaw in March and September 2019 found that the events were mainly attended by minors, with little involvement of members of environmental organisations, the Green party or other supporting institutions (Kocyba et al. 2020: 88, 92).

According to the researchers, this participant structure distinguishes MSK from other FFF events which took place at the same time, where young people were more often accompanied by adults. On the one hand, this testifies to the success of MSK, and the FFF as a whole, in mobilising so many young people, for whom participation in a strike is often their first experience with activism, potentially setting them on a path to further political engagement (de Moor et al. 2021: 621). On the other hand, it may show the weakness of institutional support or the marginality of the topic in the social consciousness of Poles (Kocyba et al. 2020: 92).

MSK describes itself as a grassroots democratic movement, “emphasizing the importance of the full participation of all members involved in the decision-making process” (*Nasze wartości* online). In doing so, it fits with the trend of movements that pay considerable attention to internal democratic practices and the value of horizontalism. This mode of operation, typical of contemporary social and protest movements, involves the presence of horizontal, decentralised structures that function on the principle of direct participation of all individuals in the decision-making process. These structures, along with the resignation from the appointment of formal leaders and the great importance attached to inclusivity, aim to actively reduce inequalities (Berglund, Schmidt 2020: 45).

I will therefore be analysing MSK as a grassroots and informal initiative that, in the course of its development, has taken on organisational characteristics with varying degrees of formalisation. I attach particular importance to the tension between these formalised norms and the ecological and democratic values essential to the identity of MSK as a new climate movement.

## Between efficiency and democracy

The organisational structure of MSK reflects the fact that the movement operates at three different levels: international, national and local. Supralocal projects are undertaken within working groups. These groups are formed to carry out a specific task, often of a long-term nature, and bring together interested individuals from all over Poland. Moreover, activists are active in autonomous local groups usually concentrated in large or medium-sized urban centres. According to the MSK website, the movement is currently active in 57 different localities (Młodzieżowy Strajk Klimatyczny online; at the time of the interviews, there were 66 of them).

Activists emphasise that local groups are characterised by considerable freedom in the choice of the actions they take, as well as the way in which they carry them out. The coherence of these decentralised undertakings is ensured in several different ways. This function is primarily performed by a nationwide communication and information network centred around the Facebook group Młodzieżowy Strajk Klimatyczny – Polska (Youth Climate Strike – Poland, which has 651 members; at the time of publication of the article, MSK had abandoned the use of this group in favour of communication on the Slack platform). Private contacts between activists also play an important role, as do the national meetings, usually organised once a year, to which local groups can send representatives. These meetings provide an opportunity to discuss key issues for the movement; the results of these discussions are made public on the movement's Facebook forum.

This organisational structure underpins the decision-making system of the MSK, the emergence of which provides the clearest example of the occurrence of institutionalisation processes within the movement. MSK is currently making decisions that require the acceptance of the entire movement using a preferential weight system. Each local group casts a separate vote, and its weight depends on the number of people active in a given city. In each group, one person is responsible for informing the other members of the vote. This person presents others with questionnaires with options prepared by a nationwide working group on the basis of previous discussions, and subsequently communicates the decision made within the locality back to the nationwide level. The votes of all the local groups are counted, after which the final decision is made.

However, most of my interviewees were unable to explain in detail the rules according to which this final result is formulated. One activist only mentioned that for various issues there are specific qualified majorities necessary to pass changes. Decisions made this way concern issues such as changes to the principles of the movement operation, e.g. changes to the decision-making system itself, but also the acceptance of funding or cooperation with external organisations,



media or companies. It therefore applies to decisions on the issues of essential aims and values of MSK, as well as on defining the scope of its activities as a movement.

The circumstances of setting up this decision-making system are interesting on their own, because it has not been in place since the beginning of MSK, but was developed and implemented in the first year of the pandemic. The pandemic-induced reduction in the possibilities of the movement's previous modes of action and expression was a significant challenge for MSK. In some cities, the lockdown caused a halt in local activity – the frequency of meetings of local group members decreased, previously planned projects were suspended, and the mental condition of young activists also suffered. The nationwide operations were not affected to such a significant extent: it is worth noting that in this area, works were regularly carried out in the remote mode even before the pandemic.

Although respondents faced numerous difficulties during the pandemic, this time was also an opportunity for MSK to reflect on the internal practices and organisational dynamics of the movement as a whole. For MSK, the pandemic period was a time of revision of the initial, largely spontaneous assumptions that accompanied the formation of the movement in late 2018 and early 2019. Interviewees saw these changes in terms of a natural consequence of MSK's growth, the increase in the number of its members and local groups, and the resulting greater diversity of opinions, which created a demand for a new decision-making system. One activist stated that the main issues and discussions that take place within the movement are precisely on how to make decisions well in such a large group. Interviewees judged the introduction of a standardised voting system as necessary due to the fact that the completely informal nature of the movement did not allow for effective action and conflict resolution.

The decision-making system is thus a field of negotiation between the pursuit of operational efficiency and the preservation of the values that constitute the movement's identity. The most important values declared by MSK include the democratic and full participation of all activists in the decision-making process and the rejection of a vertical hierarchy of members. This is also the rationale behind the aforementioned standardised voting system used by MSK: every member of the movement is supposed to be able to express their voice and influence the decisions that MSK makes as a whole.

In practice, the implementation of these values of democracy and transparency presents several difficulties. The decision-making system used within MSK has specific rules, which all interviewees were able to at least generally approximate. However, the mode of conducting discussions and formulating options that appear in the questionnaires sent to activists is much less standardised and widely known, and consequently non-transparent. Every member of the MSK's nationwide

Facebook group has the opportunity to express their opinion there, yet one activist admitted that he was unsure about how the final decision was ultimately made.

It should also be noted that, while MSK has no formal hierarchy or leader, there are informal positions of authority within it, held by members who have longer experience, extensive networks within and outside the movement, as well as knowledge of both the details of organisational action and the factual aspects involved in setting the movement's very goals. Most of the surveyed activists play just such a role within the movement or their local group. They are people who have been involved in setting up a MSK local group in their city or town, have experience working at local, national and international level, or are active or have been active in the past in other movements or organisations in their cities.

In addition, the preferential weight system adopted by the MSK, which makes the value of a given local group's vote dependent on the average number of people on strike in that city, may lead to the voice of small cities and towns – which are not able to mobilise as many people as larger urban centres – not being fully represented. One respondent from a large city referred to this problem as follows:

The discrepancy isn't that great. In such cities, it certainly depends on how many people are active; a small city or town doesn't necessarily has to have one vote. It also depends on how many people came to the strikes: if there are a lot of them, the city or town has more people, which translates into the number of votes. We know very well that this system isn't perfect. It's very difficult to find a system that works fairly, that would reflect everyone's voice. Yet, this system has allowed – although it hasn't worked for a long time yet – to somehow evaluate how we make decisions.

Several interviewees similarly emphasised that the system has been introduced only recently and is therefore in a kind of testing phase and at the same time stated that it took a lot of time to develop this system and its implementation made the work much easier.

Changes in the organisational structure of MSK show above all the development of information and communication networks, as well as the standardisation of certain procedures, the most important of which is the process of decision-making and conflict resolution within the movement.

### Rise of the youth versus traditional structures

The functioning of the movement and its development opportunities are influenced by the movement's institutional environment and the establishment of favourable relationships with the actors operating in this environment. It is worth it

to examine MSK through the concept of the organisational field (Minkoff, McCarthy 2005: 291), understood as a collection of interest groups – in this case the organisations and initiatives that make up the environmental movement – directed towards similar issues and goals, operating in a single field together with other actors. These actors can include government institutions, sponsoring institutions, scientific institutes, NGOs or the media. In this perspective, MSK is a group operating in the same field with other climate and environmental movement organisations and political institutions, whose actions influence each other. In this section, I will focus on the relationships that MSK establishes with other environmental movement organisations.

As I have already mentioned, MSK refers in its activities primarily to foreign models and other branches of the FFF movement, but does not cut itself off from existing structures of the wider environmental movement in Poland. For example, it cooperates with various organisations affiliated with the Climate Coalition (Koalicja Klimatyczna), which is an alliance of 27 NGOs involved in climate action. Organisations such as Greenpeace provide MSK with expert resources, offering advice and expertise on the practical and legal aspects of public activity through training or private contacts. For some time, Greenpeace also served as a funding body for MSK.

As an informal social movement, MSK has no permanent funding – most of the resources needed to organise strikes are obtained by activists through private contacts or existing local activism networks. Funds are also gathered through fund-raising initiatives organised by local MSK groups for the given strike. In the past activists also benefited from external funding, including from the aforementioned Greenpeace, which involved reimbursing the costs of organising strikes.

However, MSK has since decided to accept no financial support. On the one hand, it stems from a desire to be consistent with its own demands by entering into partnerships only with organisations or companies that represent values that are in line with those of MSK and ensuring that funding sources are fully ecological. On the other hand, in this example we can clearly see the tension between the movement's desire for autonomy and the dependence on institutional actors or other organisations from the climate movement field, as well as the infrastructural support they can provide.

This desire for autonomy may indicate an opportunity for the development of a new climate movement in Poland, which will not be absorbed by traditional professionalised organisations and will represent a new quality in the environmental movement. However, the survival and success of MSK seems uncertain without sufficient infrastructural support to maintain the continuity and effectiveness of the movement reaching beyond the spontaneous phases of mobilisation. Ensuring such continuity is also difficult due to the youthful nature of the movement

and the resulting transient type of participation. This problem is recognised by the respondents themselves:

It seems to me that the membership in the Climate Strike, although it's not any formalised group, that the people who are active are in some way transient, because, basically, among those of us who started the strike, there are only a couple left, because people left to start their studies, or they said they needed a bit of a break or something like that. But then, new members join in. [...] I myself think I'm going to slowly withdraw, because I'm studying and it's a bit different now. I also think everyone has their time and now it's time for the younger ones to act. Maybe someone will start an environmental group for seniors, then I'll join in.

Activists currently active in the movement are usually students in the final grades of primary and high school, sometimes also university students. MSK activities are characterised by a low entry threshold, meaning that members can easily both join and leave the movement, with the new, inexperienced people taking their place. In many cases, MSK activities come to a natural end with the end of high school education, which marks a new stage in the life of young adults and often involves moving to another city. In such a situation, it can be difficult to accumulate experiences within the movement and create a coherent and precise message. On the one hand, this poses a challenge to the continuity of the movement, while on the other hand, it naturally inhibits the professionalisation and institutionalisation processes.

### Mobilising public support

To ensure the sustainability and effectiveness of the movement, in addition to access to specific resources, an appropriate interpretive framework is needed to mobilise new members and ensure public support. Interpretive frameworks are narratives that indicate to audiences “who or what might be the cause of a problem, the relevance or importance of the issue, and what should be done in terms of policy or personal actions” (Nisbet 2011: 361). They are particularly important as MSK seeks to achieve social and political change primarily by influencing public opinion.

Eugene Nulman (2015: 128) distinguishes in this field five possible strategies for achieving political change: disrupting the regular functioning of society through methods of protest or rioting (1); attempting to change public opinion (2); gaining formal political access (3); entering into a legal dispute (4); and exerting pressure on domestic politics through reference to international politics (5). The strategy for influencing public opinion adopted by the MSK involves making the movement's

message convincing to as much of the public as possible, by presenting climate change as an important social problem.

Interpretive frameworks are used by social movements to convincingly justify their claims, which in the case of MSK means presenting climate change as a relevant social problem. In order to achieve that, MSK, similarly to other climate movements, refers in its demands to the institution of science and the authority of the scientific community. It is one of the factors from which MSK draws its credibility and is the basis for making the movement's claims universally relevant.

The second important factor, specific to MSK, is a kind of universalism of its messaging. MSK describes itself as an 'non-party' movement, i.e. not involved in political disputes between different parties. In this context, activists very often invoke the slogan of 'climate beyond divisions', pointing out that the consequences of climate change will affect everyone regardless of political divisions and so the climate crisis cannot be subject to ideological disputes and requires universal commitment regardless of political affiliation:

We often try to talk about it as a thing that is beyond divisions, because a person may not respect me, but it doesn't change the fact that we'll all be affected. Whatever one can say, we're all equal in the face of this issue. We all need to act, to equally feel this kind of responsibility, this duty to demand something from the authorities.

The activists are trying to reach as wide audience as possible and therefore avoid presenting views that could discourage support for the MSK:

We simply want as many people as possible from all backgrounds to take an interest in climate, which is why we don't have specific political or any other views. We don't define ourselves as a right-wing, left-wing or centrist organisation. We want to bring everyone together, so we don't have specific views.

The drive to win over as much support as possible also means that MSK does not have a defined position on economic issues, and for a long time it also did not have a position on the energy source that was supposed to become the basis of the fair energy transition advocated by the movement<sup>4</sup>. Furthermore, MSK does not undertake any open critique of the capitalist system, an issue that is highly controversial within the movement. References to large corporations and industry as addressees of claims or actors responsible for climate change were also very rare in the interviewees' statements.

MSK is also rather limited in its intersectionality. The support given to non-climate movements, such as feminist or LGBT activists, is controversial within

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<sup>4</sup> In early 2022, MSK formulated a position on this issue, opting for mix of renewable energy sources and nuclear energy.

the movement, despite the fact that many activists, including the respondents themselves, undertake social activism of this nature. In this respect, MSK diverges from initiatives such as XR or Climate Camp, which openly declare intersectionality. This rule had an exception, when MSK as well as some other pro-climate movements joined in the protests held in December 2020 by the Polish Women's Strike (Ogólnopolski Strajk Kobiet, OSK). Marches under the slogan 'Walk for the Future' were meant to be a short-term alliance related to the European Council summit taking place at the time.

However, MSK's official involvement with the OSK has caused controversy among young activists:

MSK doesn't take action with movements, doesn't take part in actions that involve civil disobedience. All activity should be legal because we're young people. This strike was a good option, but not for MSK, who wants to keep the entire activity legal. This later badly backfired in the media and damaged MSK's image as a movement that is non-partisan, isn't anti-government. This legality is supposed to show that we aren't yet another militant group or political youth organization, so that we don't alienate people from us. You can probably admit yourself that if someone does something illegal, such a person is immediately perceived with mistrust. It's very important for us to de-ideologise the topic of climate so that everyone can feel that it involves them.

MSK stresses that it only takes legal action and does not use more radical methods such as the strategy of civil disobedience. Participation in the action taking place during the lockdown was a deviation from this rule and some respondents felt that it had not been sufficiently discussed. There were also doubts among activists about giving support to a movement that does not address climate change:

I didn't care much about the questionable legality issue, although it's quite important, because of course everything in our PR has to be perfect. The problem was actually that we aligned ourselves with an organisation that, let's be frank, doesn't give a damn about us. What have they done for the climate? Well, nothing. And I'd argue that they shouldn't do anything about it because they're a *women's* strike. And they're fighting for something entirely different.

Other respondents in turn pointed to the benefits of cooperation with OSK, which allowed MSK to reach a larger audience.

Some activists see limiting the field of interest of the MSK solely to climate change issue as the right thing to do, in line with the idea that commitment to only one issue contributes to the uniqueness of the movement and helps to avoid unduly diluting its goals. This position of the movement allows for an openness to people with differing beliefs and a plurality of individual attitudes to be maintained

without the need to definitively resolve controversial issues. MSK thus aims to avoid conflicts both outside and inside the movement. The threat, however, is the low mobilisation potential of the movement related to the lack of demands appealing to strong controversy and social emotions.

Additionally, the young activists emphasise that they do not try to propose their own specific solutions, e.g. in the field of energy transition, because they distance themselves from the role of experts. They instead refer to existing scientific knowledge, understanding their own role as publicising the position of science. Moreover, MSK calls for the adoption of a law by the Polish Parliament that would establish a Climate Council composed of independent experts and scientists. Its task would be to develop a pathway for Poland to achieve climate neutrality by 2040.

Activists thus accumulate a certain amount of expertise that allows them to formulate policy demands and participate in the public debate, while also benefiting from the substantive support of the scientists themselves. However, they avoid professionalisation and give up their own legitimacy to propose solutions. The strength of MSK's message is to be found in the young age of the activists and their authenticity, not in their authority as experts in climate science. However, this approach may be linked to a phenomenon that Oscar Berglund and Daniel Schmidt in their book on the Extinction Rebellion movement call a "solution agnosticism" (Berglund, Schmidt 2020: 67). The authors point out that the citizens' assembly advocated by XR that is supposed to develop binding climate policy solutions within the principles of deliberative democracy, actually limits the debate on these solutions within the movement itself. Activists focus on discussing tactics, actions or media messages, spending surprisingly little time trying to answer the question of what kind of lifestyle and vision of society is needed to deal with the climate crisis (Berglund, Schmidt 2020: 68–69).

Such a phenomenon also occurs in the case of MSK and has important consequences for the operation of the movement, as MSK argues that it lacks the legitimacy to develop climate policy solutions, assigning a significant role in this matter to the state government, as the actor that ought to take actions necessary to respond to climate change.

### Policy makers – towards the state and the city

Recognising the state as the main addressee of MSK's political claims raises the question of the movement's ability to influence key state actors. Regulated access to policy makers is, in some accounts, one of the manifestations of the institutionalisation of the social movement (Thörn, Svenberg 2016: 594–596). As a grassroots protest movement, MSK operates outside the realm

of institutional politics and does not seek political positions or functions. It also lacks regulated channels of access to decision-making spheres in the sense of democratic institutions, such as public consultations that are held with NGOs. This is partly due to the peculiarities of the Polish political context, in which the influence of NGOs on policy-making and administrative decisions is often dismissed by policy-makers as unnecessary (Szulecka, Szulecki 2019: 23).

Still, the state remains the most important actor to which MSK addresses its demands, and the movement's strategy is to focus on the national and local politics and to appeal to politicians at these levels. It is worth noting that this strategy leaves out other potential actors such as international institutions, the fossil fuel industry or major industrial corporations – the latter were very rarely identified by respondents as addressees of demands or actors responsible for climate change.

Some scholars consider this attitude towards the state as a marker of the FFF's particular identity as a new climate movement – Joost de Moor et al. (2021: 622) state that while in previous years climate activism has focused on grassroots forms of protest and taking direct action against the fossil fuel industry, FFF and XR represent a 'return towards the state'. However, the researchers emphasise that this renewed focus on the state should not be attributed to a blind faith in the politicians' ability to act, as very few FFF activists actually believe that politicians can be relied upon to solve the climate crisis. While FFF activists demand that politicians "listen to the science" and "follow the Paris Agreement", they stress that it is the protesters themselves who are forcing decision-makers to act (de Moor et al. 2021: 623).

However, the Polish government remains unambitious in terms of meeting climate policy goals (Wrona, Czyżak 2021: 14–19). The lack of interest of the authorities on this issue is also indicated by the respondents themselves:

We're operating on difficult terrain; we have a government that was ready to veto the climate packages and the EU budget for the next years. Others didn't have to fight for such fundamental things as we did. What sets us apart is the activist field, we have more work to do on mobilising the government, the society. It seems to me that in other EU countries governments are pro-climate and the activists there are mobilising the government to implement solutions faster, while we're still at the stage that we're mobilising the government to develop these solutions at all.

In this situation, the activities of other political actors – cities or regions – are also gaining increasing importance for the climate movement. Listing the challenges of assigning responsibility for climate policy governance to actors at different political levels, Daniel Farber argues for a polycentric approach to governance in the face of climate change. He notes that smaller units of government can be a valuable source of innovation and local knowledge in the process of creating regulations and mitigation or prevention measures, and in the case of adaptation



measures, they are in fact the most appropriate decision-makers (Farber 2011: 487). This trend is expressed, for example, in the form of climate alarms, urban adaptation plans or citizens' climate panels introduced in various cities around the world. This turn to local administration and local activism is not specific to the Polish climate movement alone – the situation is similar in Turkey, where activists also have to face an unfavourable socio-political context (Wiktor-Mach 2021: 31–32).

It is at the local level that some activists see an opportunity to work with public institutions and further develop MSK within autonomous local groups. The problem is the lack of regional demands within MSK, the elaboration of which would be the next step in the development of the movement. Demands tailored to specific regional conditions would make it possible to work with local governments in addition to the civic panels or climate crisis declarations that already exist in some cities. This development is, however, significantly limited by the fact that MSK local groups operate autonomously only in a few cities.

## Conclusions

The current organisational structure of the MSK is the result of the movement's orientation towards democratic and horizontal values as well as deliberate attempts by activists to increase efficiency during the pandemic. These attempts are a manifestation of the institutionalisation processes taking place within the movement, understood as the dynamic creation of formalised structures and standardised processes. The best examples of this are primarily the decision-making system developed during the pandemic and the development of communication networks. The lockdown and the consequent restriction of the possibility of street protest provided an opportunity for young activists to devote time to reflection about the organisational structure of the MSK and in this sense was conducive to the processes of institutionalisation within the movement.

As the MSK grows and the number of its members increases, the tension between upholding the movement's principles and values, such as democratisation, horizontalism and autonomy from external actors, and the pursuit of efficiency becomes increasingly clear. Efficiency, understood here not only as the achievement of the movement's goals – it is worth noting here that the realisation of the movement's direct goal, which is, after all, to change social consciousness, is difficult to be measured – but also as ensuring its duration, the mobilisation of support and favourable relations with the institutional environment.

The challenge for ensuring the continuity of the movement lies in its youthful nature and the transient type of participation associated with it. On the one hand, the young age of the activists may pose a threat to the movement's continuity, but

on the other hand it is a testament to the potential of MSK as a school of activism: a movement that has mobilised young people, including those from small towns, for whom it is often the first experience of activism or social action. The lack of sufficient institutional support to maintain the continuity and effectiveness of the movement beyond the spontaneous phases of mobilisation may also be a challenge to the survival of the MSK. The organisational base in the form of adequate resources and structures is important because, in addition to ensuring the sustainability of protest actions, it also enables certain cognitive practices (Bostrom 2004: 81): primarily the pooling of expertise, the development of interpretive frameworks or the design of political change.

These cognitive practices within the MSK are significantly influenced by the fact that young activists are to a large extent consciously withdrawing from developing climate policy solutions. MSK activists legitimise their general claims by referring to existing scientific knowledge, understanding their role primarily as publicizing the position of science and proposing their own solutions only to a limited extent. In doing so, they avoid raising controversial issues that provoke conflicts both within the movement and in its surroundings.

While the degree of mobilisation of members and participants in the MSK protests is undoubtedly high, it remains a challenge to mobilise wider public support, which is ultimately one of the most important goals of the movement. The strategy of action in accordance with the slogan 'climate beyond divisions' may make it difficult for MSK to propose a positive vision of the future that, in line with the movement's ambitions, would be convincing to a large part of society, while actually challenging the current ways of thinking that contribute to exacerbating climate change. There is not much reason to speak of the movement being co-opted by mainstream organisations, but it is worth pointing out that the case of MSK shows that the formalisation of structures and participation in institutional politics are not the only processes that can lead to more conservative views. The movement's broad inclusivity and the desire to win over as large an audience as possible may therefore be inextricably linked with low mobilising power.

The internal reforms introduced during the pandemic are a step towards ensuring the stability and sustainability of the movement, but they do not eliminate all the problems related to the lack of transparency and conflicts within the it. MSK activists also face the constant challenge of the lack of responsiveness of the Polish state to the demands put forward by climate activists. Faced with the lack of favour from the authorities when it comes to implementing climate policy, it may become increasingly important for the climate movement to work with political actors at the local level. MSK now seems to be in a phase of transition both in terms of organisational dynamics and formulating demands. What

role will MSK play in the future as part of the wider climate and environmental movement remains to be seen.

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