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## **How Women Drove 'Spirits' out of Their Local Communities: The 'Exorcism' of Non-Governmental Organizations: A Comparative Case Study\***

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### **Abstract**

The process of system transformation in Poland and Central-Eastern Europe brought forth numerous economic benefits and social acceptance. However, it also presented challenging social problems, particularly at the local level. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs),

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often led by female leaders, took on the responsibility of gradually addressing these issues. By identifying the needs and expectations of the communities they served, NGOs became significant agents in resolving local social problems. Unfortunately, the actions and perspectives of women in these NGOs, who played a crucial role in their establishment and development over the decades of the system transformation period, remain inadequately recognized in the existing literature. The research presented in this text aimed to explore and understand how women-led NGOs defined and addressed the social problems of local communities during the system transformation in Poland. To achieve this, the metaphor of spirits and exorcisms was employed. The research utilized a comparative case study approach, focusing on four NGOs founded and managed by women across different phases of the system transformation in Poland. In-depth interviews, observations, and document and website analyses were conducted within each case study. This research contributes to the micro-level understanding of the contributions made by women-led NGOs to the process of system transformation in Poland.

**Keywords:** local communities, women leaders, non-governmental organization, spirits and exorcisms metaphor, Poland.

## Introduction

The system transformation initiated in Poland and other countries of Central and Eastern Europe in 1989, referred to as transition by researchers (Aslund, 2001; Gros & Stenherr, 2004), was based in the early years on economic stabilization and the establishment of democratic institutions. The transformative process gradually unfolded on three levels: political, economic, and social (Kołodko, 2008). Politically, it involved a shift from a single-party system to a multi-party democracy. Economically, it entailed a transition from a centrally planned economy, characterized by command-and-control mechanisms, to a market-oriented economy. Socially, it encompassed the shift from a closed society to an open one and the construction of a civil society (Chimiak & Iwińska, 2015). In the temporal perspective, this process was perceived in phases that can be described, following Huntington (1995), as follows: the fall of authoritarian rule (1989), the transition phase lasting between 1990 and 2004, which marked Poland's accession to the EU (Wilkin, 2017), and the phases of consolidation and strengthening, whose boundaries are difficult to determine. Generally, it is believed that the phase of consoli-

dating the results of the transformation is not a completed process (Jarosz, 2005), especially in social and cultural realms. After the initial unanimously enthusiastic assessments of the transformation processes, particularly in the economic realm, it became clear that there were both winners and losers of these changes (Jarosz, 2005), and pathologies of the Polish transformation, mainly manifested in corruption, economic neo-colonialism, and ineffective public administration came to the fore (Bielecki & Kieżun, 2012). Certain local communities, especially those reliant on monocultures, were severely affected by the transformation, experiencing the collapse of businesses, unemployment, social inequalities, anomie, social passivity, and low levels of social trust (Marody, 1996; Torczyńska-Jarecka, 2005; Domański, 2009). These factors have hindered both social and economic development. The system transformation led to a strong decentralization of the state and the establishment of local self-governments, which were given responsibility for the development of local communities (Hryniewicz, 2002). It was expected that this would lead to the rebuilding of their autonomy, self-governance, and responsibility for meeting needs and creating conditions for harmonious development. The revival of self-help and self-reliance, the building of bonds, a sense of belonging, and the shaping of local identity, as well as the strengthening of local activity, were anticipated. Unfortunately, in many cases, these expectations proved to be futile.

At the same time, legislative changes, including the enabling of freedom of association, have led to the gradual development of civil society, including social movements, informal bonding structures, and community-based initiatives (Hryniewicz, 2002; Gliński, 2012). Furthermore, these changes have also facilitated the emergence of non-governmental organizations as the primary representatives of civil society (Bogacz-Wojtanowska, 2004). During the transition and consolidation phases of Polish transformation, these organizations gradually became partners of local self-governments in addressing serious economic and social issues (Rymsza, 2005; Makowski & Bogacz-Wojtanowska, 2011). They fulfilled various functions and engaged in different activities depending on their established goals (Kramer, 1998; Salamon, 1995). Indeed, NGOs began to play a particular role in local com-

munities, gradually providing social services, fostering social and cultural activities (Dudkiewicz, 2013). They became a binding force connecting the interests of individuals and larger groups, building interorganizational and interpersonal relationships, and expanding the sense of community and identity (Bogacz-Wojtanowska, 2013).

In Polish local communities, and also in many countries worldwide (James, 1992), women have taken responsibility for numerous actions by establishing non-governmental organizations and engaging in local-level activities, particularly in areas not dominated by male politics (Dominelli, 2019). However, apart from research on the development of women's organizations in the early stages of the system transformation (Malinowska, 1999) and quantitative studies on women's participation in third-sector structures, including leadership positions (Charycka et al., 2022), we know little about how organizations founded and led by women address local social issues. While the role of NGOs as social glue and their contribution to identifying social issues, building local capacity, fostering social and cultural animation, and engaging in cross-sector partnerships is scientifically recognized (Lewenstein & Palska, 2004; Bogacz-Wojtanowska, 2013), these studies do not specifically identify gender, including the role of women as leaders of NGOs in addressing the long-term consequences of transformation and building a better future for local communities. Therefore, the aim of the research presented in this paper is to examine how emerging local non-governmental organizations led by women defined the issues faced by local communities during the period of system transformation in Poland and what actions they undertook to mitigate or resolve them. More broadly, the study seeks to understand how women shaped non-governmental organizations and local communities and how they attempted to address significant problems arising from the transformation process, either independently or through collaborations. To recognize it, the metaphor of spirits and exorcisms has been employed (Morgan, 1997). The notion of 'spirits' was used to describe certain problems that local communities were dealing with, while 'exorcisms' referred to activities carried out by the studied non-governmental organizations to expel the spirits living in the community in which they decided to act. The findings broadened the

knowledge about the participation of women in the system transformation in Poland at the local level.

The article is organized in the following manner: apart from the Introduction which outlines the backdrop of the system transformation in Poland, the discussion begins with a theoretical reflection concerning the contribution of women to the third sector and local communities and the usage of the spirits and exorcisms metaphor in organization studies. The subsequent sections of this article present the research methodology, findings, and discussion of the study. The article concludes with a summary of the key findings and their implications.

## **Theoretical background**

### *Women in the Polish non-governmental sector*

The feminization of non-governmental organizations is a phenomenon observed in many countries worldwide. Feminization, in this context, refers to the gradual increase in the participation of women in organizational leadership, voluntary and professional work, as well as the dissemination of a managerial ethos and so-called feminine organizational cultures within these organizations (Fondas, 1997). Importantly, in less developed countries or patriarchal societies, there is a higher representation of men than women in the third sector. Moreover, men more frequently occupy top positions within these organizations, while women face numerous obstacles on their path to advancement within the organizations (Damman et al., 2014; Pynes, 2000; Biernat-Jarka & Trębska, 2016).

Meanwhile, the tradition of women's civic activism and the formation of informal groups and organizations in Poland dates back to the nineteenth century. During this time, Polish women's movements began to develop, primarily associated with patriotic activities and mainly involving women from noble and intellectual backgrounds. Alongside them, in connection with the effects of the industrial revolution in cities, the labor movement emerged, in which women also became involved (Dajnowicz & Miodowski, 2020). It

was only after 1918, with the regaining of independence, that women could participate in public life and self-organize in the new Poland, also gaining full voting rights. The post-war socialist policies strongly encouraged women's involvement in the professional field, which was often combined with traditional family roles (Kotlarska-Michalska, 2010; Fidelis, 2010; Sekuła-Kwaśniewicz, 2015). However, women could formally join only two mass women's organizations: the Rural Women's Associations and the Polish Women's League. Nevertheless, women's activism during this time is considered relatively weak, although there are increasing examples of proactive women's actions (Grabowska, 2018).

The initial phases of system transformation were particularly significant for the development of women's activism, as women began their efforts to address the deficits resulting from socialism. During the transition period, there was a rapid increase in the number of organizations founded by and for women, often associated with feminist movements. By the mid-1990s, Poland already had 70 women's organizations (Malinowska, 1999). The transformation also brought forth a new field of women's activity: the local community. Just like the situation in other countries around the world (Williams, 1989; Lister, 1997; Dominelli, 2019), women in Poland have found their 'space' in a much closer, everyday realm of human affairs, namely at the local level (Bogacz-Wojtanowska & Wrona, 2017). Women's activism, since the beginning of the transformation, has largely focused on community members, neighborhoods they co-create, and the issues that are closest to them. However, these activities, especially from the perspective of politicians, are perceived as less significant due to their limited scale of impact and low visibility (Dominelli, 2019). In reality, however, the often-invisible efforts of women significantly impact the quality of life and serve as an important driver of social change. James (1992) highlights that women's activism is frequently situated outside of politics and often deemed irrelevant to it. As a result, in their work for local communities, women frequently tackle challenging and uncomfortable issues, calling into question the prevailing social norms. In the case of women in Poland, local activity is also manifested through involvement in local government, particularly in the position of rural *sottys* (village head) (35.5% – *Bank Danych*

*Lokalnych [Local data Bank]*, 2018). This activity primarily stems from the fact that these positions are not perceived by men as significant in terms of political engagement and career building, and they do not confer formal authority (Lukic et al., 2006; Matysiak, 2015). Instead, they are seen as 'social' roles that require personal resources and are more frequently undertaken by women (Matysiak, 2015; Góral, 2019).

Women's NGOs' activities for local communities are particularly visible in rural areas and small towns, where women have been organizing and engaging in social work for over 150 years through the Rural Women's Associations in Poland, which currently have over 700,000 women as members (Brodzińska & Brodziński, 2016). During the phase of Polish transition and transformation, there were programs and grant systems dedicated to the development of 'pro-women' projects and organizations in Poland (Drewniak, 2012). Women were particularly active in the immediate period before Poland's accession to the EU in 2004, where they co-created partnerships in local communities (Local Action Groups) within the LEADER fund, which brought together representatives of local organizations and residents (Brodzińska & Brodziński, 2016). In Poland, NGOs have been perceived as feminized in terms of volunteering and membership since the early years of transformation, especially in areas such as healthcare, education, and social assistance. Still, this trend has not translated into occupying top organizational positions (Bogacz-Wojtanowska & Wrona, 2017). It was only in 2014–2015 that the participation of women and men in the governing bodies of NGOs began to approach parity (Adamiak et al., 2016). Gradually, women gained the right to make decisions in organizations and came to dominate the workforce, with 75% of employees in the third sector being women (Charycka et al., 2020). This is mainly because of the fact that over the years, the third sector has been recognized as a place conducive to the career development of women, offering non-discriminatory practices, a positive atmosphere, opportunities for self-improvement and professional growth, and a tolerant attitude towards motherhood (Wysocka, 2009). This was hardly the standard in the other sectors during the early stages of transformation.

*Metaphors of spirits and exorcisms in research on organizations*

Using symbols and metaphors to understand organizational reality has a relatively long tradition in organizational sciences (m.in. Kostera & Kociatkiewicz, 2015; Czarniawska, 1997). The metaphor is a consequence of the paradigmatic assumptions and the epistemological position adopted in this research, which precedes the choice of the research methods (Kostera, 1996). The interpretative and symbolic paradigm, employed in the presented research, examines organizations from the perspective of subjective viewpoints, making them the subject of our research (Hatch, 1997). According to the approach of the interpretative-symbolic paradigm (Burrell & Morgan, 2003), within which the research was placed, it is believed that social actors co-create reality and can pass on their experiences to researchers.

The metaphor of 'spirits' is one example that researchers studying organizations use to describe their reality. The latter an apparition of something not existing anymore, usually a dead person or a past event, which is believed to appear or manifest as the living, typically as a nebulous image (Rahimi, 1991). They can be called ghosts, spirits, or demons (Glotova, 2020). Researchers in the field of organizational studies often resort to the metaphor of spirits to describe phenomena that are often left unspoken, emerging 'between the lines.' These phenomena, despite lacking clear articulation and tangible presence in the organizational reality, have an impact on its shape. Therefore, this metaphor is employed in the context of research on change management (Town 2021; MacAulay et al., 2010), organizational imagination (Gordon, 1997), and broader struggles with various challenges within organizations (Kociatkiewicz & Kostera, 2019; Riad & Jack, 2020). The metaphor of spirits also serves to illustrate the problems, concerns, and difficulties that constitute the remnants of the past, and dealing with them enables 'liberation,' new beginnings, and further development. As emphasized by researchers such as Town (2021), Ludlow (2012), and Peterson (1998), organizations wrestle with spirits, employing various management tools and practices that can be referred to as exorcisms. The literature defines the latter as the act of removing the bad effects of a frightening or upsetting event (Kociatkiewicz et al., 2022).



Still, it should be noted that a metaphor is a figure of speech, and its function is not descriptive but rather involves transferring the name or concept that signifies one thing to another thing through the power of probability (Ricoeur, 1991). Words acquire metaphorical meanings in a specific context, which makes it possible to discover new meanings within that context (Ricoeur, 1991). There is a relationship between metaphorical thinking and general concepts, which makes what is 'familiar' and 'local' appear as 'strange' and 'abstract,' and vice versa. (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995; Lofland et al., 2006). Metaphors help direct attention to previously overlooked and unnoticed similarities between seemingly different phenomena (Lofland et al., 2006). This opens new possibilities for analysis and comparisons, and at the same time enables the search for inclusive and properly organized themes and concepts (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995; Lofland et al., 2006). A metaphor serves cognitive, pragmatic, emotional, and persuasive functions. It is an essential element in the necessary creativity for developing new approaches to the object of study, including understanding organizations. (Sułkowski, 2011; Alvesson & Sandberg, 2013).

The use of metaphors of spirits and exorcisms appears particularly intriguing in the context of attempting to understand organizations which operate in various transitional periods, such as the system transformation in Poland, and which strive to strengthen this process. Thus, to understand how NGOs established during the period of system transformation in Poland defined the problems of local communities during transformation and what actions they took to neutralize or solve them, we decided to employ the spirits and exorcisms metaphor as an interpretative framework for our study. The aim of such an approach was also to introduce alternative metaphors into organizational theory (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2013) by drawing attention to the complexity of organizational environment of NGOs operating in the period of transformation.

## **Methodology**

### *Research strategy and methods*

To accomplish the defined objective and address the research question of how emerging local non-governmental organizations with female leadership defined the issues faced by local communities during the period of system transformation and what actions they undertook to mitigate or resolve them, several research methods were employed. The following research questions were formulated:

RQ1: What problems (spirits) were recognized in local communities of organizations led by women during the period of transformation and establishment of the organizations?

RQ2: What actions (exorcisms) were taken by women leading organizations to solve these social problems?

Four local NGOs that were established in local communities in various stages of transformation in Poland were chosen for the study (Table 1). In addition, the organizations selected for the study meet the following criteria: they are founded and led by women, their organizational form is either an association or a foundation, they differ in terms of location and the area in which they operate, and although their activities are aimed at addressing the issues of the local community, they have different organizational goals. The research was conducted in 2019. By interpreting current events and reinterpreting past events, a comparative case study was presented, which is a combination of retrospective and prospective case study types (Stake, 2005; Njie & Asimiran, 2014; Yin, 1994). Such an approach facilitated mutual complementation and extension, leading to a deeper understanding of the current phenomena and the processes that shape reality.

The research material was gathered using qualitative research methods (Creswell, 2013). The participants of qualitative research are social actors, whose voices are revealed through quotations that also provide scholarly legitimacy to the article (Kostera, 2003). At the same time, discoveries in qualitative research do not stem from statistical sources and do not have a numerical character, as the research did not seek to determine causal relationships and

Table 1. Characteristics of the studied NGOs

	A	B	C	D
<b>Organizational and legal form</b>	Foundation	Association	Association	Association
<b>Year of establishment</b>	2007	2015	1997	2004
<b>Location and area of activity</b>	Kraków powiat, Lesser Poland Voivodeship	Skarżysko powiat, Świętokrzyskie Voivodeship	Kłodzko powiat, Lower Silesia Voivodeship	Wadowice powiat, Lesser Poland Voivodeship
<b>Goals of the organization</b>	Educating and supporting residents, NGOs, business organizations, and local governments in effectively achieving their goals. Belief in the purpose of working for the common good.	The primary goal is the development of the town, fostering integration, and utilizing the potential of its residents who aspire to enhance their living conditions. It is believed that the local community's greatest strength lies in its people, and the active participation and engagement of residents serve as the key driving force behind local development.	Improving the quality of life for the local community by effectively acquiring, managing, and allocating financial resources for charitable purposes and civic initiatives. By caring for the common good, the organization promotes the development of the local community, providing innovative solutions and strengthening the social, human, and material capital.	Building social capital; activities supporting the development of communities and local societies. Contributing to the creation of new jobs in rural areas; promoting employment support and professional mobilization of unemployed individuals and those at risk of job loss.
<b>Most important areas of activity</b>	animation, community organization, participation, HR, volunteering.	history; culture, ethnography, folklore; tourism, support for seniors; support for women.	scholarship programs (for children and teenagers); educational programs; grant programs (support for undertakings for the common good).	culture; cultivating traditions; social economy; promotion of the region and regional products; ecology.
<b>Transformation phase in which they were established</b>	Third phase – consolidation and strengthening	Third phase – consolidation and strengthening	Second phase – transition	Between the second and third phases –transition/consolidation

Source: Statues of studied organizations, websites, and interviews.

generalizations (Golafshani, 2003; Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Table 2 presents the qualitative research methods utilized in each of the four case studies which we conducted.

Table 2. Utilized research methods

Research method	Number	Additional information
In-depth, free-form individual interviews	In each organization, one participant was involved, except for one case where there were two participants.	Duration: 1 hour and 40 minutes to 2 hours and 10 minutes (transcribed).
Observation	In each organization, two participants were involved.	Duration: 1 day (observation notes).
Analysis of organizational documents	At least three organizational documents were examined: the statute, financial reports, portfolios, and websites.	Additionally, documents related to the local community – websites and development strategies – were analyzed (using a categorization key).

Source: Authors' study.

The names of the organizations were kept anonymous. For the purposes of this article, the interviewees, documents were marked in the presentation of the results with the letters A, B C, and D1 and D2, respectively (in the case of an interview with two people).

### *Analysis and interpretation of the research material*

The research material was subject to analysis and interpretation. The analysis was carried out in three stages. During the initial phase, the researchers organized transcribed interviews, observation notes, and conducted an analysis of organizational documents and local community materials using a pre-constructed categorization framework. During the second stage of the analysis, the material was studied to highlight the main problems (spirits) with which the studied NGOs had to deal while working with their communities. In this way, we have established three main categories that form the names of three 'spirits' in the empirical part – Genius loci, Acedia, and Samael. Simultaneously, the methods (exorcisms) employed by the studied organizations to deal with the identified spirits were analyzed. Then, during the third stage of analysis,

our focus shifted to a deeper understanding of the phenomena under study. To achieve this, each researcher extensively reviewed the research material and compared the data, coding the research material based on previously established categories of properties. Concurrently, literature review on spirits was conducted, which made it possible to assign the identified categories of properties to specific spirits.

## **Results and discussion**

### *Spirits of local communities*

The first ghost identified as 'haunting' the studied local communities was the genius loci, i.e., the spirit or demon presiding over the place. In modern scientific literature, apart from this metaphysical dimension, it is scientifically analyzed and the 'genius loci' is 'something' which makes a certain space unique, i.e., a set of properties, both tangible and intangible, that give specific places or landscapes an individual quality. Hence, understanding the sense and feeling of a place lead to a better quality of life, satisfaction, and a sense of security (Mohan & Twigg, 2007).

In the presented research, the genius loci, as guardian spirits, are a permanent element that has existed and has been preserved despite the transformational changes that have occurred in local communities. The particular genius loci of the studied places consisted of long duration, a combination of historical knowledge and life experiences, specific events, local culture, tradition, and symbols that had given the place its meaning and value and evoked emotional involvement:

These organizations, they're really close to the people, you know? They're all about preserving and celebrating our local traditions. They bring people together through food, songs, holidays, and all those charming rural customs. And they do amazing things like publishing books with old photos and stories from the past, taking us back to historical places. It's just beautiful, the way they keep our heritage alive and create a sense of community. (D2)

Meanwhile, different phases of the systemic transformation 'blew in' or kindled various other types of spirits in the communities studied. Mostly they were malicious 'demons' which active women identified precisely. The first one of them, appearing in each case studied, is the Acedia demon (The Concise Oxford Dictionary..., 2006), i.e., the lack of concern for one's own being and existence, indifference. It manifested itself in the reluctance to work characteristic of many members of the community, apathy and helplessness, apprehension, or fear of the concept of activity, but also short-sightedness and demanding attitude. Acedia appeared in local communities in the first period of transformation, in a sense of rapid change and extraordinary social instability, which forced ideas for their own activity, especially on those people who were not prepared for it:

The unstable situation means that people are afraid of making various decisions because they don't know what will happen tomorrow... It is not that people are not able or brave enough to take a job. They just prefer to be dependent on unemployment benefits. (C) According to the female leaders, Acedia appeared in tandem with Samael – the fallen angel and at the same time the spirit of destruction, that was brought by the transformation. Closing or privatization of industrial plants, the collapse of old sources of income, painful hatching of new workplaces in the chaos of change, neglect of the state in the social sphere – all this was a traumatic experience for many residents of the communities in which those organizations had operated.

And it just seems to have disappeared, or there is automation and there is no need to employ that many people. (A)

Like Samael, who, as the destroyer of sins, is not entirely an evil spirit spreading nothing but destruction (Jung, 1925), the female leaders pointed out that transformational destruction brought new values, revealed the potential of the community, especially social, but also economic, associated with natural resources, natural, or cultural heritage:

We are returning to the sources, we are looking for roots, we are rebuilding the local identity, we are not carried away by currents of discouragement and passivity. (B)

Another manifestation quite clearly identified as the actions of Acedia, but also of the demons' causing conflicts and disputes in all communities, was social stagnation, lack of communal action and involvement, but also lack of mutual respect, respect for values and common goods. This lack of cooperation of many social groups was perceived by all female leaders, in contrast to their communal thinking and constant emphasis on the need to expand the groups of people engaged in community life. Importantly, the female leaders highlighted that chasing away these spirits of reluctance to cooperate is a long-term and difficult task, and the successes achieved so far do not bring satisfaction. In cooperation networks, it is difficult or impossible to get public institutions involved:

I have this belief that different institutions don't know how to cooperate with each other, that we have this lack of collaboration, of seeking common solutions, of thinking about it in a systemic way [...] There's considerable institutional resistance, this critical mass... sometimes it's like the mountain gives birth to a mouse, you know... (A)

Other spirits of transformation that were identified by the female leaders studied, albeit with less influence, included the absence of conceptual understanding, knowledge, and ideas for social change, both among local authorities and residents, as well as the underutilization and neglect of the potential and nurturing of the genius loci.

### *Female 'exorcisms' of the organization*

The attitudes towards exorcisms that were performed by the organizations studied, regardless of the period of systemic transformation, were specific attitudes and previous experience. Like the exorcist in the Christian religion,

endowed with devotion and humbleness (Duffey, 2011), female leaders had a specific attitude towards the local reality affected by various 'evil powers.' Research participants represented coherent attitudes of willingness to act, enthusiasm, and belief that the impossible could be done. In other words, they were internally prepared for the rituals that they would perform next. As in the exorcism ritual, where the leader's experience is important (Duffey, 2011), each of the female leaders already had practical experience in social work and activity:

And it is like that, I worked in a kindergarten, but I also worked at universities, I conducted training sessions [...], so I was always very active. I also had other jobs, for various reasons, you know, existence related. So, I have always had this openness to people, the world, and to different experiences, and above all to learning. (D2)

Female leaders declared that instead of fame or recognition (like exorcists, who usually act with a sense of service to their recipients; Duffey, 2011), they rather had the explicit desire to 'save the world' (B), built into their nature of social functioning. Each of the female leaders also had a deep need for social action, faith, and moral certainty that this was the right thing to do:

You may have lower skills, even less knowledge, but such, you know, enthusiasm, you know that it will work out, we will do it together, it will be fun, I am not sure ... I don't know, but I think so [...] some kind of faith that it will work out [...] (C)

Preparation for the exorcism ritual is one of the most important elements of the entire process of breaking free from the 'evil spirit,' conditioning its success (Mohr & Royal, 2012). The first one is to know the problem of possession, a diagnosis and consultation with specialists from various fields. According to Christian religions, medicine, and psychiatry (Goodman, 1988), should also be involved. The surveyed local female leaders also recognized their area of activity in a special way, having a deep understanding of the needs of the local



communities in which they operated. They initiated multilevel communication in their own communities, they communicated issues important to them to various recipients, and they communicated with the stakeholders – citizens, authorities, and partners. All this was done to activate the potential of the community, but not at their own discretion or their own idea, but according to what they hear in their communities:

When something happens or is supposed to happen, I'm the person who believes that these people should be informed because once they know, they can decide for themselves whether they want it or not, you know? That's why I ask about different things, provide information, because I think it's very important. (D2)

As for dealing with problems, you can handle them by communicating, that's the first thing... (C)

The second element of preparation for the exorcism in Christian religion is to gather people who will accompany the ritual of casting out the evil spirit. This is to assist the main exorcist (Section 11 of the *Rituale Romanum*). In the case of the surveyed women, for their own exorcisms, they prepared a the ground thoroughly, by systematically building relationships and interacting with people coming from the local community, based on the existing resources, or 'good spirits':

Many things that have been (achieved) and continue to be achieved are because we simply do them together. We sit, we travel, we create a kind of partnership. (D1)

The main goal is the development of Suchedniów, the integration of people, and the utilization of potential. Because we hold on to the belief that development is something that people do, not something that is done for them. (B)

In a special way they focused on mobilizing 'good forces,' educating, supporting, and activating, which in effect more and more often resulted in 'certainly this desire to act [...] it really got into motion, it is like people began

to believe that you can also live in the countryside' (D1). Creating a network of companions during the exorcism process was a crucial element in driving out evil spirits from the community. Additionally, it served to reinforce the presence of positive and benevolent spirits, including those that strengthened the genius loci (spirit of a place). In other words, they intensively gathered those who could work together and drive out 'evil powers,' initiated common activities where they jointly motivated themselves to act:

Many things we have been able to do are because we are simply doing them together. We sit, travel, and create a kind of partnership. (D1)

The exorcism itself, in the light of research, is a long-lasting, consistent, and often very complicated rite, under which the exorcist (as leader, authorized person) along with other participants of the process of clearing a possessed person or place, performs rituals and prayers (Mohr & Royal, 2012). The leaders of the studied NGOs pointed to the need for consistent, patient action in their own communities, their organization, setting an example of doing a good job for others:

In the case of NGOs, the first and foremost thing is consistency, regardless of what happens. There are ups and downs, and you must swallow it, take note, but then you must push on. (C)

The exorcism carried out by female leaders entails substantial efforts to overcome obstacles, ignite action, inspire others, pave the way for others, and activate or leverage local potential. It is a transformative process that eliminates barriers and allows these leaders to flourish, just like an exorcism drives out negative forces and restores balance. The work of the female leaders is like an invocation, a call for joint action, usually at the beginning of quite inconspicuous, small activities that have gradually developed:

We really started from small things, by creating these festivals that everyone would come to. (D1)

Stimulating and activating, clearly treated by the female leaders as a long-term process, gives a new quality, social capital is created, social awareness changes, community creativity, and the conviction of a certain level of agency appear:

We do this program with women, [...] and it is such, you know, such enthusiasm, you know, at these workshops, they are already so enthusiastic, listen, it's really unbelievable. It is clear that such willingness helps one another, she opened a store, someone found out that she owns a store, everyone went to buy something from her in the store, you know, such cool immediate reactions that I liked. (D1)

The purpose of this 'exorcism' of work at the grassroots level is to activate the local community, similar to the concept in Christian religions, in order to liberate a person or place from an evil spirit and regain control over one's body. The female leaders surveyed treat the matter of appreciation and boosting self-esteem as the basis of their activities, showing people that they are important, that their lives are important and can be changed. This is the most important value of all organizations, the driving force of action:

The human being here is a value, cooperation between people really. Here, we come back to the essence. (D2)

An exorcist can use prayers and religious materials such as patterns, gestures, symbols, icons, amulets, etc. (Mohr & Royal, 2012). Female leaders who took part in the research were also equipped with certain instruments, enabling them to act. These include, above all, their own charisma, knowledge of the local community, the potential that they saw in their communities: particular historical experiences, practices, professions, economic or social activities, and natural resources perceived in a way that is different from the public. It is worth noting that, in their opinion, the special feature of all the female leaders, namely activation and development, was about the gradual use and respect of the existing local resources, as well as a strong focus on social development.

**Conclusions**

The studied NGOs, led by women, speaking the language of the metaphor used, acted as follows: When someone dies, windows must be opened to let the soul out. In Poland, the spirit of socialism departed, allowing the spirit of capitalism to take its place. Alongside this shift, old problems, such as poverty and methods of earning a living, were merely adorned with a new robe (Weber, 2005). The period of transformation was also the time when NGOs opened all the doors to let the spirits of communism ‘out.’ The transformation in Poland, whose processes cannot be considered completed, has brought to local communities existential and social problems difficult to overcome (Perdue, 2005). These problems were noticed by the studied NGOs. Table 3 presents the identified spirits haunting local communities, along with the exorcisms utilized by women-led NGOs to combat these spirits.

Table 3. Spirits and exorcisms in research findings

Spirits and their description	Symptoms of haunting	Exorcisms
Genius loci: the genii loci are believed to be a protective force and a spirit that dwells in a specific place, serving as its guardian (Verschuure-Stuip, 2009). The genii loci define the sense of place, its atmosphere, and nature, including its physical and symbolic value (Norberg-Schulz, 1980).	1. constant, unchanging spirit, e.g., history and memory, tradition, tangible, and intangible heritage	1. improving communication and relations between people, educating, and organizing the local community, taking care of local resources, drawing on the potential of the place, creating new development opportunities
Acedia, as described by Durkheim (1897/1966), is a form of anomie that arises within democratic societies and is influenced by social inequalities (Merton, 1938).	1. apathy and social helplessness, lack of cooperation because of very poor social capital	1. building bridges between individual autonomy and group responsibility, restoring social engagement and local solidarity
Samael – in the Judeo-Christian tradition, a fallen angel, and a spirit of destruction. It appears when ‘life is vitiated, no uplifting is feasible, all is darkness and corruption’ (Jung, 1925, p. 314).	1. insecurity, powerlessness, feelings of frustration, lack of faith, and reluctance to change	1. showing the sense of joint actions and learning to take responsibility for what is ‘common’ – now and for the future

Source: Authors’ elaboration.

The 'spirits' that were identified by the studied NGOs leaders are well known in the literature of social researchers: Acedia is above all the anomie (Durkheim, 1897/1966) which appeared very quickly and rapidly in the first years of the Polish transformation. Samael, in turn, is a result of very poor social capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Putnam, 2000; Paxton, 1999; Grootaert, 1998; Woolcock & Narayan, 2000). Importantly, the weakness of social capital was also of a specific nature since a common feature in the diagnosis of all the studied cases is not only a deep understanding of the social processes but also the search for situational solutions.

However, it is important to highlight that this research also reveals that the leaders of the studied NGOs, contrary to the prevalent sense of hopelessness and the emergence of social pathologies, perceived socio-economic challenges as well as identified emerging opportunities. Consequently, they deliberately opened the 'windows' to expel the 'evil spirits.' The studied NGOs were created because of social changes during transformation, i.e., a manifestation of burgeoning civic activity and conscious and responsible civic attitudes (Chimiak, 2015; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). At the same time, they were carriers of social changes, including those that brought them about, but – above all – in terms of eliminating costs and social problems that emerged as part of the transformation (Jacobsson & Korolczuk, 2017). They were a response to the institutional sociological vacuum (Nowak, 1980), characteristic for Poland and described in the Polish literature as 'the institutional vacuum in the space between the public sphere of politics and the private sphere of the family, which should usually be carried out by the activities of voluntary associations' (Wasilewski, 2005, p. 71). At the same time, it is worth noting that they also filled the vacuum left by the retreating of the state in the transformation processes. Thus, the situation of the activities of NGOs as part of system transformation can be called a certain variation of the hollow state (Milward & Provan, 2000), where nonprofit and voluntary sector organizations are considered important social and policy actors. The specificity of the Polish hollow state in the first phase of transformation consisted of the fact that the state (in the initial period) withdrew from most of its activities and left them

to the emerging NGOs, and gradually, through the development of local governance, it reappeared.

It should be noted that the metaphorical approach to the activity of NGOs during the transformation period has made it possible to visualize in a special way the important rites of their activity, i.e., the said 'exorcisms,' which are practiced by them as the leaders of the studied organizations. This allowed us to find an answer to the second research question posed. This activity can be referred to several of the most important social functions of non-governmental organizations related to work for the benefit of local communities (Putnam, 2000; Stewart-Weeks, 2000; Neumayr et al., 2007). Despite the variety of undertaken activities (exorcisms), their main rite was of a social and communal nature. Exorcisms carried out prove that the leaders of the organization have a deep understanding of the problem, nature, and human needs, constant building of community, relentlessness, and hard work. Their activities in local communities, their management of social change and activity, are not only transformative in nature (Ford & Harding, 2018), but they are primarily situational and contextual. Leaders in the studied NGOs do not adapt to common standards of managerial roles (Höpfl & Matilal, 2007), and, going further, follow in their 'exorcisms' what Gilligan (1982) calls the ethics of care, i.e., taking responsibility for the prosperity and success of others and the entire community. In their activities, they use what local organizations and communities have at their disposal: the richness of human creativity, diversity, and potential (Sinclair, 2004), they rely on the support of the genius loci, benefitting from its protective influence.

The conclusion of the study is that to fully understand the complexity of the role that women-led NGOs, played in progressing the political transformation in Poland, it is necessary to look beyond the *terra firma* of already known ways of thinking about organizations. By reaching for the spirits and exorcism metaphor, it was attempted to understand from the women's perspective the complexity of the work performed by their organizations. The usage of metaphor opens the understanding to the micro-perspective on the input of women-led NGOs to the system transformation in Poland. However, the findings presented in this article are limited in that they are based on

four case studies. Thus, their voices are not generalizable, but they still offer several points of departure for future research. Finally, it is believed that the insights from this study extend beyond the four studied organizations, as there are many other examples of similar organizations led by women worthy of exploration, both in Poland and other Central and Eastern European countries.

The limitations of the presented research result from the studied research field and the adopted methodology. The chosen research field means that the results cannot be interpreted in isolation from the historical and economic context resulting from the period of system transformation. All attempts at generalization are limited by the locality and contextuality of the problem that was undertaken. Besides, the limitations of the metaphorical perspective should be pointed out. The use of the metaphor of spirits and exorcism made it easier to learn and understand the difficult processes of transformation, its effects at the local level, and the special role of NGOs in this area. At the same time, it is important to remember that the metaphor, while shedding light on certain aspects of the phenomenon, may inadvertently lead us to overlook others.

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