The Rise and Fall of “Outsider” Political Groups in Post-Communist Europe

A Case Study of the Samoobrona Movement in Poland

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The Samoobrona movement (short Samoobrona) was founded in Poland in 1992 by a group of financially over-extended farmers who combined into a single entity two legally distinct organisations, one an agricultural trade union (ZZR Samoobrona) and the other a political party (Przymierze Samoobrona which was later renamed Samoobrona RP). While it rapidly gained fame through the radicalism of its members during protest actions, Samoobrona was commonly seen throughout the whole 1990's as a peasant extremist group without any political future. Yet, in the first years of the new millennium, it succeeded to everyone’s amazement in assembling a broad electorate and becoming one of the largest political forces in Poland. It gained more than 10% of the votes at every election between 2001 and 2005, and had more than 50 deputies in the Sejm 4th and 5th term. From May 2006 to August 2007, it even entered into a governmental coalition with the LPR and the Kaczyński brothers PiS. Andrzej Lepper, one of the founders and the long-lasting president of both Samoobrona’s components, was then appointed Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Agriculture. However, this political peak was short lived. Indeed, Samoobrona lost most of its electoral support and all its seats in Sejm in the 2007 early parliamentary election. It never recovered from this electoral rout. Although they still formally exist, both the trade union and the political party are now extremely weak and barely active, especially since their historical leader Andrzej Lepper committed suicide in August 2011.

The trajectory of Samoobrona in Post-communist Poland is puzzling. How come farmers that had never previously been actively involved in politics decided to create new political organisations? How did they eventually manage to obtain electoral success in the early 2000s’? How did they behave following their access to institutional positions? Why did Samoobrona experience such a dramatic electoral drop in 2007 and see such a rapid political marginalization since then? Those are the main questions to which my paper intends to provide answers. To put it an other way, the main purpose of my analysis is to identify and examine the conditions of an outsider political group’s entry and durability in post-communist politics.

The article is organised into three parts. The first addresses the literature on the emergence of outsider political groups in Central and Eastern European countries following regime change. It stresses the inability of the still extremely popular concept of populism to fully account for these
movement's political trajectory. It then advocates a sociological approach that focuses on both the outsider political group members' activities and the specific context in which they operate. The two other parts of the article apply this approach to the case of Samoobrona in Poland. The analysis follows a chronological path. While, the second section aims to identify the main factors explaining Samoobrona's creation and unexpected political rise (1991-2001), the third covers a period of over ten years, from the first steps of Samoobrona's members in institutional arenas to their recent political marginalisation (2001-2011). At the empirical level, the analysis is based on original research conducted between 2004 and 2010 that included semi-directed interviews, observations, archival documents and media content.

I – Studying outsider political groups' emergence in Post-communist politics

Following regime change, most former central and eastern European countries experienced the emergence of outsider political groups, that is to say of parties, trade-unions or committees that were heirs neither to democratic opposition movements nor to former communist organisations. Though they carried a wide variety of political discourses and gathered members with diverse backgrounds, these new political actors had in common their call for a renewal of political practices and their claim to represent an alternative to the political establishment. Most of them were short-lived, but some turned out to be electorally successful. A few even managed to become major political actors for a while. This is for example the case of Ataka in Bulgaria [Ragaru, 2006], of Partidul Romania Mare in Romania [Roger, 2000] or, of course, Samoobrona in Poland [Pellen, 2010]. There is a widespread agreement in the literature that the notion of populism is a useful tool to analyse the unexpected electoral surge of such outsider political groups in post-communist countries. After having tried to clarify the meaning given to this elusive notion in the literature on post-communist Europe (A), I will point out the analytical bias it contains (B). I will then propose an alternative analytical approach based on Bourdieu's political theory (C).

A- On the Uses of Populism in Post-communist Studies

While widely accepted, the use of the concept of populism to study outsider political groups that have emerged in Central and Eastern Europe after the fall of communism is rather paradoxical. It
Indeed confronts scholars to two major problems. First of all, the word populism has acquired a strong negative connotation in the last thirty years. By dint of being used as a synonym of demagoguery by journalists and politicians, it has gradually turned into a derogatory label aiming to delegitimize political opponents [Taguieff, 1995]. However, most authors express their belief that this dramatic semantic shift is not inescapable and that populism can be turned back into a neutral heuristic tool by reconceptualisation. They then face the second major problem of the term: the huge diversity of its academic usages. Since it was first coined in the late 19th century, populism has indeed been applied to a bewildering variety of phenomena in different contexts, notably Russia, the United States, Latin America and more recently Europe. It has spread so widely among scholars so that it has become increasingly difficult to see analogies between the numerous movements, parties or leaders that were given this title. An overview of the existing literature leaves no room for doubt: there is no consensus on a single definition of populism that could overlap all its current uses. As Paul Taggart points out “Attempts to identify a core of populism – something that runs through it in all its various guises – have left some writers with the clear sense that there is no clear sense to it” [Taggart, 2000: 10].

Against all odds, the very elusiveness of the notion probably played a key role in its diffusion in political science in general and in post-communist studies in particular. Indeed, thanks to its loose meaning, populism can be applied to different contexts and incorporated into various theoretical frameworks. Annie Collovald has convincingly demonstrated it by studying the rapid diffusion of the word “populisme” among French academics: if so many authors have resorted to it since the early 1980s, it is not because it is heuristic but rather because it is convenient. It has indeed provided them the opportunity to classify phenomena the emergence of which they had not anticipated (in this case the Front National) without having to refine their whole theoretical framework [Collovald, 2003]. The rapid diffusion of the notion of populism among specialists of post-communist politics relied largely on the same logic [Pellen, 2010: 15-19].

In an effort to clarify the confusion that surrounds the notion of populism, Margaret Canovan established in 1980 a groundbreaking typology of its scientific usages. Invoking a Wittgensteinian family resemblances approach, she distinguished no less than seven types of populism in the literature [Canovan, 1980]. Drawing on the English political theorist's approach, I argue that it is possible to distinguish three main types of populism in the sole literature on post-communist Europe: one that could be referred to as transitional populism and two others as traditional populisms, namely ethnopopulism and agropopulism. For purposes of clarification transitional
**populism** can be defined as a political movement that try to generate mass support by denouncing so-called dominant elites (as opposed to common people), exalting the leader's superior qualities and promising immediate comfort to those who feel excluded from the political, social and economical transformations following regime change [Di Tella, 1965; Jaguaribe, 1967; Tismaneanu, 2001]. In this sense, the emergence of populist movements is regarded as a phenomenon specific to a certain stage of economic and political development rather than to a geographical area. A symptom of crisis in the process of transition to “modern” free-market democracy, it would depend on similar general underlying causes and dynamics no matter the regional context, e.g. Latin America or Eastern Europe. Rejecting the transitologists' tabula rasa vision of the regime change, some authors contend that the post-communist political configurations are deeply affected by local specificities and legacies of the past [Bunce, 1995; Kitschelt, 1995]. From this perspective, several studies have stressed on continuities between pre-communist and post-communist political parties, especially between political movements from the pre-war period and outsider political groups that have emerged following regime change. In this sense, populism is regarded as a pre-democratic political ideology emphasising the interests, cultural traits and sovereignty of “the people”, understood as a spontaneous and homogeneous community. In the Central and Eastern European context, two different incarnations of this *traditional populism* are commonly identified: firstly an *ethnopolitism* based on a confusion of the ethnic people (ethnos) with the political people (demos) [Vermeersch, 2004; Kubiak, 2003]; secondly, an *agropolitism* stressing the virtue and tradition of the peasants, regarded as tantamount to the “common people” [Mudde, 2000; Seiler, 2003: 229]. Both these kinds of populism could be traced back to the end of the nineteenth century. After having flourished in the interwar period, they would not have totally disappeared under the communist regime and would be re-gaining momentum since 1989.

Since the three types of populism I distinguished in the literature on post-communist Europe are analytical constructs, real-life usages may well overlap several categories; especially as most authors have tendency to use populism without providing a clear definition of what they exactly mean by it. Nevertheless, the typology I suggested clearly showed that, while using a common label, all the authors studying outsider political groups’ emergence in terms of populism do not necessarily share either the same analytical framework or the same interpretation of their nature and trajectory. While some focus on their leaders' charisma and their abilities to be an outlet for people's frustrations, others insist on the key influence of pre-democratic nationalism or agrarianism on their ideology.
B) The limits of explanations in terms of populism

Meanwhile, beyond the divergence in the meanings given to the notion of populism, authors using it to analyse outsider political groups that have emerged in Central and Eastern European countries agree on two points. First of all, they all consider that these political groups draw most of their support from the popular classes, especially labourers and peasants. Secondly, whether they see them as charismatic political movements or as relics of pre-democratic ideologies, they tend to regard their electoral successes as symptoms of ruling elites' difficulties in legitimising democratic and capitalist principles following regime change. From this perspective, most scholars have interpreted the 2001 electoral success of Samoobrona as one of the main indications of an anti-elite and anti-liberal surge that would have arisen within Polish popular classes in a context of economic and political crisis [...]. The other way round, Samoobrona's sensitive decline since the 2007 parliamentary election is often seen as one of several encouraging signs of democratic and economic “normalisation” of Poland [...].

I argue that this kind of explanation in terms of populism contains a triple analytical bias. Firstly, regarding the emergence of outsider political groups as symptoms implies an etiological bias, i.e. the assumption that it depends on an underlying autonomous disease process [Dobry, 2009; 46-58]. Most authors indeed focus on exogenous factors to explain their unexpected electoral rise, e.g. economic crisis, mistrust of ruling elite, nostalgia of the former regime or fear of European integration. By doing so, they tend to neglect internal factors that may also be determinant, notably the internal organisation of the group, its programmatic formation or its mobilisation efforts. Secondly, such a symptomatic approach also implies an exceptionalist bias. Scholars labelling outsider political groups as populist indeed tend to consider them as “extra-ordinary” political movements that differ in nature from “normal” non-populist, movements [Dobry, 2005]. Such a postulate of incommensurability is very problematic for at least three reasons: (1) it substantialises so-called specificities of populist movements without enabling the identification of their origin (e.g. the charisma of their leader or their extreme positions), (2) it ignores everything they may have in common with other political groups (e.g. in their organisation, in their activities or in their programmatic positions), (3) and finally it does not enable us to consider their possible transformations over time. The third bias contained in most analysis in terms of populism is an elitist bias [Collovald, 2005]. As mentioned above, scholars agree on considering that the “symptomatic” electoral success of so-called populist movements is due mainly, if not exclusively, to the support of the lower social strata. Yet, such a postulate is extremely questionable since (1) it
is rarely based on empirical evidence, (2) it tends to portray popular classes in a very negative way by prejudging them as potential threat to modern democracy, (3) it ignores the fact that so-called “populist movements” may also – and often do - draw a significant part of their support from higher social strata.

Given its elusiveness and the displayed set of analytical bias it contains, I argue that the notion of populism is far more problematic than useful. It has a remarkably low heuristic value and often conjures up misleading images of the political groups studied [Sikk, 2009]. Hence, I consider that it is necessary to abandon the notion and to develop alternative analytical strategies for studying outsider political groups in post-communist European countries. I make the assumption that the best way of dealing with their unexpected political trajectories is to stop postulating their originality (if not their abnormality) and to address them using “classical” analytical tools and methods from the political sociology.

C) Toward a political sociology of outsider political groups in a context of democratisation

From the sociological perspective I suggest that acquiring a good understanding of the creation, electoral rise and marginalisation of outsider political groups in Central and Eastern European countries implies taking into account both the specificity of the contexts in which those processes took place and the diversity of agents they involved. In other words, I argue that the successive stages of this groups' trajectories must be regarded as the results of interactions between individuals with various characteristics in a context of “democratisation”. In my opinion, Bourdieu's political theory [Bourdieu, 2000] and the works it has inspired in recent years [Lagrooye & al., 2006; Cohen & al., 2009] are particularly helpful in the analysis of these interactions. They indeed provide solid analytical tools to examine the political activities of agents in relation to both their specific attributes and their evolving environment. The interrelated concepts of “field” and “capital” appear particularly useful.

In Bourdieu's sociology, the concept of field refers to a relatively autonomous sector of social activity that is structured by specific set of rules, either formal (e.g. laws) or informal (e.g. behavioral expectations). According to the French sociologist, each of the various fields that can be identified in complex societies (artistic, academic, economic, political...) constitutes “both a “field of forces”, whose necessity is imposed on all agents who are engaged in it, and a “field of struggles” within which agents confront each other, with differentiated means and ends according to
their position in the structure of the field of forces, thus contributing to conserving or transforming its structure” [Bourdieu, 1998: 32]. Every field tends to be organised around two poles which oppose the dominant agents and the dominated, the apostles of law and order and the protagonists of change, the incumbents and the challengers [Kauppi, 2003: 778]. The position of an agent in a given field is defined by both its habits, i.e. its system of durable dispositions, and its capital, that is to say, the resources he can accumulate and draw on to interact with other agents. Bourdieu distinguished four primary forms of capital: economic (e.g. money, property rights), cultural (e.g. educational qualifications), social (e.g. networks) and symbolic (e.g. prestige, renown) [Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu, 1985 : 724]. Far from being unchanging, the values of each form of capital may vary across time and from one field to another. Indeed, as Wacquant underlined, “the conversion rate between the various species of capital turns out to be one of the central stakes of social struggles, as each (agents) seeks to impose the hierarchy of capital most favorable to its own endowment” [Wacquant, 2006: 10].

The political field can be described as the specific sector within the social macrososm where “political products”, i.e. means of perception and of representation of the social world, are generated through the competition of agents striving to get access to political power positions [Bourdieu 1981: 3-4]. The level of autonomy of the political field from other fields (e.g. religious, military or economic), the kind of capital most valued within it and the criteria that regulate access to it are the results of long-term processes of sedimentation and institutionalisation of past internal struggles [Dulong, 2010]. The set of rules structuring a given political field therefore tends to evolve very gradually depending on the dynamics of the competition between agents involved within it. Meanwhile, dramatic change may happen rapidly under specific conditions. The combination of social and political variables (e.g. social transformations, collective mobilisations or conflicts among elites) may indeed occasionally lead to a political crisis, i.e. a “fluid conjuncture” during which boundaries and routines of the political field lose their relevance and can give way to new structuring principles [Dobry, 2009].

Following other scholars, I argue that the 1989 events in Central and Eastern Europe can heuristically be described in terms of political crisis. The more or less gradual “fluidification” of communist regimes' principles then opened a period of profound recomposition of each national political field. This period, which is commonly referred to as “transition” or “democratisation” in the literature, is characterised by high uncertainty and struggle about the upcoming rules of the field [Schmitter & Santiso, 1998; Hadjiski, 1999]: which species of capital will henceforth be the most
valued? what kind of agents will be perceived as the most legitimate? what will be the new ways of obtaining political power positions? what principles of perception and representation of the social world will become dominant? From this point of view, regime change in former Central and Eastern European People's Republics appear as the product of competitive processes that run over several years and whose stakes are “to delimit and reconstitute the political field, (its structuring rules) and all the activities that are deemed to form part of it” [Heurtaux & Aït-Aoudia, 2006].

Drawing on Bourdieu's theory, it can be argued that political stances and strategies of the different agents involved in such initially indeterminate processes vary, depending on the volume and composition of capital they detain (and strive to impose as the most valuable in the new configuration). The manner they acquired this capital may also influence their activities. Agents involved in the political field may indeed draw either on individual capital, on collective capital, or on a combination of both. While individual capital is the result of personal inheritance or accumulation, and is therefore bounded to its owner, collective capital is obtained by temporary and limited delegation of a political group, i.e. an association in which individual agents invest and pool capital in order to increase their chance of obtaining profits in the political field [Offerlé, 2006:35-48]. These political groups may themselves be analysed in terms of sub-fields, as they involved agents with various personal characteristics that collaborate but also confront each other for the right to control and distribute the capital that has been accumulated collectively.

To summarise this preliminary discussion, it can be said that adopting a Bourdiesuan theoretical approach to study the emergence and trajectory of outsider political groups in Post-communist Central and Eastern European countries is to address how agents enter a political field under profound recomposition and how they attempt to strengthen their position within it, in competition with other agents that a priori had more resources at their disposal. More specifically, the case-study of Samoobrona in Post-communist Poland presented in this article seeks to provide answers to the three following research questions: (1) How individual agents that were not previously involved into politics came to collaborate in order to build a political group? (2) How did they strive to accumulate capital, either individually or collectively, and to elaborate political products aiming to legitimate their claim to obtain political power positions (in particular among voters)? (3) What were the effects of the evolution of their position within the political field (notably their accession to political power positions) on their activities and the organisation of the political group they had built?
III – The slow emergence of a dual political movement (1991-2001)

A) The creation of a new agricultural trade union

During the period 1989-1993, Poland experienced a large number of demonstrations, strikes and disruptive actions, far more than in the previous years and than in other East-European countries [Kubik & Ekiert, 1998]. If protesters stemmed mainly from industrial workers and public sector employees, farmers also played a significant role in the contestation movement. The protest actions they organised counted for around 10% of the total and retained a wide autonomy within the general protest movement [Gorlach & Forys, 2002]. Thus, while a huge majority of workers’ and employees’ strikes were organised by trade union federations, peasant participation in protest events was only partly organised by one of the two competing national agricultural trade unions, the “post-Solidarity” NSZZRI “S” on one side and the “post-communist” KZRKiOR on the other side. In the first years of the protest cycle, almost half of peasants' protests was set up at a local level without any formal organisational framework [Forys, 2008: p.155].

The voivodeships of Zamość (South-East of Poland) and of Koszalin (North-West) were the scene of such “spontaneous” actions in the summer 1991. In both these regions, non-affiliate independent farmers facing over-indebtedness decided to organise local protests aiming to publicise their economic difficulties. In the weeks before Polish parliamentary elections of 27 October 1991 (the first entirely competitive held since 1922) this protests gradually gained national attention. As the incumbent government was refusing to consider farmers' indebtedness as a public problem [Blumer, 1971; Gusfield, 1981], some farmers from the Zamość and Koszalin areas decided to gather their feeble forces and to organise a common protest in the very center of Warsaw. On October 5, a dozen of them rallied to occupy Wiejska Street, just in front of the building of the Polish Parliament. While this action remained formally independent from any trade-union, it was made possible by the decisive logistics support of the NSZZRI”S”¹. Yet, two rival groups rapidly distinguished themselves within the fast growing encampment. While some protesters, actively supported by the NSZZRI”S”, wanted the occupation to remain pacifist, a bunch of non-affiliate farmers began to advocate the use of violent and direct actions². By mid-october, these “radicalised” protesters decided to create their own group within the encampment: the National Comity of Agricultural Self-

² e.g. “Czekamy na kredyt”, Gazeta Wyborcza, 11/10/1991
Defense (KKSR: Krajowy Komitet Samoobrony Rolnictwa). This small informal organisation quickly managed to gain autonomy and to earn media attention by organising its own press conferences and “radical” protest actions, especially hunger strikes [Siméant, 2009]. Seeing in the KKSR a good way to undermine the NSZZRI’S’ influence on the farmers' protest, the KZRKiOR actively supported its initial structuring.

I'm not hiding that we (the KZRKiOR) played a helpful role in the emergence of the Samoobrona movement [...]. I'm not hiding that while they were camping in front of the Parliament, we were supporting them. At that time, Gabriel Janowski, the future minister (then President of the NSZZRI’S), was claiming he was the sole representative of the protesters. So, here is how it went. Everyday, around two or three in the afternoon, Gabriel Janowski would come to visit the encampment and talk to the journalists. And then, every night around midnight, we would come discretely to the encampment to help them (the members of the KKSR), for example by supplying them food or blankets. I met Andrzej Lepper for the first time at that time. We helped them, I'm not hiding it. It's only once our help enabled them to become a bit stronger, that we became rivals.

Janusz Maksymiuk (then President of the KZRKiOR)
Interview, Warsaw, 25 June 2008

In the aftermath of the elections of 27 October 1991, the president of the KZRKiOR and his rival of the NSZZRI’S rapidly refined their attitude toward the indebted farmers’ protest. Both elected to Sejm and both prospective candidates for Minister of Agriculture, they publicly agreed on the necessity to put an end to the occupation of Wiejska Street as soon as possible. This was done two weeks later with the signing of a vague agreement on Agricultural Over-indebtedness between the incumbent government and farmers' representatives. In this context, the founders of the still informal protest committee KKSR decided to give it a legal status in order to avoid the risk of disappearance. Having completed the then relatively easy procedure to turn it into an official trade-union, they registered their new organisation under the name Agricultural Trade Union “Selfdefense” (ZZR Samoobrona) on 10 January 1992. Andrzej Lepper, a farmer of the Koszalin area who had participated in the occupation of Wiejska Street was chosen to be its first president. In the weeks following its registration, the ZZR Samoobrona remained as weak and isolated as the KKSR had been in late 1991. It lacked means of action (especially money and members) and neither the authorities nor the other agricultural organisations seemed to take it seriously. In April 1992, in order to put an end to their isolation its leaders decided to make what can be regarded as a last chance attempt. Counting on the presence in Warsaw of most active members of the trade union

3 Interview with Janusz Maksymiuk (then President of the KZRKiOR), Warsaw, 25 June 2008 [Pellen, 2010]
4 e.g. « Chłopski lament bankowy », Gazeta Wyborcza, 14/11/1991, p.2.
5 While they had sent numerous invitation requests to several officials in the first months of 1992, leaders of the ZZR Samoobrona had only managed to ensure themselves one short, tense and eventually fruitless interview with the new minister of Agriculture, Gabriel Janowski. Cf. « Minister w helikopterze », Gazeta Wyborcza, 30/01/1992, p.2.
on the occasion of its first congress, they launched a protest action right in the centre of the capital city. On 9 April 1992, around one hundred members of the ZZR Samoobrona entered the building of the Ministry of Agriculture and started to occupy its first floor. While not very organised, this action would prove to be a successful “move” [Dobry, 2009]. Indeed, it rapidly gained massive media cover and eventually enabled the ZZR Samoobrona to take advantage of the vivid institutional conflicts of that time [Baylis, 1996] to obtain official recognition, notably through the right of sitting on public commissions on Agricultural issues, just like the KZRKiOR and the NSZZRI’S”.

In the following months, the leaders of the ZZR Samoobrona strove to build on this initial success to enlarge its support base and to develop its structures in every region, in other words to accumulate collective capital. They pursued those goals through both symbolic and practical actions. On one hand, they decided to refine the trade union's public stances by taking position on new issues they had previously neglected, such as rural unemployment, guaranteed prices or privatizations of state farms. On the other hand, they decided to organise new protest actions aiming to denounce the economic policy implemented by the new government. Favouring actions that required neither complex logistics nor huge number of participants, e.g. brief road blockades or official buildings occupations, the new trade-union initiated no less than twenty protest actions from July 1992 to March 1993. By the spring of 1993, the concomitant strategies of demands for enlargement and anti-governmental protest implemented by the ZZR Samoobrona's founders seemed to have been doubly successful. Firstly, they had enabled the newly created trade-union to acquire the reputation of forming one of the main opposition force to the government. Secondly, they had enabled Lepper's trade-union to strengthen its presence across the country. Building on its reputation of activism and on its visibility in the media [Gitlin, 1980; Neveu, 1999], the ZZR Samoobrona had indeed managed to recruit new members in almost every region. The gradual integration of these new members resulted in the rapid development of the ZZR Samoobrona's organisation following two complementary modalities. On one hand, sub-national associations of the trade union were established in each voivodeship through a process of “territorial penetration”, i.e. from the centre to the periphery [Panebianco, 1988]. On the other hand, at the same time, hundreds of local associations of the trade union were established at gmina level through a process of “territorial diffusion”, or “spontaneous germination”. Most of these local circles were initiated directly by small groups of local supporters without any intervention of either the national committee or the regional circles6.

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6 Initiators of a local circle only had to send the national committee a letter promising to respect the values of the ZZR
From Autumn 1991 to Spring 1993, to everyone's complete surprise, the ZZR *Samoobrona* had gradually managed to grow up from a marginal indebted farmers organisation to a nation-wide powerful agricultural trade union. Yet, some of its main leaders were expecting more. Since spring 1992, some of them were indeed seriously considering building on their achievements as unionists to access political power positions...

**B) The difficult steps from unionism to politics**

In the days following the overthrow of the Olszewski cabinet by the Sejm on 4 June 1992, it seemed highly probable that the President would call early parliamentary elections to put an end to the long lasting political crisis. While every existing political organization was getting prepared to campaign for the second time in less than one year, some members of the ZZR *Samoobrona*’s national committee, including its president Andrzej Lepper, took the stance that the trade-union should take advantage of the situation to enter politics. Emboldened by the success of the occupation of the Ministry of Agriculture in April, they considered possible forthcoming elections as an unexpected opportunity to extend their actions beyond the sole agricultural unionism arena and try getting elected to Parliament. On June 12, they decided to take the plunge and took part in the creation of a new political party in association with activists from the tiny Trade Union of Metallurgists and from a dissident group of the also tiny Polish Green Party. Andrzej Lepper was chosen as the first president of the new party, named *Przymierze Samoobrona*, and Janusz Bryczkowski, a former leader of the Polish Green Party, as its vice-president.

The decision to create a new political party to contest elections may seem normal in a representative democracy. Yet, it is far from being self-evident in Poland in the early 1990s. Indeed, thanks to the 1991 electoral law a wide variety of organizations were then allowed to present candidates in elections, including political parties of course, but also trade-unions, associations or even citizen committees. Three complementary factors explain the apparently paradoxical choice of the ZZR *Samoobrona*’s leaders to create a new political party instead of involving directly their organization in politics. Firstly, the 1990 law on political organizations made it really easy to create a new party, since it then required only 15 citizens’ signatures for registration [Heurtaux, 2006]. Thus, in a context of profound uncertainty such as that of June 1992, creating a new party probably appeared to the ZZR *Samoobrona*’s leaders as the simplest and quickest way to make clear that they intended

*Samoobrona to be formally integrated into it*
to contest possible forthcoming elections. Secondly, the creation of a political party offered them the advantage of not challenging the displayed political neutrality of the trade-union. Thus, even though the officials of the trade-union and of the party were in fact exactly the same persons, they could still pretend to maintain a distinction between their unionist and political activities. Thirdly, organizational diversification provided the opportunity to try to enlarge the support base of the party beyond that of the trade union. Thus, although the ZZR Samoobrona was an agricultural trade-union whose most members were farmers, the Przymierze Samoobrona has always been described by its founders as a generalist political party aiming to gather voters from every strata of society. The main goal of the participation of a dozen of non-agricultural activists in the creation of the new party was clearly to give some credit to this ambition.

In the end, President Walesa did not call early elections in 1992 as Hanna Suchocka managed to ensure a slight parliamentary majority to his coalition cabinet in July. In the following months, the newly created Przymierze Samoobrona was totally forsaken by its founders. As already stated, they then tended to focus their attention on strengthening the ZZR Samoobrona's structures and representativeness. If they were very active in the social movement arena under the banner of the trade-union, they barely mentioned the party anymore. It was only after the unexpected fall of the Suchocka Cabinet in May 1993 and the equally unexpected forthcoming dissolution of Parliament that they decided to reactivate the Przymierze Samoobrona in order to contest the upcoming early elections [Jasiewicz, 1993]. Most of the resources the reactivated party had at its disposal for its campaign were those that the agricultural trade-union had gathered in the social movement arena, notably activists, local structures, money and renown of the label Samoobrona. Nevertheless, in the weeks preceding the 1993 early elections, leaders of the Przymierze Samoobrona intended one more time to picture it as a non-peasant party, widely autonomous from the trade-union and aiming to represent every citizen, whatever their sector of activities or their place of residence. This objective was pursued through three main strategies. Firstly, officials of the party tried hard to avoid having only farmers for candidates. Even though they had failed to finalize electoral alliances with other non-agricultural organizations as they had originally hoped, they invited several members of small nationalist groups and some minor celebrities (notably sportsmen, businessmen or veterans) to stand for the electoral committee Samoobrona-Leppera they set up for the election. To attract these personalities (who could draw on personal capital) they offered them most of the higher positions on the committee's lists. Thus, despite counting for half of the 370 candidates (352 for the Sejm and 18 for the Senate), activists of the ZZR Samoobrona (who could mostly draw only on collective

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7 Including Bryczkowski that was appointed vice-president of the trade union in July.
capital) were relegated to second rank positions, except of course for the dozen of them sitting in the trade-union's and party's national committees. Secondly, these officials applied themselves to reshaping the party's image and message in order to distinguish it from the trade-union. For this purpose, a manifesto was written, published and widely delivered to voters during the campaign. It presented the *Przymierze Samoobrona* as a “trans-professional” group defending the interests of “every Pole that feels neglected by the anti-patriotic and anti-social policy implemented since regime change”. At the core of the manifesto laid the denunciation of “the profiteers from the old and new Nomenklatura” and themes selected from the nationalist corpus, e.g. full cultural, economic and diplomatic independence for Poland. On the other side, questions specifically related to agriculture were barely addressed. Thirdly, the trade union was put on standby by its national leaders for the duration of the campaign. Protest actions were interrupted and local activists were asked to focus their activities on promoting the party's program and supporting its candidates.

The strategy of distancing the party from the trade-union implemented during the 1993 campaign created tensions within the organization [Pellen, 2013]. On the one hand, many members of the *ZZR Samoobrona* openly protested against their marginalization in the committee's list for the benefit of personalities with personal capital but no activist experience. On the other hand, *Samoobrona-Leppera*'s candidates were torn between the generalist “popular and patriotic” platform of the party and the agricultural reputation of the label *Samoobrona*. During the whole campaign, they found themselves in direct competition with both the numerous nationalist electoral committees and the two peasants' electoral alliances, the “post-communist” PSL and the “post-Solidarity” PSL-PL. In the event, the committee *Samoobrona-Leppera* did not manage to distinguish itself from its opponents and to secure enough votes to obtain mandates [Millard, 1994]. On 19 September 1993, the committee attracted only 2,78% of the total votes cast at the national level (383 967 votes), far away from the quorum of 5% necessary to enter the Sejm. This electoral failure had major consequences for both organisations of *Samoobrona*. In the weeks following the election, the *ZZR Samoobrona* and the *Przymierze Samoobrona* became engulfed in vivid internal crisis. For the first time, several members of their twin national committees openly contested the leadership of Lepper. By the end of the year, these internal conflicts had led to the departure of thousands of activists and to the exclusion of dozens of officials, including Janusz Bryczkowski and several founding members. The process of organizational disintegration was yet far from over and continued through the years ahead. In a context of economic growth and relative political stability, such as that of the Sejm 2nd term (1993-1997), neither the trade-union nor the party managed to remain active at a national level and to secure the collective capital they had accumulated in the
previous years. While being still officially considered as one of the three national agricultural trade- 
unions, the ZZR *Samoobrona* was in fact dramatically impoverished and was counting fewer and 
fewer members in fewer and fewer regions. As for the *Przymierze Samoobrona*, it was gradually 
reduced to the status of a groupuscule. In the 1997 parliamentary elections, it was unable to gain 
more than 10 000 votes, that is to say less than 0,08% of the total votes cast... Following this 
spectacular rout, every commentator and most politicians agreed on giving *Samoobrona* up for dead.

“The 1997 elections, that was the worst moment of Samoobrona's life. Even myself, I was not prepared for [such a 
massive defeat]. But it was a political depression and some persons then thought that it was the end of *Samoobrona*, 
that *Samoobrona* could never ever recover from such a defeat, that it was the end of Lepper. But at that moment, we 
decided with a small group of members that we should continue our activism despite the difficulties […] There were 
very few activists left, […] only the most dedicated to the cause. We had no premises and , almost no means. It was 
really most peculiar. I had to say to those who wanted to invite me to come [e.g. to a public meeting] that they would 
have to pay for everything. They had to pay for my transportation, my accommodation […]. People were contributing 
to pay the fuel, I was sleeping in private homes... Following the 1997 electoral failure, it was really really hard to 
rebuild the movement.”

Andrzej Lepper (then President of the ZZR Samoobrona and of the Przymierze Samoobrona )
Interview, Warsaw, 25 June 2008

**C) The unexpected re-emergence of the ZZR Samoobrona**

After years of relative improvement, the economic situation of Poland's agricultural sector 
deteriorated dramatically from the summer of 1997 onwards. Under the combination of reduced 
exports and excessive imports following the Oder Great Flood, most agricultural prices then started 
to plummet, taking with them farm incomes. Between 1996 and 1998, the later dropped by almost 
50% to their lowest level since regime change. Nevertheless, while the degradation of the farmers' 
socio-economic situation rapidly became evident, it was unlikely to be framed as a social problem 
that required public action for two complementary reasons [Blumer, 1971; Gusfield, 1980].

On the one hand, the post-Solidarity coalition government that had come into office after the 1997 
election was championing an economic liberal approach to agricultural issues. From this 
perspective, both the new Minister of Finance (Leszek Balcerowicz) and the new Minister of 
Agriculture (Jacek Janiszewski) were agreeing on regarding the drop in farm incomes as a 
compulsory stage in the difficult process of adaptation of Polish agricultural sector to international
competition. On the other hand, the main parties and trade-unions claiming to defend farmers' interests were deeply divided and politically marginalized following 1997 election. The second national political force and a major partner of the “post-communist” coalition cabinet from 1993 to 1997, the PSL was sent back to opposition after losing half of its electoral support and 80% of its parliamentary mandates. Yet, none of the PSL's main opponents had taken advantage of PSL's sensitive electoral regression. While the KZRKiOR had not entered into any electoral alliance for the first time since regime change, neither the ZZR Samoobrona nor the NSZZRI”S” had managed to obtain any mandate. Besides having all emerged weakened from 1997 election, agricultural parties and trade-unions were far from all sharing the same definition of the economic crisis experienced by Polish farmers in the first months of the Sejm 3rd term (1997-2001). On the contrary they initially tried to distinguish themselves from another over this issue in order to re-strengthen their own position in the political field. While the PSL quickly took the public stance that the crisis was mainly due to the liberal economic policy implemented by the new government, the NSZZRI”S” came round to the governmental official position and blamed the former PSL-SLD coalition for having insufficiently prepared Polish farmers for a fall in agricultural prices. As for the KZRKiOR and the ZZR Samoobrona, they were both satisfied initially with expressing specific demands on issues they considered likely to interest, and potentially re-mobilize, the core of their original support base, e.g. guaranteed prices for cereals or public cover for farmer's credits.

As the months passed by and the crisis continued to worsen, agricultural organisations gradually refined their initial stance. By mid-1998, they even began considering collaborating in spite of their vivid rivalry. Two main factors explained this significant change. The first was the persistent invisibility of the agricultural crisis in the public debate. Despite agricultural organisations' competitive attempts to politicize the fall in farmers' income, neither journalists nor officials seemed to consider it as a relevant issue by mid-1998. The second factor was the perceived growing domination of the minister of Finance Leszek Balcerowicz over the governmental policy, including on agricultural issues. A fervent monetarist, Balcerowicz had the rare quality of being equally hated by all agricultural leaders since he implemented the so-called “economic shock therapy” in 1990. United by their will to at last put the agricultural crisis in the agenda and by their common hatred of

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8 If some of its officials were candidates anyway, either on the list of the PSL or of the SLD, only six of them got elected to Parliament (in comparison with 26 in 1993).

9 In the months preceding the 1997 elections, the NSZZRI”S” had been torn apart by its officials over the electoral strategy to adopt. While most of its historical leaders had decided to join the AWS, an electoral alliance of conservative post-solidarity groups, the new president of the trade union (Roman Wierzbicki) had chosen to enter into an alliance with the nationalist party ROP led by former Prime minister Jan Olszewski. ROP barely reached the 5% quorum and obtained only six members of Parliament, none of them coming from the agricultural trade-union.
Balcerowicz, Roman Wierzbicki (NSZZRI"S"), Janusz Maksymiuk (KZRKiOR) and Andrzej Lepper (ZZR Samoobrona) eventually decided to set aside their differences. On June 24th 1998, they signed up an “Agreement of Agricultural trade-unions' presidents to collaborate in order to ensure a decent representation of farmers' professional and social interests”. With the support of the PSL, they then also decided to organize a common march aiming to show their historic unity in Warsaw on July 10th.

The most important farmers' protest action for years, the march of 10th July 1998 brought together around 15 000 persons. Among them, only a few were members of the ZZR Samoobrona. Indeed, Lepper's organization was then by far the smallest and the weakest of the three national agricultural trade-unions. Yet, surprisingly enough, most media reporting of the demonstration later described it as a major participant group to the action, if not the main. Building on Gitlin's and Champagne's works [Gitlin, 1980; Champagne, 1984], I argue that the anticipated framing of the demonstration as violent by journalists is the main factor explaining such a paradoxical focus on the then tiny ZZR Samoobrona [Pellen, 2009]. In post-communist Poland, peasantry was commonly referred to in public debate as an archaic group, unable to adapt to economic and political modernity [Zalewski, 2006]. Based on this prejudice, national media were expecting demonstrators to be undisciplined and eager for brutality, especially those from the ZZR Samoobrona which had kept entire their reputation of being the most radical peasant activists they had acquired in the early 1990's. During the demonstration, Lepper and its followers did not intend to counter this reputation. On the contrary, they tried on three occasions to divert the protest march from its planned route and to confront the police forces. While those attempts did not last long and failed to disrupt the general peaceful atmosphere favored by both the NSZZRI"S" and the KZRKiOR, they were in accordance with journalists' prejudices. They were therefore given wide media coverage, by far more important than the real influence the ZZR Samoobrona had had on the action.

As the Buzek government kept on refusing to take their claims into account, leaders of the three national agricultural trade-unions pursued their collaboration throughout the summer, autumn and winter 1998-1999. The ZZR Samoobrona was by far the main beneficiary of this cooperation. It indeed offered it the opportunity to take part in common visible protest actions it would not have been able to organise by itself, notably protest marches and temporary road-blockades. In other words, it enabled it to overcome its then dramatic lack of resources by drawing on the other trade-union's means of actions. The inter-union cooperation was all the more advantageous for the ZZR

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10 Notably those of the then two most influential national newspapers Gazeta Wyborcza and Rzeczpospolita.
Samoobrona that, following the same logic as that described concerning the march of July 10th, media recurrently overstated its role within the contestation. It must be said that Samoobrona's activists continued to perfectly play their part during protest actions, especially Andrzej Lepper who did not hesitate to behave systematically as a caricature of a revolutionary peasant leader, going as far as calling peasants to overthrow the government while brandishing a scythe in front of journalists' cameras.

The strategy of subversion [Offerlé, 1998:122] implemented by the ZZR Samoobrona, particularly from the Autumn 1998 onwards, had ambivalent effects. On the one hand, it gradually weakened its position within the inter-union alliance and toward the government. During the whole summer, autumn and winter, its partners constantly pointed out its “excesses” and publicly condemned them as “damaging the cause of farmers”. On several occasions, they even threatened Lepper with the expulsion of his organisation from the inter-union alliance if he did not moderate his attitude. Finally, they did not carry out this threat, but neither did they stand up for the ZZR Samoobrona when the government decided to exclude it temporarily from negotiations on agriculture in December 1998. On the other hand, their activism and radicalism enabled the trade-union and its president to regain the momentum they had lost for years. In fact, thanks to his “performance” during protest actions, Andrzej Lepper gradually became a true media star. Taking advantage of journalists' prejudices and other union leaders' strategic hesitancy, he managed to enforce its monopoly on ZZR Samoobrona's representation in the public space and, above all, to gain the reputation of being the main leader of the peasant wave of protests [Pellen, 2009]. On the other hand, such as in 1992-1993, the ZZR Samoobrona drew on its president's visibility in the media and its involvement in protest actions to attract new members. The gradual process of re-enlargement and re-organisation of the trade-union's support base meanwhile followed a different pattern from that of seven years earlier. This time, officials of the national committee of the trade-union took care to ensure their full monopoly on members' selection and the creation of local circles' [Pellen, 2010: 289-306]. Firstly, they organised themselves to participate in as many local actions as possible with the aim of identifying potential new members and local leaders among non-affiliate demonstrators. Secondly, they initiated and closely controlled the establishment of both regional and local circles and directly appointed all local leaders.

“Through protest actions, we were trying to rebuild our structures. We were looking for new leaders, we were developing local organisations in gminas, powiats and voivodeships... This is how we were striving to redevelop the ZZR Samoobrona's structures everywhere...”

Andrzej Lepper (then President of the ZZR Samoobrona and of the Przymierze Samoobrona)
This highly hierarchical strategy of “territorial penetration” proved to be very efficient. While the trade-union had only few hundred members left in Spring 1998, its leaders reckoned its total membership at almost one hundred thousand one year later... This approximation is impossible to confirm and is probably very exaggerated. Yet, there is no doubt that the ZZR Samoobrona had succeeded in taking advantage of the resurgence of peasant protests to rebuild its structures across the country. The third Congress of the trade-union held in Warsaw in 5th May 1999 clearly showed how strong it has become again. At this occasion, more than 2 000 delegates from all around Poland, hundred of guests (including officials of the government and of every major parties and trade-unions) and dozens of journalists gathered in the prestigious conference hall of the Palace of Culture and Science in Warsaw. In his opening speech, Andrzej Lepper did nothing to hide the pleasure he felt in seeing its trade-union back on the top. In front of his guests, he even allowed himself to predict a bright future for Samoobrona, not only as an agricultural trade-union but as a political force at large.

D- An hesitant yet successful come-back to politics

In the months following the 1997 election, the few Samoobrona's activists left had agreed on the necessity to suspend their political ambitions in order to keep the ZZR Samoobrona alive. Meanwhile, as the trade-union once again appeared in the headlines and regained strength, some of them, notably Andrzej Lepper, seriously began to consider re-entering the political ring for one more round. I argue that a good understanding of the gradual “re-politicisation” of Samoobrona between 1998 and 2000 implies taking into account both the dynamics of peasant protests of that time and the hesitations of the ZZR Samoobrona's members toward the opportunity - and the best way - to come back into politics. Three main periods can be distinguished in this process.

The first period may be called that of the "failed peasant political union” and runs from June to October 1998. While very popular in the early 1990's, the idea of a political unification of the Polish peasant movement had almost totally disappeared from the public debate since then [Zalewski, 2006]. By the end of June 1998, PSL's leaders used the excuse of the historic cooperation agreement between the three main agricultural trade-unions to publicly revive the idea that every agricultural organisation should unify into a single political entity. By doing so, they intended to legitimize their project of forming a broad peasant electoral coalition around their party for October
1998 local elections. Presidents of the NSZZRI’S” and KZRKiOR quickly dismissed the idea that the June Agreement had any political implication and firmly rejected the PSL's electoral proposal. On the contrary, Andrzej Lepper publicly displayed its adhesion to the ideal of a political unification of the peasantry for upcoming elections. His vision of such a merging yet differed from that then promoted by the PSL. Lepper indeed favored an association of equals between all agricultural organisations over an electoral coalition around the agrarian party. Yet, in addition to being regarded as unacceptable by other agricultural leaders, Lepper's project was far from having unanimous support within the trade-union's national committee. At that time, many ZZR Samoobrona's officials were indeed still traumatized by 1997 electoral failure and very skeptical about the opportunity to re-enter politics. In this context, Lepper had no choice but to bury his utopian project. In order to participate in local elections anyway, he finally resigned in September to join the electoral coalition formed by the PSL under the name “Przymierze Społeczne”. Yet, given the reluctance of its national committee, but also the mistrust of several PSL's leaders, he just managed to draw up local partnership agreements in seven constituencies out of sixteen. Finally, only 120 members of the ZZR Samoobrona managed to secure a place in the Przymierze Społeczne's candidate lists of 10,000.

The second period may be called that of “political assertion” and runs from November 1998 to May 1999. Thanks to its integration into the Przymierze Społeczne, the ZZR Samoobrona obtained electoral positions for the first time during the 1998 local elections. A dozen of its members indeed got elected to voivodeship sejmiks, including Andrzej Lepper in West Pomerania. Yet, this result was considered as very unsatisfactory by most officials of the trade-union. While some argued that it was not worth taking the risk to re-enter electoral politics for only a handful of minor political positions, others claimed that Samoobrona would certainly have managed to gain more mandates if it had run on its own. Lepper himself quickly came round to this latest interpretation. In the days following the local elections, he backtracked on its past commitment and broke the alliance with the PSL. In spite of the persistent reluctance of a significant part of the national committee, he thus undertook a process of political assertion that he would pursue through subversion and widened demands during the following months. On the one hand, while officially remaining faithful to the inter-union agreement, he started to express more and more frequently heterodox and explicitly political stances aiming to affirm his independence. In addition to openly insulting members of the government and to repeatedly encouraging protesters to undertake illegal actions, he did not hesitate to publicly criticize the other agricultural organisations on several occasions. At the end of January 1999, he went as far as calling the presidents of the NSZZRI’S” and the KZRKiOR “cowards” and
“traitor to the peasants' cause”\textsuperscript{11}. On the other hand, Lepper strove to extend beyond the single issue of farming income his demands. In this mind, he began to publicly address the farmers' impoverishment not anymore as a sectoral problem but as a symptom of a general economic deterioration experienced by all popular groups in Poland. At the same time, he also sought to build partnerships with non-agricultural organisations opposing the economic policy of the government, especially the workers' trade-unions "Sierpień 80", “Solidarnosc 80” and OPZZ. The strategy of political assertion initiated by Lepper from the last months of 1998 onwards, while very controversial both inside and outside the trade-union, proved to be particularly successful. Together with the concomitant process of re-structuring of its organisation, it indeed enabled the previously marginal agricultural trade-union to be recognized by other political groups, whatever their ideological orientation, as a disruptive yet inevitable protagonist of political struggles. The list of guests attending the ZZR Samoobrona's Congress in May 1999 clearly confirmed this new state of affairs.

The third period distinguishable in the Samoobrona's re-politicisation process runs from May 1999 to March 2000 and may be called that of “the last hesitations”. Following the Congress, there was no doubt anymore about the fact that the ZZR Samoobrona would play an active role in presidential and parliamentary elections to be held in 2000 and in 2001. Lepper was triumphantly re-elected for a third term as president of the trade-union and its previously controversial strategy of political assertion thus tacitly confirmed by delegates. Meanwhile, the exact manner in which Samoobrona would re-enter the political competition still remained to determine. In the following months, three different options were explored simultaneously by Samoobrona's leaders. Firstly, the party Przymierze Samoobrona, which had been totally forsaken for years, was reactivated. It was given a new name, Samoobrona RP, and its organisation was refined to match exactly that of the trade-union at every level, from the gmina circles to the Prezydium of the national committee. In contrast to 1992, no external activists were invited to join the party and mandatory dual membership was enforced. Secondly, a political rapprochement with the PSL was initiated in June 1999. A joint committee of three members from each organisation was created to discuss throughout the summer the possibility of a common peasant candidacy to the presidential election. Thirdly, negotiations aiming to form an electoral coalition were also opened with a wide variety of extra-parliamentary non-agricultural organisations eager to contest upcoming elections, from leftist trade unions to far-right groups. By the beginning of the Autumn 1999, Samoobrona seemed to be

moving towards an agreement with the small trade-union "Sierpień 80" and the national group "Zjednoczenie Patriotyczne "Grunwald". Whereas talks with the PSL ended in deadlock, Lepper and the leaders of this two organisations indeed displayed their will to develop a political partnership in October. In January 2000, they went as far as announcing the upcoming creation of a new common political party to be called *Blok Ludowo-Narodowy*. However, this project would eventually never come to reality. *Samoobrona*\(^\text{a}\)\('s* leaders and their partners indeed proved unable to agree on a common candidate for the upcoming presidential election and put an end to their collaboration in March. In this context, the henceforth Janus-faced national committee of *Samoobrona* (at once that of the ZZR *Samoobrona* and of the *Samoobrona* RP) decided to take the risk of re-involving the movement on its own in the electoral competition. Despite the persistent reluctance of some of its members who were still favoring an alliance with the PSL, it nominated Andrzej Lepper as its candidate to presidency in May 2000.

Two main characteristics may be underlined in Lepper's campaign for the October 2000 presidential election. Firstly, it is remarkable that *Samoobrona*\(^\text{a}\)'s president strove in the months preceding the vote to present himself as the candidacy of a “third way of human and economic development, alternative to both socialism and capitalism” [*Samoobrona*, 2000]. This new political positioning was primarily aimed at enlarging his potential base of support by picturing him as a generalist political leader eager to defend the interests of all “ordinary Poles suffering from the ongoing economic crisis”\(^{12}\). But it was also aimed at softening his image of radical peasant leader by renewing his displayed political influences. In addition to the nationalist ideology, Lepper thus referred extensively during his campaign to the very consensual Pope John Paul II's teachings but also to the fully respectable Schröder and Blair's “New Left”. Secondly, it is also remarkable that Lepper almost exclusively used means from the ZZR *Samoobrona* to campaign. The structure of his campaign committee was copied from that of the trade-union and activists were requested to actively support Lepper's candidacy, e.g. by making a financial donation, by canvassing or by holding local meeting. Thanks to this support, Andrzej Lepper managed to carry out on a limited budget a particularly animated campaign. According to Andżelika Wardęga, he visited at least twice each of the 379 Polish powiats in the months preceding the election [Wardęga, 2002, p.245]. Yet, in spite of his dynamism, Lepper did not achieve the electoral objectives he had set for himself. While he was expecting to obtain at least 10% of the votes and to outstrip the PSL's candidate, he won only 3,05%, well behind its main rival.

In the weeks following the October 2000 presidential election, the Samoobrona's national committee was the scene of a vivid controversy opposing Lepper and his entourage to several high rank officials of the movement, including one of its founder (Czeslaw Kosik) and two of its vice-presidents (Ireneusz Martyniuk and Janusz Malewicz). While the first interpreted Lepper's result as slightly disappointing but yet very encouraging in view of the September 2001 parliamentary elections, the second argued that it was a total failure demonstrating that the movement should either leave electoral politics or form an alliance with the PSL. In the end, Andrzej Lepper solved the controversy the hard way by expelling all his opponents from the movement in the first weeks of 2001. This brutal decision caused several defections among the members. Yet, in contrast with the early 1990's, these defections remained too limited to disrupt the functioning of the movement. Paradoxically, it even enabled Lepper to strengthen his position within the national committee. In the following weeks, neither his authority nor the participation of Samoobrona to the upcoming parliamentary elections would be discussed anymore.

The 2001 Samoobrona campaign was based explicitly on the example of the 2000 Lepper campaign. Firstly, the movement's manifesto and propaganda were one more time intended to present it both as the embodiment of an original Third Way for Polish politics and as the representative of all Poles who have suffered from the economic crisis, whatever their profession, age or residence. Secondly, the structure of the campaign committee was again set up so to match almost exactly that of the trade-union. Thus, while it was formally the party Samoobrona RP which contested the elections\(^\text{13}\), it could rely on the resources the trade-union had gathered during the 1998-1999 peasant protests to campaign, notably members, visibility and, to a lesser extent, money. Just like one year earlier, activists were put to work to collect funds and canvass. As to local and regional trade-union's leaders, they were warmly encouraged to be candidate in their constituency. But in contrast to 1993, they tended to be promoted to the highest positions on the candidate lists, that potentially eligible. As a consequence, 95,1% of the Samoobrona RP's top-of-list candidates for 2001 parliamentary election were members of the trade-union, compared to only 25% in 1993...

Thanks to the trade-union's resources, Samoobrona managed to present a full list of candidates in each of the 41 constituencies and to run a very active campaign all around the country in the weeks preceding the election. In a context of both serious economic crisis and deep recomposition of the party system, especially amid the right-wing spectrum, Samoobrona's activists strove by all means to make their movement be recognized as a serious contender for parliamentary politics and to

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\(^{13}\) Under the term of the new electoral law voted in April 2001, only political parties and voters committees are allowed to register for elections. For the first time since regime change, social organizations, including trades unions, are formally deprived from their previous right to candidate.
convince voters to support it. In a troubled context of economic crisis and profound recomposi
tion of the party system, especially amid the right-wing spectrum [Richard, 2004], they eventually
succeeded beyond all expectations, including their own. On 23 September 2001, Samoobrona's lists
gathered no less than 10,2% of the total vote and thus largely achieved the quorum necessary to
enter the Parliament. It obtained no less than 53 seats in the Sejm and 2 in the Senate, becoming the
third largest political force in Parliament, behind the SLD and the newly created post-Solidarity PO, but ahead of the PSL. More than ten years after its creation, it had managed to reconvert into
politics the collective capital it had accumulated within the social movement arena, notably through
its leader Andrzej Lepper.

III – SEQUENCE 4 (2001-2012)

A- Toward a “new” Samoobrona

The 53 newly elected Samoobrona's MPs made their first appearance in Parliament on the occasion
of the first session of the Sejm 4th term on October 19th 2001. They then distinguished clearly from
their counterparts of other parties. Firstly, they could be identified at a glance through their clothes,
as they were all wearing a white and red striped tie identical to that worn by Lepper during the 2000
and 2001 electoral campaigns. Secondly, and foremost, they differed dramatically from other MPs in
their lack of political experience and their socio-professional characteristics. On the one hand, most
of them had never been elected to any public office before. Only two of them had previous
parliamentary experience (i.e. 3,8% of the parliamentary group), whereas it was the case of more
than half of the 407 other members of the Sejm 4th term. On the other hand, most of Samoobrona's
MPs didn't belong to the same socio-professional groups than the huge majority of Polish
politicians of that time. While not surprising given the above-mentioned modalities of candidates'
selection, the over-representation of agricultural workers among them was particularly impressive
(66% vs only 16,3% of the total MPs). Employees and intermediate professions were also slightly
over-represented (30,2% vs 13%) whereas higher and managerial professions were dramatically
rare in comparison with other parliamentary groups (15,1% vs 75,4% of the total MPs). Similarly,
only 18,9% of Samoobrona's MPs had completed graduate studies whereas it was the case of the
overwhelming majority of their counterparts (89,9%). To put it shortly, most of the 53
Samoobrona's MPs that entered Parliament in October 2001 shared characteristics that were in
contradiction with the informal social rules of access to public office that had become dominant
since regime change [Heurtaux, 2004].

In addition to their affiliation to a political movement that had become famous through its "radicalism" during peasant protest actions, the political inexperience, the unusual professional origins, and the low education level of most Samoobrona's MPs were all illegitimating factors that dramatically weakened their position in Parliament. In the first weeks of the Sejm 4th term, they were regularly subject to mockery and criticism from journalists and other politicians who deride them as ignorant, incompetent and thus potentially dangerous for democracy. The marginalisation of Samoobrona's MPs within the Sejm became even more acute from November 2001 on, following an insulting statement of Andrzej Lepper against the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Former Prime minister, Wlodzimierz Cimoszewicz (SLD)\textsuperscript{14}. Alongside other influential politicians, the President of the Republic Aleksander Kwasniewski (SLD) in person then made a public call for the “formation of a large democratic front gathering left-wing and right-wing and aiming to politically isolate Andrzej Lepper”\textsuperscript{15}. The growing ostracisation of Lepper and, consequently, of others Samoobrona's MPs in the last weeks of 2001 had major consequences on the functioning of the Samoobrona movement at large. Indeed, as the stigma related to being a Samoobrona member kept on increasing, the ability of the movement to ensure the allegiance of its elected officials was crumbling. Although opinion polls indicated a growing public support for Lepper's party, several of its newly elected MPs decided to leave it and to join more legitimate parties, notably the then governing parties PSL and SLD. From January 2002 to August 2003, no less than 20 Samoobrona's MPs splintered, that is to say more than one third of the total parliamentary group. These multiple departures weakened all the more Samoobrona that most of the dissents were among those of its MPs with the relatively higher volume of personal capitals (either economic, cultural or political). Thus, by mid 2003, Samoobrona looked in pretty bad shape. In addition to being henceforth totally isolated within the political field, its representation in Parliament was dramatically shrinking. The wave of dissidence among its officials was even beginning to undermine local structures in some regions.

It is in this context of internal crisis that Andrzej Lepper and his closest allies within the national committee decided to deeply refine the “partisan identity” [Pudal, 1994] of Samoobrona. In the first months of 2003, they initiated a transformation process aiming to conform the movement to most of the then dominant rules of the Polish political field. They thus aspired to make it be considered by

\textsuperscript{15} « Front Antylepperowi », \textit{Gazeta Wyborcza}, 07/12/2001, p.6
other agents of the Polish political field as a “normal” political organisation as legitimate to exercise political power as any other. In the following years, this transformation process was implemented following three complementary directions. Firstly, the use of extra-institutional protest actions was put on standby in order to break with the movement's reputation of radicalism. From 2003 on, local leaders of the ZZR Samoobrona were asked by the national committee to give up taking on to the street and to henceforth put forward their claims only through the elected officials of the movement. Secondly, Samoobrona's public stances were reshaped in order to put an end to the unceasing accusation of demagoguery and populism its members were subject to. On the one hand, the party's officials, including Lepper himself, brutally and dramatically changed their public behavior. They strove to moderate their language when speaking publicly and even adopted a new style of dressing by constantly wearing elegant business suits. On the other hand, a so-called “committee of experts” was set up to draft a new political program that would fit the most legitimate practices of political argumentation, notably the use of statistics and of “scientific” references. Published on May 2003, the new manifesto was explicitly aimed to show the seriousness and moderation of the Samoobrona's political project of “Third way of economical and political development” [Samoobrona, 2003; 10]. Thirdly, the national committee of the movement tried hard to attract new members with a high volume of personal capitals in order to mitigate the huge gap in social characteristics between Samoobrona officials and other Polish politicians. Lawyers, businessmen and academics were thus solicited to join Samoobrona's candidate lists in view of the 2004 European elections. In exchange of a top position on a constituency list, these “notables” only had to account for their electoral campaign's expenses and to fill a check (Weksel) of 630 000 Zloty (150 000 euros) that would be cashed by the party if they leave it after having been elected. This unusual modality of candidates' selection proved to be successful. Thanks to its relatively high level of voting intentions in the polls, Samoobrona's leaders managed without any difficulties to attract individuals belonging to the same socio-professional groups than the majority of other Polish politicians. Consequently, most of the 126 Samoobrona's candidates for the 2004 European elections were newcomers in the movement and almost 90% of them had an higher or managerial profession. As the recruitment of most candidates outside the movement didn't seem to impact the electoral performance of Samoobrona during the 2004 European elections (it obtained 10,8% of the total vote and 6 seats in the European Parliament), the national leaders of the movement decided to renew this way of choosing candidates for the 2005 Parliamentary elections. One more time, it was made possible for “notables” eager to obtain a political mandate to “buy” a position on Samoobrona's candidate lists under the same conditions as those defined in 2004.
The year 2005 can be considered as a super election-year in Poland, since Parliamentary and Presidential elections were held respectively in September and October. Four years after its unexpected entry in Parliament, Samoobrona contested both this elections among favorites. Indeed, despite the huge internal transformations experienced by the movement, it had managed to stabilize at a relatively high level of popularity in opinion polls (between 10% and 30%). It had also secure its position as a major national political force at every intermediary elections since 2001. In the weeks preceding the 2005 elections, Andrzej Lepper didn't hesitate to express his confidence that Samoobrona will obtain more than 100 seats in Parliament and that he will win the Presidential election. Eventually, even so Samoobrona did realize its best electoral performances ever in 2005, the results proved him far too optimistic. During Parliamentary elections, Samoobrona improved only slightly its 2001 results by gathering 11,4% of the total vote (+1,2%). It obtained 56 seats in the Sejm (+3) and 3 in the Senate (+1), thus confirming its position as the third largest political force in Polish Parliament. As for Andrzej Lepper, he didn't manage to qualify for the second round of the Presidential elections. Yet, he placed third with more than 15% of the total vote and thus reaffirmed his importance in Polish politics.

The 56 Samoobrona's MPs that entered the Parliament on the occasion of the first session of the Sejm 5th term on October 19th 2005 had very little in common with their predecessors. As a consequence of the transformations experienced by the movement in the preceeding years, notably the new modalities of candidates' selections above-described, the composition of the Samoobrona's parliamentary group was indeed deeply changed in comparison with that of the previous term. Firstly, only 17 of the Samoobrona's outgoing MPs had managed to get re-elected. It must be said that most of those of the incumbents that had only few personal capitals at their disposal or were not members of the Samoobrona's national comitee had been relegated to second rank positions in the candidate lists, behind new-coming “notables”. Secondly, MPs with a higher and managerial professions were then forming a majority in the parliamentary group (60,7% vs 15,1% in 2001) whereas those with an agricultural profession had lost their predominance (35,7% vs 66% in 2001). Similarly, most of the new Samoobrona's MPs were henceforth holding a graduate degree (57,1% vs 18,9% in 2001).

Following the 2005 elections, the Polish party system experienced a major shift which resulted in an unexpected strengthening of Samoobrona's position within the political field. As predicted by
most opinion polls, the outgoing “post-communist” governing parties SLD and PSL had suffered huge defeats in both elections and had seen their parliamentary representation sink (respectively from 216 MPs to 55 and from 42 to 25). Contrariwise, the two main post-solidarity parties PiS and PO had made huge electoral gains. Their parliamentary representation had rocketed up (respectively from 44 MPs to 155 and from 65 to 133) and together they were certain to hold a solid majority in both Sejm and Senate. Yet, the two leading parties eventually failed to form the coalition they had promised for months. Indeed, the fierce contest between their leaders for the Polish presidency eventually ended up in a falling out. In the weeks following the victory of Lech Kaczynsky (PiS) over Donald Tusk (PO), the last attempts to form a coalition failed. PiS had no choice than finding new partners in Parliament to govern. Yet, as SLD and PO decided to join the opposition, Samoobrona (56 MPs), LPR (34 MPs) and PSL (25 MPs) were the only remaining options [Markowski, 2005; Szczerbiak, 2007].

In the weeks following the falling out between PiS and PO, Andrzej Lepper made several public statements to express that Samoobrona was fully ready to negotiate a coalition with PiS. The “moderation” of the movement and the “normalisation” of its elected officials' profiles since 2001 were the two main arguments he then used to legitimate its claim to enter government. PiS's leaders initially showed reluctance at discussing with a political group most of them continued to consider as an illegitimate political actor. Yet, they gradually changed their mind as Lepper strove to provide as many evidences of its movement's conformation to the dominant rules of the political field as possible, and as it was becoming clearer and clearer that PiS wouldn't be able to form a stable majority without the support of the third largest political force in Parliament. In January 2006, PiS's president Jaroslaw Kaczyński accepted for the first time to invite Samoobrona's representatives to take part to negotiations aiming to ensure the government a majority in Parliament. The negotiations ended on February 2nd with the signing of a so-called “stability pact”. Under the terms of the agreement, Samoobrona and LPR would support without participation the PiS's minority government in exchange of the promise that some of their electoral proposals would be turned into bills. The pact was supposed to last for one year, it lasted less than two months. Andrzej Lepper and LPR's president, Roman Giertych, indeed rapidly claimed that PiS was not respecting its obligations. In the first days of spring, they demanded the formation of a proper majority coalition to continue to support the government. After a few weeks of political instability, during which PiS tried and failed to call early elections, they eventually managed to impose their point of view. On April 27th 2006, leaders of PiS, Samoobrona and LPR signed a formal coalition agreement. Samoobrona obtained three cabinet seats, including Andrzej Lepper as Deputy Prime Minister and
By mid 2006, the strategy of “normalisation” of Samoobrona initiated by Andrzej Lepper in 2003 seemed to have been a total success. Indeed, it had enable the movement to put an end to its institutional marginalisation without impacting its electoral performance. Less than 15 years after its creation as a tiny agricultural trade union, Samoobrona had become a powerful governing party with a substantial representation in every Polish elected institutions. Yet, this period of acme will prove to be short-lived...

C – The long term costs of radical transformation

After months of internal struggles, the PiS-LPR-Samoobrona ruling coalition collapsed in July 2007, over suspicions raised by the Prime minister Jarosław Kaczyński (PiS) that Lepper was involved in corruption. Few weeks later, the Sejm voted its own dissolution. Early parliamentary elections were held on October 2007. They turned up to be a disaster for Samoobrona. The party collapsed to just 1.5% of the vote (-9.9%) and lost all its seats in Parliament. In the following months, it looked in total distress as most of its officials decided to leave it, either to put an end to their political career or to join an other party. While many hold him accountable for Samoobrona's electoral failure, Andrzej Lepper initially dismissed all the criticisms and denied that defections were damaging the movement. In the last weeks of the year 2007, he even didn't hesitate to express his confidence that Samoobrona would very soon be back at the top, both as a political party and as an agricultural trade union. The events will prove him to be totally wrong. On the one hand, Samoobrona RP experienced failures at every elections since 2007 and has gradually lost all its representation in elected institutions. During 2010 presidential elections, Lepper has managed to gather only 214 000 votes (1.28% of the total vote), that is to say ten time less than five years earlier... On the other hand, while being still theoretically one of the three national agricultural trade-unions, ZZR Samoobrona had almost no activity in the last years. Since the 2007 elections, it had only rarely been invited to agricultural negotiations with the government and had been unable to gather more than a few dozen members during the numerous protest actions Lepper and his last supports had tried to organise. As he was facing this succession of failures, a more than ever isolated Lepper seemed to have gradually lost his faith in Samoobrona's come back. All the more that he was then also struggling with major personal difficulties. Eventually, in August 2011, only a few months before new Parliamentary elections that would probably have turned into a new rout for Samoobrona, he committed suicide in his office. He thus certainly put a final end to the twenty-
year-long spectacular history of *Samoobrona*...

Two main complementary explanations have been given to the rapid decline of *Samoobrona* following its 2007 electoral failure. Firstly, it has commonly been said that *Samoobrona*’s dramatic fall had been the result of its inability to satisfy its voters after entering Cabinet. Its traditional supports would indeed have been widely disappointed by either the moderation of its political position, the poor performance of its representative in the government or the several scandals involving its leaders, including Lepper. Secondly, it has also often been considered that *Samoobrona* had been the victim of PiS’s strategy to enlarge its support base. During 2007 early elections, Kaczyński brothers’ party would indeed have succeeded in siphoning voters from its former coalition partners, mainly by incorporating some of their main proposals into its electoral program and by constantly criticising the behavior of their representatives in Cabinet [Markowski, 2008; Gwiazda, 2008]. In spite of having been defeated by PO, PiS had thus managed to notably improved its results (+5,1%) at the expense of it former partners which both lost all their parliamentary representation in 2007.

I argue that a full understanding of *Samoobrona*’s spectacular decline in recent years also implies to pay attention to two more internal factor. Firstly, the gradual disintegration of ZZR *Samoobrona*’s local structure. My doctoral research indeed shows that the trade-union, and therefore the party, experienced an haemorrhage of members following the implementation of the transformation process by the national committee in 2003. Three main elements explains this wave of defections of grassroots activists: the growing inaction of a trade-union most of them had joined during 1998-1999 peasant demonstrations (1), their growing marginalization within the movement (and on its candidates lists) to the benefice of newcomers with a high volume of personal capital (2), and their growing difficulty to identify themselves with a movement that kept on redefining and moderating its political positions (3). In short, it can be argue drawing on Daniel Gaxie’s work that *Samoobrona*’s local structure started to disintegrate as soon as the trade-union stopped to reward either symbolically or materially the activism of its members [Gaxie, 1977]. During 2005 electoral campaigns, *Samoobrona* had already lost most of its activists. Yet, this fact then remained largely invisible as the movement managed to campaign actively with the support of highly paid political consulting and campaign managing companies. Having spent in 2005 every single zloty it had earned through public party funding since 2001, *Samoobrona* could no more afford such an external support during the 2007 early elections campaign. The total disintegration of *Samoobrona*’s local structures then became obvious, as the movement proved able to mobilise activists eager to
campaign in only a few regions of the country. Without realising it, its leaders had squandered the collective capital it had accumulated within the social movement arena by trying to turn it at any price into a “normal” and respectable political party. The second internal factor that must be taken into account to fully understand Samoobrona’s spectacular decline is the deterioration of the relations among its officials in the years preceding its 2007 electoral rout. Following the 1998-1999 peasant demonstrations, Andrzej Lepper had succeeded in imposing its authority over its rival. He had gradually managed to monopolise the control of the movement and its collective capital. That explains why he was able in 2003 to impose, without discussion and debate, a radical transformation of the movement's organisation and stances. Yet, paradoxically enough, this very transformation process would prove to result in a weakening of its authority. The political career of the numerous “notables” that joined the movement from 2004 on indeed relied less on Samoobrona's collective capital, and therefore on Lepper, than that of the historic members of the movement. Thus, during Sejm 5th term, Lepper's leadership was challenged at several occasions by some of these newcomers with a high volume of personal capital. Above all, almost every “notables” that had become officials of the movement between 2004 and 2007 left it as soon as it suffered a reversal of electoral fortune. While favoring them at the expense of historic activists that were loyal to him, Andrzej Lepper had created the conditions of possibility for his isolation and had thus dug his own political grave.

Summarising

The aim of this paper was to provide insights to explain the spectacular trajectory of Samoobrona in Post-communist Poland, from its emergence in the late 1990s to its disintegration after 2007 Parliamentary elections, passing by its electoral successes in the early 2000s. In contrast with the numerous studies using the problematic notion of populism to account for Samoobrona's atypical political career, I located my study within the field of political sociology. More specifically, I advocated that Bourdieu's political theory and analytical tools are particularly useful to study outsider political groups such as Samoobrona in Poland.

My analysis of Samoobrona's trajectory in contemporary Poland was divided into two parts following a chronological path.

(1) In the first part of my analysis, I focused on the first years of Samoobrona, from its emergence
during 1991 peasant protests to its unexpected electoral success in 2001 Parliamentary elections. Firstly, I showed that a good understanding of the creation of a new agricultural trade-union in 1992 implied to take into account the specific political context of that time. On the one hand, I argued that the pre-existing agricultural trade-unions played a decisive role in the decision of previously non-affiliate farmers to collaborate to build a new organisation by enabling them to accumulate some primary collective capital. On the other hand, I showed that the vivid institutional conflicts of the year 1992 are a major explaining factor to the surprising decision of President Walesa to provide official recognition to the still tiny ZZR Samoobrona following the occupation by some of its members of the building of the Ministry of Agriculture. Secondly, I demonstrated that the structural governmental instability of the years 1992 to 1993 had a decisive impact on ZZR Samoobrona's leaders decision to enter into electoral politics. My analysis also pointed out the main reasons why the electoral strategy of organisational differentiation initially implemented by the movement failed and deeply weakened the movement. To a point where it seemed to be on the verge of disappearing in the late 1990s. Thirdly, I pointed out the three main reasons of Samoobrona's unexpected political come back and electoral success in the early 2000. First, I explained that media's prejudice on peasantry played a decisive role on the recognition of a yet badly shaped ZZR Samoobrona as a major participant to farmer's protest actions organised by exceptionally unified agricultural organisations in 1998. Second, I demonstrated that Andrzej Lepper gradually managed to take advantage of its growing reputation as the most radical peasants' representative to redevelop the local structures of ZZR Samoobrona across the country. Finally, I argued that the halting process of “re-politicisation” of Samoobrona between 1998 and 2000 proved to be successful mainly because it enabled the movement to reconvert into politics the collective capital it had accumulated within the social movement arena.

(2) The second part of my analysis of Samoobrona's trajectory also dealt with a period of over ten years, from the first session of the Sejm 4th term in October 2001 to Lepper's suicide in August 2011. Firstly, I pointed out that the election of Samoobrona's officials to Parliament had major consequences for the functioning of the movement at large. As most Samoobrona's MPs shared characteristics that were in contradiction with the informal social rules of access to public office that had become dominant since regime change, the movement quickly faced marginalisation in the field of institutional field. Andrzej Lepper and its allies then decided to initiate a drastic process of transformation of Samoobrona's organisation in order to put an end to its stigmatisation and to make it be recognised by other agents of the Polish political field as a “normal” political organisation. Secondly, I noted that this “conformation” process enabled Samoobrona to take advantage of the political deadlock following 2005 parliamentary elections to force itself as an unavoidable coalition partner for the main parliamentary party, PiS. Thirdly, I demonstrated that the transformation process implemented in 2003 also deeply weakened Samoobrona's structure and therefore played a
decisive role in its rapid disintegration following its 2007 electoral rout. At the very moment when it seemed to be at the height of its political influence, it was in fact a giant with feet of clay facing disappearance.

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