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The Paradox of Global Civil Society

Abstract

The article presents the issue of global civil society, which is often regarded as a kind of remedy for global problems. It has been pointed out that civil society is inextricably linked with the institution of the state, as well as democracy, which is not conducive to globalisation. As a strictly verbal structure, the global civil society cannot actually be brought into existence, mainly due to the lack of a universal/global axiological foundation. Referring to attempts to create a global civil society, the author points out that it can become a construct that exists ostensibly to address problems which could be addressed by entities with a real ability to act, but which cannot or do not want to. These are problems best not ignored. Referring to Roland Robertson’s concept of glocalisation, I stress the need to re-evaluate the local-global relation, which I believe will reduce the negative effects of globalisation through the local activities (i.e. operating at the level of the nation-state) of civil societies.

Keywords: globalisation, state, democracy, civil society, global civil society, glocalisation.

1. Introduction

This article examines the issue of global civil society. The word “issue” is deliberately used to point out that the term “global civil society” is largely moot.
Civil society\(^1\) is in fact a phenomenon whose existence and meaning is inextricably linked to the nation-state\(^2\). The vast majority of theorists and researchers have combined the idea of the global civil society with democracy, and its deficit is one of the cardinal sins of globalisation. It cannot be denied that for many countries and societies, global civil society has become an opportunity to improve the socio-economic situation, allowing them to limit misery and poverty. This has strengthened their importance in the international arena. Also, politically speaking, the dialectics inherent in the processes of globalisation does not allow some of the problems to be overcome. There is no entity that could successfully counteract the negative consequences of globalisation, but it is clear they must be ameliorated as the consequences indeed extend throughout the world. Although a partial attempt – when other attempts seem impossible – to mitigate the negative effects of globalisation should be made by civil society, within the framework of the state it is often able to effectively cope with the aftermath of a number of negative events and processes. However, it is not clear how such a society would function on a global scale. Whether a global civil society project would succeed, though present in both the public and scientific discourse, is a matter for debate.

\(^1\) Due to space limitations, numerous approaches to civil society have been omitted. Historical perspective allows several models to be distinguished: the classical (including Aristotle, Immanuel Kant, Jean Jacques Rousseau, and today Hannah Arendt), the liberal (Adam Smith, Adam Ferguson, John Locke), the Hegelian, the Marxist, the sociological (assuming that for the smooth functioning of society it is not only the relationship between government and citizens that plays an important role, but also the relationship between citizens themselves) and the pluralistic (Arend Lijphart, Robert Dahl) (Dziubka 1998). Today, several concepts work in parallel and prejudge what elements and values are the most important for civil society. For some, it is an intermediate structure between what is public and what is private (Bobbio 1997, Szacki 1994). Others, including Michael Walzer (1992), understand them as a community based on the commitment of individuals to act for the common good. Victor Pérez Díaz (1993) maintains that the most important value is pluralism, understood as the existence of a whole range of different, often conflicting interests of the collective, which can be articulated and the implementation of which can be freely organised. In pursuing these interests, communication between different segments of society is crucial. Jürgen Habermas (1990) also draws our attention to the important role communication plays. In the countries of Central and Eastern Europe there is a particularly strong emphasis on the ethical aspect (Havel 1979).

\(^2\) “We can therefore assume that one of the constitutive conditions of the existence of civil society is the existence of the state (…). Actions taken by the citizens (…) require an appropriate, institutional, but also social context. It can guarantee only the state, and the fixed and sufficiently accepted socio-political order according to which it is organized” (Krauz-Mozer 2007, pp. 259–260).
2. Globalisation and Democracy

The term “globalisation” has diminished over time, mainly because it is abused to the point of becoming a kind of political rhetorical tool used to “explain” a complex and increasingly complicated reality. While we can speak about the “taming” of globalisation, in the sense that the term has entered the everyday vernacular, it is difficult to find a clear academic definition to encompass all of its aspects (Scholte 2007). Globalisation can undoubtedly be associated with “the process of compaction and intensification of connections and relationships of the economic, political, military, cultural, ideological, and between human societies” (Sztompka 2002, p. 598; see also Robertson 1992; Scholte 2000). This shows how complex the process of globalisation is and how many faces it has. These led Marek Pietraś to suggest one speak not so much about the process of globalisation, but about its individual strands, of which he lists five (2002, see also Castells 2000, 2010, Scholte 2014):

– economic – covering mainly trade, services, capital flows and technology;
– information – the development of electronic means of communication, which facilitate the compression of time and space;
– cultural – encompasses two somewhat contradictory tendencies: first, the homogenisation of consumer behaviour and, second, diversity and multiculturalism, which have their source in the sense of identity and distinctiveness of nations and ethnic groups;
– political – in the foreground, the problem of the relationship between global politics and the nation-state and global governance;
– ecological – including, primarily, threats on a global scale, resulting mainly from the development of civilisation and technology.

In the opinion of most researchers, civil society is a phenomenon associated with democracy. For proponents of globalisation, it is a kind of media democracy due perhaps to the “third wave simultaneity” of globalisation and democratisation (see Dzwończyk 2007). Despite the temporary parallels, disparities are visible, resulting among other things from the different character of the two processes – globalisation proceeds more unpredictably, while democracy requires stable mechanisms, regulation and permanent institutions. This is what underlies one of the most serious accusations: democratic deficit. This phenomenon stems largely from globalisation having significantly redefined the importance of the nation

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3 Roland Robertson and Kathleen White even ask whether it is reasonable to speak of a globalisation not globalisations (2007).

4 However, Ernest Gellner (1991) and John Gray (1993) disagreed with the opposite opinion, because it recognised that civil society can be realised only in the sphere of economy; they believed that it can function in authoritarian systems.
state in the modern world (Ohmae 1995, Shaw 1997); this creates a framework for the functioning of democracy (see eg. Held 1989).

Globalisation limits democracy in two dimensions – the local (the “locality” in this case means the nation-state) and the global (i.e. the world). In the first case, legislative and executive power in different countries are somehow doomed to succumb to the pressures of globalisation, since voluntary withdrawal from the group of countries in the process of globalising can lead to the state being weakened both economically and politically (Wnuk-Lipiński 2004, pp. 150–154). This in turn contributes to the “corrosion of representative bodies”, as politicians increasingly listen not to the voice of the voters, but to the financial markets or international corporations, capital and various kinds of specialised international institutions – that is, organisations set up such that power is shifted from elected bodies to ones that are neither elected nor accountable to society.

The global dimension is even more complicated. The issue of “democratic decision-making” really boils down to a question of responsibility – or rather the lack thereof – for decisions. Earlier, democratically taken decisions in the context of a nation state addressed citizens and perhaps to a small extent went beyond the state’s territorial boundaries. The situation today is different: Elective decisions taken by the authorities of one country often have important implications on the life of citizens of other countries that do not have any influence on those democratically selected decision-makers. On the other hand, on a global scale, entities function which are not responsible for the decisions, and sometimes even exert a fundamental impact on the lives of people around the world. The result is that democratic supervision of key issues faced by the entirety of humanity has become practically impossible. These issues include military security, finance, the fight against unemployment and environmental protection.

What is certainly not conducive to democracy is the economic domination of globalisation. As Roman Kuźniar has pointed out, globalisation prioritises the economic sphere. Even if its other aspects are considered, it shows “the trend of moving important decisions made concerning the larger communities or sectors of society as a whole, from the political sphere to the sphere of economy. A power economy (…) not only does not have and does not need democratic legitimacy, but in fact is alien to the nature of democracy” (Kuźniar 2002, p. 77).

Nevertheless, proponents of globalisation treat it simply as a tool for democratisation. In their view, thanks to modern techniques of communication, globalisa-

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5 Global Governance represented an attempt to democratise globalisation and ensure the equal treatment of all humanity. Instead, it has become a tool of control and a not entirely effective element of curbing conflicts in potentially dangerous areas of the world (Lipschutz 1997, Duffield 2001). Over time, the idea of “democratising” Global Governance moved toward connecting it with the idea of sustainable development (Rosenau 2003, Albrow & Holland 2008).
tion can be recognised as a kind of convergence, both economic and political. According to them, a democratic state with a high level of economic development plays a pattern-forming role for countries eager to imitate them. They do not see that the attempt to impose one (western) development pattern is conducive to the protests of a cultural nature, the consequences of which are ultimately the most political in nature, insofar as they favour integrist attitudes, leading to the formation of different kinds of fundamentalism.

3. Civil Society and Globalisation

According to the critics of globalisation, it is the primary source of global problems. They concern the whole of humanity and relate, if not to its survival, certainly to the quality of life, and requires joint action across the international community. “Traditional” global problems include resource depletion, disease and armed conflict. According to Ulrich Beck, these are joined by a host of new global problems including environmental issues, epidemics and diseases of civilisation, wars (both local and regional) leading to humanitarian disasters, and the effects of the division of regions into poor and wealthy, which promotes international terrorism and financial crisis (Beck 2012). The “continuity” of global problems probably also promotes globalisation’s dialectical nature. On the one hand, social life is centralised and integrated, but is at the same time accompanied, paradoxically, by decentralisation and disintegration (Rosenau 2002). On the other hand, the local penetrates the global (Robertson 1995).

The global civil society could help solve global problems, it is said. The very concept of civil society is experiencing a renaissance, for many years having remained outside of the mainstream interests of social scientists. Charles Taylor described the term simply as “pulled out of the junk, which was used primarily to describe the community of Eastern Europe” (1994, p. 54). With time, however, it began to be used beyond the countries of the USSR: It went global. But is that a good thing?

In principle, all authors dealing with the issues of civil society unanimously believe that it is a space filled by the voluntary cooperation of the units it affiliates. This allows only a “negative definition” to be formulated, according to which civil society is everything “that remains once limits are determined within which the state’s power operates” (Bobbio 1997, p. 64). Not only should the natural evolution of the concept be taken into account, but also the fact that its history is associated with the two traditions of republican and liberal, in which civil society is presented in a much different way – in terms of either the community or the individual.
Dorota Pietrzyk-Reeves notes that today, in representing a synthesis of republican and liberal political thought, the idea of civil society is dominated by liberal themes. They are focused on the individual and his rights, which are overshadowed by the display of tradition of the republican notion of community and the common good, implemented within the framework of the state. In the liberal sense dominant today, civil society is treated as a reality clearly separate from the state, but this does not mean that civil society is an alternative to the state (Pietrzyk-Reeves 2004, pp. 17–116). In both cases, however, the state is seen as a prerequisite for the functioning of civil society. It is impossible not to observe that the most favourable institutional environment for civil society is created by democracy, to which the impact of globalisation, as in the case of a state, can hardly be considered positive (Scholte 2000, Wolf 2001, Held 1997).

Here it is worth considering a paradox about globalisation: On the one hand, when the nation-state is weakened, and thus the conditions for democracy are limited, the effect on civil society is negative. However, anti-globalisation can breed nationalism, which also poses a threat to civil society. A lack of openness, distrust of pluralism and diversity are in conflict with one of the cardinal values of civil society – tolerance.

The words of Charles Taylor about the renaissance of the idea of civil society through the societies of real socialism lead us to Piotr Sztompka’s analysis of civil society (1996), which examines three theoretical approaches:

1. The tradition of Ferdinand Tönnies and Georg Simmel, who recognised it as a “community” understood as a “mesostructure” intermediary between two levels: the micro and the macro. Meanwhile, civil society, NGOs, governments, various associations and self-help groups are often referred to in the literature as the “third sector”.

2. The economic, which refers to the legacy of Karl Marx and especially Max Weber. Civil society is understood here as an autonomous sphere of activity and economic relations, as a specific mode of production based on private ownership, driven by entrepreneurship, imbued with rational calculation and focused on individual benefits, but with the principles of social justice (understood as rewarding the individual for his effort, work contribution or merit).

3. The cultural, which refers primarily to the ideas of Alexis de Tocqueville (see 1996 edition) and Antonio Gramsci. Civil society is understood here as an axiological community, a set of norms and values shared by the society. It’s a kind

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6 Andrew Arato stated that “Poles in the seventies re-invented the discourse of civil society” (1993, p. 296).

7 There are three basic areas of activity in a society: the public sphere (administration), business (business profit), and the third sector, in which non-governmental organisations operate, working mainly for the benefit of others and for whom profit is immaterial.
of civic solidarity, manifested in the interest of public good and the cultivation of universal values such as truth, honesty, social activity, concern for others, providing support, tolerance and respect for others and respect for tradition.

None of these dimensions are able to function effectively when civil society is shifted to a global scale. The activity of a “global third sector” often turns out to be even counterproductive, because it not only eliminates divisions, but actually generates and petrifies them. The economic aspect on a global dimension does not seem achievable because of very far-reaching social injustice, generating a center–periphery (North-South) division. This division is the result of, as Kuźniejar explained, the economic taking primacy over other spheres of life, and attempts to create an uncontroversial “directory of global values” that not only has failed, but also triggered war, not only a worldview (Huntington 1993, Barber 1995).

4. Global Civil Society?

Nevertheless, attempts have been made to “construct” a global civil society. In relation to the republican tradition, the idea of global civil society revolves around the decision-making process relating to the public (humanity). More widely shared, the liberal approach involves the concept of global civil society groups (international NGOs) operating internationally, or even globally. According to John Keane (2003), the term global civil society refers to self-organising groups, more or less formal entities operating across borders and beyond the reach of governments. He emphasises that it is not something fixed and is still an unfinished project, but nonetheless seeks to organise the world anew.

According to Mary Kaldor (2003), the term “global civil society” can refer to three planes. The first are new social movements, which Claus Offe describes as informal, egalitarian, and which occasionally work in a way that each depends on the context. As Offe points out (1985), new social movements are made up of participants, charities, volunteer-agitators, informal cooperation networks, volunteers and voluntary donations. The most preferred tactics are demonstrations and other actions calling for the physical presence of a large number of people. Demands tend to take a negative form (expressed using the keywords “away”, “end”, “stop”, “enough”, “never (more)”. These movements are not able to compromise because they themselves have nothing to offer (except retractable demands), and the results they desire are so universal and urgent that it is impossible to negotiate. Offe emphasises that the new social movements apply mostly legal, albeit unconventional measures. This is questionable, given that the movements

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8 Some use the term transnational NGOs.
and anti-alterglobalists use increasingly brutal methods accompanied by street clashes, sabotage and all kinds of provocation, which can hardly be considered appropriate methods for civil society, which is not violent.

According to Kaldor, the second area of global civil society is created by a global third sector, international NGOs and INGOs. However, researchers involved in these organisations see the use of the term “global civil society” as an abuse, because their operation raises a host of reservations. For example, often for objective reasons they are not able to effectively carry out the society’s mission (Hudock 1999, pp. 18–20). Moreover, they are themselves affected by global weakness, which is recreating the division of the center–periphery. However, the most serious charge levelled against them is that they generate social divisions of a lasting nature: “The non-governmental sector develops according to its own logic and objectives, which are not consistent with the needs of the objects of their actions. Once the established system is fighting for their own institutional survival, legitimising its existence by taking over an even wider area of social spheres (...). Non-governmental organisations are active participants in the process of building new social differentiation and stratification. As part of the global society, non-governmental activists are a transnational middle class, continuing closer relationships within their own groups than between them and the objects of their actions, which are mainly members of the local lower classes. A dangerous product of the activities of the NGO sector is to maintain economic subordination of the disadvantaged and consequently the reproduction of poverty” (Załęski 2005, p. 346).

Kaldor (2003, p. 589) draws attention to the involvement of INGOs in politics and competition between them, including in lobbying for funding (including from governments). This leads them to act more like market subjects than NGOs. Ronnie D. Lipschutz draws attention to another aspect – appreciating the role of INGOs in helping the needy in disasters, wars and natural disasters. He notes that they are increasingly becoming part of the global capitalist economy, succumbing to a kind of “corporatisation” – evolving dangerously in the direction of an enterprise striving foremost to turn a profit, even if the money would be better spent on the needy. He is especially concerned about the pursuit of corporate performance, which, although it can provide good economic results, is based on non-democratic management (Lipschutz 2005, pp. 761–763).

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9 The division of the center–periphery (the rich North and the poor South) also applies to INGOs. Global NGOs concentrated in OECD countries are primarily think-tanks that collect and analyse information and develop problem-solving strategies while in possession of huge financial resources. Meanwhile organisations operating in the poorer regions deal with the often murderous “dirty work” (Hagai & Anheier 2006).
The last plane of global civil society, according to Kaldor, proposes a post-modern perspective, one that goes beyond the “classical”, heavy, western individualism understanding of civil society, which allows operators including religious (eg. Islamic) or ethnic communities to be involved (2003, p. 590). Although moving beyond Euro-Atlantic ethnocentrism seems reasonable, a community based on the ethnic or religious identities tends to focus primarily on the defense of the foundations of its identification, which often result in hostility towards all differences and which excludes pluralism and tolerance, two important values for civil society. Communities of this type may evolve in the direction of the “bad civil society” Simone Chambers and Jeffrey Kopstein write about (2001).

In all of the planes of global civil society distinguished by Kaldor, there are visible weaknesses. These are significant enough that questioning the wisdom of the concept of global civil society, which seems primarily a verbal construct, but one which to some extent orders the complex reality of globalisation running on a governmental and non-economic plane. It is difficult to accept that the term has been fully defined, especially given how difficult it is to produce a definition of “civil society”.

On the other hand, it is impossible not to agree with Ralf Dahrendorf contention that “we need a global civil society. (...) As Athens of Pericles turned the citizenship of dreams into reality on which to build a modern society, as civil society in Europe and North America, and in several other points of the globe predict what clearly is everywhere possible” (1993, p. 84).

Roland Robertson and Kathleen White (2007) point to two basic determinants of contemporary globalisation: intensification of global connectivity and an increase in global awareness. Seen through this lense, it may seem that the Dahrendorf demand can be met, especially considering the current possibilities for social communication. But the problem is that “global consciousness”, as the authors suggest, does not mean agreement, but only the “sense of the world as a whole” (Robertson & White 2007, p. 64). However, they also suggest that globalisation refers to the four major planes of human life – cultural, social, political and economic, which are closely related. The most visible and most analysed of the four are culture and economy. Edward Shils (1997, p. 78) points to the market as one of the elements of civil society, while at the same time stressing that “civil society is not a market, though it does build a place for the market, and creates favourable circumstances”. “Collective self-awareness of the cognitive and normative” determines whether a given society is a civil society. This orders the unit taking into account the consequences of individual actions for the good of society as a whole, especially when making decisions about conflicting (from the point of view of the individual and the community) interests or ideals (Shils 1997, p. 87 et seq.). This concerns the special role the cultural aspect plays:
It involves the creation of a kind of “global axiological base” that includes the value of enabling the collective interest of the whole of human society to develop. This seems unlikely, given that “Globalization is not a negotiated process, there is no multilateral character, it does not require anyone’s approval. It’s more like a one-way street with traffic. One side of this process «exports» or «issues» while the other «imports» or «accepts», but does not internalise the mechanically absorbed tangible and intangible creations coming from the outside” (Kuźniar 2004, p. 161).

This definition not only confirms democratic deficit, but also the practical rejection of the principle of equality and universal acceptance of internationally agreed norms and values.

5. Glocal Civil Society?

In 1995, Roland Robertson introduced the concept of the “glocalisation” of the social sciences. This initially referred to the strategy of matching goods and services from the global market to the local market. Robertson then broadened its meaning to incorporate the cultural sphere as well. In this perspective, glocalisation means adapting local cultures to global conditions of life, as well as bringing local content and value into global circulation. In principle, this should lead to a situation in which the entity has the right to choose and combine a different cultural matrix of possibilities (Robertson 1995, 2003). In simplified terms, it can be assumed that glocalisation is associated with the idea of multiculturalism – therefore, respect and equal treatment of all cultures (and the values represented by them) which, while in itself attractive, was eventually rejected. On the one hand, an attempt to “globalise” the Western world (including those associated with civil society) failed and caused the opposite to happen. On the other hand, the aspirations of local cultures to have their values penetrate the global arena proved for the western world acute in effects¹⁰. However, the tension Robertson notes between localism and globalisation in the cultural dimension is important for two reasons: First, it emphasises the importance of the cultural aspect and, consequently, the axiological aspect¹¹. Second, it provokes a way of looking at the relations between the global and the local. The concepts at work in global civil society represent an extension of civil society functioning within the framework of national states. As “normal” (national) civil societies are assigned the task

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¹⁰ There were, for example, solutions such as “Confucian democracy” (Singapore) and delegated democracy (Latin American countries).

¹¹ I omit here the political and economic, for which the glocal state should resolve the tension between the global and local (in the dimension of the state) (Beck 2012).
of solving all sorts of problems and ills in the country, a global civil society would serve to solve global problems. These, however, are practically unsolvable, precisely because of its (global) scale and are solved only fractionally. The relatively loose nature of the links between entities that make up what is exaggeratedly referred to as global civil society is at the same time a cause of frustration concerning the efficiency of its operations. Coordinating activities on a global level without an institutional and bureaucratic “housing” seems unlikely.

So perhaps a reevaluation of “global–local” relations should be initiated so that globally it becomes possible to realise how much evidence there is of the effective operation of “normal” society. According to Geert Hofstede (2007), an intercultural cooperation scholar, the assumption which encompasses the slogan “Think globally, act locally” is incorrect. According to Hofstede, we must think locally and act globally. This means be aware of differences, but avoid evaluation and learn to cooperate to achieve common goals. This assumption is very similar to the message of most definitions of civil society. Although it has not been articulated in the context of global civil society, it seems that its realisation can contribute to the implementation of the tasks that may face a civil society acting locally (within national borders). Working together in a transnational dimension may make it possible to become individuals that are able to limit the negative effects of globalisation, relying on a snowball effect.

6. Conclusion

As indicated above, the concept of the global civil society is somewhat “exaggerated”, but as Dahrendorf has indicated, it is nonetheless essential. Perhaps it represents not so much an “axiom”, but nascent reality, as Keane has called it. According to this approach, the global civil society is a project carried out over a matter of years, but is doomed to remain incomplete, and requires the implementation of what is known as civic education, which is often difficult to implement even on a local (national) scale. A long-term horizon may discourage the necessary effort, but we cannot remain passive in the face of the challenges of globalisation (cf. Castells 2010b). Hofstede’s proposal may not seem highly ambitious, because it is not “global” enough. However, it should be accepted that putting too much hope in the not entirely defined global civil society could cause Lipschutz’s concern to materialise: That is, it will become a kind of “smoke-

12 As an example, measures taken in 2005 by the Global Coalition Against Poverty (Global Call to Action Against Poverty), which operates at the global level. On that level, however, spectacular successes have not been achieved, but much better results are achieved by the activity at the national level in over one hundred countries of the world.
screen”, an apparent fictitious instance that exists in order to deal with the problems the state, organisations and international institutions cannot or do not want to deal with, but whose matters should not be ignored. So to create a sense that these issues are not neglected, they will be subjected to discussion in the global civil society (Lipschutz 2005, pp. 768–769). Due to their “amorphous” side and tendency to become global players, societies will not be able to make binding decisions, only to pretend and, referring to the classics of political science, “take non-decisions” (Bachrach & Baratz 1962). On the global level, these will take the shape of “symbolic decisions” (i.e. those that define the most noble objectives without specifying the means of their implementation) or “remittance”, which will focus on initiating a particular activity, without sketching out final goals to be achieved (Pietraś 1987).

**Bibliography**


Paradoks globalnego społeczeństwa obywatelskiego
(Streszczenie)

W tekście poruszono zagadnienie globalnego społeczeństwa obywatelskiego, które uznawane jest często za remedium na problemy globalne. Wskazano, że społeczeństwo obywatelskie jest nierozłącznie związane z instytucją państwa, jak też demokracją, którym globalizacja nie sprzyja. Zdaniem autorki globalne społeczeństwo obywatelskie to jedynie konstrukcja werbalna, która nie ma szans na realizację, przede wszystkim z powodu braku uniwersalnej (globalnej) bazy aksjologicznej. Odnosząc się do prób tworzenia globalnego społeczeństwa obywatelskiego zwrócono uwagę, że może ono stać się bytem pozornym, istniejącym po to, by zajmować się problemami, którymi podmioty mające realne możliwości działania zajmować się nie mogą bądź nie chcą, a których to spraw nie wypada pomijać. Nawiązując do koncepcji glokalizacji Rolanda Robertsona, wskazano konieczność przewartościowania relacji lokalne – globalne, co w ocenie autorki pozwoli na ograniczenie negatywnych skutków globalizacji poprzez działania lokalnych (tj. funkcjonujących na poziomie państwa narodowego) społeczeństw obywatelskich.

Słowa kluczowe: globalizacja, państwo, demokracja, społeczeństwo obywatelskie, globalne społeczeństwo obywatelskie, glokalizacja.