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THE ROLE OF A LOCAL COMMUNITY AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN THE EDUCATION SYSTEM IN PROGRAMS OF SELECTED POLISH LIBERAL PARTIES¹

ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to analyze the vision of the Polish education system outlined by selected liberal parties in Poland in 1989–2019, focusing on the role played by local communities and local authorities. The text analyzes election programs of main liberal parties as well as speeches of prominent politicians. The qualitative analysis of relevant content revealed that Polish liberals clearly specified in their programs the importance of a local government (as a body that makes decisions which to a large extent pertain to school), parents and the entire local community (as an entity that actively co-participates in school's life, and has influence on key decisions). The proposed school system was institutionally grounded in a local government and simultaneously acted as a cultural center as well as a place where a local community can spend their leisure time.

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To this aim, changes were postulated in three key areas: “municipalization” of the school institution, schools forming stronger ties to the local community, and modification of education funding system.

Key words

local government, local community, education system, liberalism, political thought

Introduction

An important element of the post-1989 political transformations in Poland was restoration of local government institutions. In 1990 they were reinstated at the *gmina* [commune] level, and the Acts of June 5, 1998 added the next two tiers (*powiat* [county] and *voivodeship* [province]), thus laying foundations for developing the activities of local communities and of the civil society (Ganowicz, 2014, pp. 60–62; Wojdyło, 2019, pp. 19–21).

In Polish post-1989 public space, the institution of a local authority was mainly promoted by parties and circles of liberal provenance. As emphasized by the researchers of the Polish political arena, liberals were unwaveringly in favor of a multi-tier local government as conducive to i.a. implementation of minimal state (Góra-Szopiński, 2006, pp. 54–56; Radomski, 2017, pp. 145–158; Wójcik, 2008, pp. 202–204). In his seminal text *Idee gdańskiego liberalizmu* [The ideas of Danzig liberalism], Donald Tusk drew attention to the significance of local authority institutions. He wrote that besides respecting personal freedoms, private property and ideological neutrality of the state, one cannot neglect another element which is the objective of and a precondition for the above-mentioned ideals, i.e. local organizations and local government, which the state should actively build and support (Tusk, 1998, p. 149).

Promoting local government was a feature not only of Polish liberalism. As stressed by Sławomir Czarnecki (2002, p. 172), liberals thought of the state and of its activities also in terms of local government, perceiving a local community as a place that allows individuals to flourish and shapes them into an autonomous entity able to make their independent choices. To put it more sharply, he said: “A person can make use of their capability for self-determination only within a community” (Czarnecki, 2002, p. 172).

As noted by Alicja Wójcik (2008, p. 202), Polish liberals saw local government as a factor allowing central institutions to cede power to citizens, which in turn

implies making room for a wide spectrum of their activities. Thus local government was supposed to provide more efficient solutions to the problems recognized by local communities, ensure citizens' participation in taking decisions pertinent to public affairs, and offer the possibility to realize citizens' individual needs, which was supposed to lay foundations of a mature civic society.

A positive attitude towards local government led to formulating conceptions of expanding the institution of a local authority to new areas of communities' life. A local authority was to offer gmina residents not only the possibility to participate in local-government elections but also to co-decide on various topics vital for the community. It is for this reason that liberals supported (or even initiated) the idea of participatory budgeting, local referenda, civil initiatives or social consultations (Radomski, 2017, p. 325).

One of the areas in which an opinion expressed by a local community should translate into action was the institution of school and the education system. This issue appears to be important because, as noted by Aleksander Nalaskowski (1997, p. 267), school or – more broadly speaking – education may become a source of political changes, a political action or a tool for propaganda-related measures.

The goal of the present paper is an analysis of the concept of the education system formulated by Polish liberals in the period 1989–2019, in its aspects related to local communities and local government. The research problem is the significance and role of local communities and local government within the education system specified in Polish liberals' political thought. The research was based on quantitative analysis of the relevant content in liberal parties' election programs as well as in the words of prominent politicians (Szczepaniak, 2012, pp. 95–96).

1. Liberal parties in the Third Republic of Poland

To complement the introductory remarks, the concept of *liberal parties* should be specified. When used in reference to Polish post-1989 politics, the concepts of *Polish liberalism* and *liberal parties* may seem rather vague. The problems with precisely defining Polish liberalism, and, by the same token, which parties have a liberal political program do not stem from the lack of research on the liberal thought, but rather from the very essence of liberalism. Such researchers as Jerzy Szacki (1994), Jacek Bartyzel (2012) or Jarosław Charchuła (2016) emphasize the difficulties in defining liberalism as such and its Polish variant. On the other hand, the researchers of Polish political arena have established a canon of sorts

comprising liberal principles that can be used to distinguish a family of liberal parties. This set includes personal freedoms, free market, minimization of the state's role, and private property (Kowalczyk, 2014b, p. 76; Karnowska, 2005; Modrzejewski, 2006).

At this point, it should be noted that the specific situation – political parties were being formed during the period of political transformation – and the parties' positions within the political spectrum determined the program differences among Polish liberals (Kowalczyk, 2014a, p. 229). So as to order this sphere of political reality, Krzysztof Kowalczyk distinguished certain sub-families within liberal parties, thus arriving at neoliberal, liberal-Christian, liberal-conservative and socio-liberal variants of Polish party-specific liberalism (2014b, pp. 76–79).

While specifying the concept of *Polish liberal parties* and thus determining the scope of the current analysis, the author resorted to the classifications already existing in the literature. The researcher of the Polish party system Łukasz Tomczak (2010, p. 7) included under the label of “liberal” the following parties: Platforma Obywatelska RP [PO, Civic Platform], Unia Wolności [UW, Freedom Union] (former Unia Demokratyczna [UD, Democratic Union]), Kongres Liberalno-Demokratyczny [KL-D, Liberal Democratic Congress], Partia Demokratyczna – demokraci.pl [Democratic Party – demokraci.pl] and Unia Polityki Realnej [UPR, Real Politics Union].

On the other hand, Łukasz Danel (2016, p. 102) adopted a slightly different typology, grouping the above parties within a liberal-conservative part of the political spectrum. However, he makes the caveat that this part of the political arena was divided into parties attempting to combine economic liberalism with a conservative world-view and the ones of typically liberal provenance. In the latter category the author included Unia Wolności and Nowoczesna [Modern].

Grzegorz Kucharczyk (2009, p. 268) in turn recognizes that “the liberal thought in the Third Republic of Poland was dominated by two distinct circles”: a conservative-liberal one, centered around Unia Polityki Realnej, and a liberal-democratic one, the emanation of which was Kongres Liberalno-Demokratyczny, and later on – Platforma Obywatelska. Considering the above, it must be emphasized here that due to its specific program, UPR was excluded from the present analysis.

The party that should be also counted as liberal is Ruch Palikota [Palikot's Movement] (in October 2013 the party was renamed as Twój Ruch [Your Movement]), which represented a variant of social liberalism with vague postulates of secular state and freedom of opinions. (Lewandowski, 2018, pp. 114–115).

2. “Municipalization” of schooling

An important element of education-related ideas of Polish liberals was the matter of commercialization of education (Lew, 2011; Lewandowski, 2019; Łukasik-Gębska, 2016). After all, Polish liberals assumed that it is necessary to perceive the education system from the perspective of labor market and competition, considering also economic success, the state’s development and the success of individuals (*Manifest edukacyjny*, 2002).

However, for the institution of school to function properly and for the adopted goals to be realized, changes had to be made both to programs and to systems and institutions. Concerning the latter area, the proposals made by liberals during the analyzed period focused on three dimensions:

- a) Institutional “municipalization” of schooling;
- b) Introducing changes to the funding system;
- c) Integrating schools with a local community in the social dimension.

The changes suggested in the first dimension, which also was the cornerstone of the liberal vision of schooling, were “municipalization” of schooling and decentralization of the education system. First and foremost, as far back as the 1990s, liberals postulated that the gmina-level local government should take over the responsibility for schooling (*Stabilizacja i rozwój*, 2001, p. 289). The second step suggested was to strengthen the influence of the local government on the organization of schooling (Program Unii Wolności, 2004, p. 92). The suggested solutions stemmed from the paradigm (adopted by the liberals in the 1990s) of strong local government, which implied broadening the competencies of gmina as well as increasing its fiscal revenues (Radomski, 2017, p. 154).

What was supposed to go hand in hand with the “municipalization” of schooling was expanded offer of different education forms. (*Stabilizacja i rozwój*, 2001, pp. 288–289; Program Unii Wolności, 2004, p. 92). The fundamental element of that thought was the assumed need for the co-existence of public schools – as the basic constituent of the education system considering the constitutionally stipulated free access to education – with private schools; the latter would also be able to count on some financial support from the public budget (*Stabilizacja i rozwój*, 2001, pp. 288–289).

During the period in question, strengthening of local government prerogatives in relation to the education system was a constant element of the liberal thought, regardless of individual party affiliations. This topic was not only mentioned but also developed in the election programs of Platforma Obywatelska

after 2001. Its politicians favorably assessed not only the process of ceding the funding of schools to local government and all the related present and future changes but also the initiative that allowed the non-public education to thrive (*Polska Obywatelska*, 2007, pp. 81–82; *Samorządowa deklaracja Platformy Obywatelskiej*, 2003).

The status and significance of the “municipalization” of the education system were underlined by Donald Tusk, who emphasized in his first expose in 2007 that: “the local governments will be able to more efficiently – and better than the central power – manage the funding of education and to optimally adjust Polish schools to local possibilities and needs. Their awareness of those needs is better than the awareness of these issues on the part of central offices. We do not have to decide for them in each case” (Tusk, 2016).

The studied topic was also raised in the election program of Koalicja Obywatelska [Civic Coalition], which in 2019 comprised Platforma Obywatelska and Nowoczesna. The document in question contained passages related to the legal powers of local government with regard to schooling. The program explicitly stated that the local government could introduce a flexible school structure by dividing the 8-year-long primary school into suitable segments. As was argued, introducing this sort of solution would allow, primary schools from small municipalities to be limited to grades 1–3, whereas in larger municipalities the schools would follow the standard 8-grade system as usual. The justification was as follows: “This sort of solution will allow us to equalize chances of children from rural areas and those from larger centers and to fully exploit the premises at gminas’ disposal. Although we suggest this should be done on voluntary basis, we will introduce relevant criteria related to the infrastructure; e.g. [the school building] having a science lab or a gym. In this manner the local government shall establish the school structures tailored to the needs of the local community” (*Twoja Polska*, 2019, p. 110).

Municipalization of schooling was supposed to be implemented at the school-internal level. In liberals’ view, increasing the influence of parents and teachers on shaping the new forms of schooling was a manifestation of the changes in education as important as the local government taking over the responsibility for schools. As stated by Urszula Augustyn, a PO politician responsible for education-related issues: “It shall be the local government, parents and teachers that are going to decide about the manner in which the school is to operate” (*Platforma zapowiada naprawę*, 2019). To this end, and in line with the 2019 election program, schools should establish their own *Rady Szkoły* [School Councils] and organize annual *Walne Zgromadzenia Szkoły* [General School Assemblies],

which are – bodies of representative, democratic and participatory character. Both the Council and the General Meeting would be supposed to make decisions “reached through open dialogue and with the engagement of all the parties involved; that is, pupils, teachers, parents, local-government authorities and socio-economic communities” (*Twoja Polska*, 2019, p. 107).

3. Funding – towards school vouchers

The second dimension of the postulated changes, strongly correlated with the idea of decentralization, was the model of funding schools. What seemed obvious to liberals was that the system of funding education should be responsive to individual decisions of parents, who – by selecting a particular school – would effectively ensure the flow of funds into the chosen school. Another essential change emerging from the modified method of funding would be school autonomy.

Detailed plans for the new system of funding schools involved first and foremost introduction of school vouchers as a basis for developing the school budget. However, this system would have to be fostered by promoting among parents the conscious selection of schools for their children, as this would be followed by transferring to a given school certain public funds. School vouchers were to be complemented by a fund set at the ministerial level to aid particular programs of equalizing chances for the schools situated in the areas neglected education-wise and plagued with social problems (*Program Unii Wolności*, 2004, p. 92; *Polska Obywatelska*, 2007, p. 83).

However, under the PO coalition government (2007–2015), the proposed system of school vouchers was eventually modified. The politicians of PO responsible for education drew attention to the fact that introducing school vouchers at the central level would not be feasible. Instead they maintained that this solution had worked at the level of some local governments and that it would be necessary to popularize this mechanism so that the funds spent on education could be *rationally* distributed, which in consequence was supposed to increase the quality of education (Góra-Ojczyk, 2008; MEN: *Bon oświatowy w Polsce już funkcjonuje*, 2008).

As argued by Katarzyna Hel, the then Minister of National Education, a school voucher should be issued locally as Poland is “a very large country of considerable regional diversification. The face value of a voucher able to satisfy a large modern school will be still insufficient for a small one situated in an old

building (...). In a sense, the present education subsidy allocation algorithm is indeed a voucher. The financial means are allocated proportionally to the number of pupils inhabiting an area under a given local government. Local governments then receive from the state a sort of a voucher. However, the majority of local governments do not similarly allocate money to the schools subordinated to them. That is why it is worth introducing a school voucher at the local government level” (Góra-Ojczyk, 2008).

Another dimension of the changes in school funding in which the idea of self-governance was manifest involved the suggestion to introduce into secondary schools the principle that pupils would co-decide about, for example, the allocation of the means collected within the funds of parent-teacher associations, which was believed to be beneficial for building shared responsibility for managing the common property and for developing social skills (*Polska przyszłości*, 2015, p. 36; Łukasik-Gębska, 2018, p. 375).

The changes in funding schools put an emphasis on individual choices of the parties involved (i.e. both parents and pupils) and were intended to create the awareness in making education-related decisions as well as shared responsibility for institutions at the local level.

4. School in a local environment

The third dimension of the analyzed issue was embedding school into the structures of a local community and into a local environment. In line with UD’s postulate dating back to 1993, school was meant to be somehow “integrated” with the local community (*Stabilizacja i rozwój*, 2001, p. 289). After more than 20 years, this proposal was still present in liberals’ election documents. For instance, in PO’s 2015 program this concept was very prominent. The party members declared at that time that schools should become centers of social life around which local communities would integrate, so they should be open all day long (*Polska przyszłości*, 2015, p. 36). In Urszula Augustyn’s opinion, it is important for school to offer comprehensive services “so that a child who comes to school in the early morning and leaves it in the late afternoon could not only receive good education but also a considerable amount of sport, good food and extracurricular activities which not only develop children’s gifts but also work on compensating deficits” (Platforma zapowiada naprawę, 2019).

Suggestions of similar solutions could also be found in the program of Twój Ruch. The community-forming nature of school was to be realized by extending

the period which pupils may spend at school. *Świetlice* [after-school clubs] were to change from mere “emergency-case storage rooms” to locations of afternoon educating sessions filled with classes dedicated to arts and sport, as well as places where pupils should do their homework (Deklaracja i tezy programowe. Twój Ruch, 2013, p. 24). The important justification for introducing this sort of changes was an argument that it would allow parents to freely pursue their respective professional careers without fearing for what may be possibly happening to their children, who at the same time could make use of afternoon educational sessions developing their skills (Twój Ruch proponuje, 2013).

Thus the school imagined by liberals was supposed to provide students not only with daily education but also with supervision, and thus take over extracurricular activities which were previously reserved for the private space. This in turn meant that school would become an institution increasingly important for local communities.

The social dimension of school was also manifested in the significance of its collaboration with other institutions responsible for well-being of local communities. After all, it was decided that school should take active measures and exert influence on students with behavioral problems. What is needed to fulfill this purpose is the involvement of the local community as well as the support of such specialist facilities as medical units and resocialization facilities (*Polska Obywatelska*, 2007, p. 83).

With time, liberal visions of schools anchored in local communities started to take on clearly social character. In the 2010s, what became an invariable constituent of liberal programs were the suggestions that schools should extend their supervisory role to the economic level. Promises of ensuring that pupils in need have access to healthy and warm food, embodied in the slogan “No child should feel hungry” were complemented by the declarations to sustain the programs aimed at alleviating poverty and at providing pupils and their parents free access to counselors and speech therapists, (*Polska przyszłości*, 2015, p. 36; Łukasik-Gębska, 2018, p. 375); promises were also made regarding free textbooks.

Another significant element of liberal program to anchor schools in their environment was introduction of school’s accountability towards parents and the local community, in particular for “preparing pupils effectively for a happy life, while not remaining accountable to bureaucrats for strictly complying with relevant regulations” (Program Unii Wolności, 2004, p. 92; Manifest edukacyjny, 2002).

Conclusion

The issues of the education system, as raised by Polish liberals over the last three decades, were essentially related also to the matters regarding local community and local government. Three distinct key areas in which the changes were postulated are the “municipalization” of the institution of school, strengthening schools’ connections with local communities, and – which goes hand in hand with the first two changes, modification of the education funding system. Importantly, these three points constituted a complex proposal for changes and they were a well-established element of liberal thought in Poland during the studied period.

The present analysis made it possible to pinpoint the modifications made over the years to the liberal parties’ conception of school education in Poland. The proposals considered in this study started evolving to an increasingly larger extent towards school responsible for the welfare of its pupils. The issues related to, say, providing children with food or free textbooks – which appeared as a kind of novelty in the analyzed programs – were liberals’ response to socio-economic problems of Poles. The changes in the concept of education reflected the broader changes occurring in the analyzed political thought over the years. They also were a departure from doctrinal economic liberalism, presented e.g. by KLD. The problem of equalizing chances and of the state’s involvement in social issues related to the area of education were first raised by *Twój Ruch*; yet, as time went by, these ideas were also adopted by *Platforma Obywatelska*. However, it is worth mentioning that we can truly speak of these threads in Polish liberalism only at the turn of the 2010s.

A typology of liberal political parties can be also developed with the approach to the topic of this paper (as stated in the title) used as the main indicators. Such parties as *UW* or *PO* primarily put emphasis in their respective proposals on municipalization of schools and introduction of school vouchers. In turn, *Twój Ruch* focused to a larger extent on equalizing chances and introducing mechanisms for mitigating social inequalities.

In the answer to the research problem formulated in the introductory part of this paper, the author must firmly state that Polish liberals – in their conception of the education system – specified that an important role should be played both by the institution of the local government (as a body making decisions which to a large extent pertain to schools) and by parents and the entire local community (as an entity actively co-participating in school’s life and being endowed with

a power to have influence on key decisions). In liberals' view, what comprised the education system was school institutionally grounded in a local government and simultaneously constituting a cultural center as well as a place where the local community could spend their leisure time.

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