

Role of the civil society in the development of a local government in Poland

ABSTRACT

It is an indisputable fact that the intensified participation of citizens in administrative units mobilizes the population to search for solutions to problems which appear in this community. The concept of civil society is not limited to participation, but it also has an idealistic dimension. However, any attempts at defining this term are an emanation of different types of social and political beliefs. The article discusses factors affecting the condition of the local civil society. This paper is an in-depth analysis of the existing data, documents and information on the website of the District office in Siedlce, as well as in the local media.

KEYWORDS: *Civil society, local government, Poland, Siedlce, participation, community*

It is an indisputable fact that the intensified participation of citizens in administrative units mobilizes the population to search for solutions to problems which appear in this community. The concept of civil society is not limited to participation, but it also has an idealistic dimension. However, any attempts at defining this term are an emanation of different types of social and political beliefs. Starting from those indicating the necessity of “the existence of a space free from the compulsion to organize

people in order to defend their dignity, separate from the state”, to the idea of raising private funds and human capital for a part of the objectives, which, incidentally, in accordance with the law are the responsibility of the state. Today, however, more and more European countries practice the latter approach.

The definition of civil society can therefore be considered in two contexts: “firstly to analyze civil society as a platform for active people, who come together in order to realize the interests of groups and citizens, and secondly as a platform for defense, aimed at protecting the rights of citizens and their groups against undue state interference” (Piechota, 2007, 14).

Contemporarily we can't tell much about a well-functioning democracy without taking into account the importance of civic organizations (Gliński, 2002, 5). The Constitution of the Republic of Poland of April 2nd, 1997 in its preamble also provides that: “We, the Polish Nation - all citizens of the Republic, both those who believe in God as the source of truth, justice, good and beauty, as well as those not sharing such faith but respecting those universal values as arising from other sources, equal in rights and obligations towards the common good - Poland” (Konstytucja RP z dn. 2.04.1997 r., Dz.U. Nr 78, poz. 483 ze zm.). It means that the Polish political system is based on the principles of: sovereignty of all citizens and subsidiarity of the social communities and organizations with regard to the state (Piechota, 2007, 17).

Discussing this idea in the context of local patriotism, we should pay attention to another important concept – the local community. This describes a community understood as a collectivity of persons who have some common social features. In this case it is a common living place and their identity with the land. Research in this area includes one of the fundamental disciplines of sociology. Therefore the verbal nomenclature is closely associated with this discipline. However, more and more studies of this type also are carried out in political science.

Such communities constitute the most intense area of social activity because of the possibility of a spontaneous and informal behavior and a strictly local dimension of many problems (Gilejko, Błaszczuk, 2011, 9).

At the local level, civic participation is influenced by many factors:

- the type of municipality (its urbanity or rusticity)
- the socio-demographic structure,
- the local traditions,
- the geographical location
- the level of socio-economic development,
- the social activity of the local government, political parties, or the business sector (Frączak, 2004, 50-55).

The first element of a well-functioning civil society are social associations. A good example of a local community, which in organizational terms is approximately at the country average, is the community of the Siedlce District. 114 associations operate in the area (*Wykaz stowarzyszeń*, pozyskano:http://www.bip.siedlce.pl/bip/89_umsiedlce/fckeditor/file/Oferty%20dla%20organizacji%20samorządowych/wykaz%20NGO//Ewidencja%20Stowarzysze%C5%84%20Zwyk%C5%82ych-8.pdf), which is a relatively small number. For example in the Grodzisk district. There are about 430 of them (*Stowarzyszenia*, <http://www.bip.powiat-grodziski.pl/index.php?cmd=zawartosc&opt=pokaz&id=9637>), but in comparison with other districts in Poland the quantity is quite similar.

Predominant organizations are:

- housing estate associations [*kluby osiedlowe*] (e.g. Stowarzyszenie Mieszkańców Osiedla „Dolina Helenki”),
- Volunteer Fire Brigades (OSP) (e.g. in Wola Wodyńska, in Skórzec, in Brodki),
- associations of fans of culture and nature in the Siedlce region (e.g. Towarzystwo Przyjaciół Mordów, Towarzystwo Przyjaciół Ziemi Wodyńskiej, Regionalne Stowarzyszenie Kulturalno-oświatowe „Kornel”, Towarzystwo Promocji Sportu, Rekreacji i Kultury Regionalnej „PRO-EKO”),
- business organizations (e.g. Przesmyckie Stowarzyszenie Rozwoju Gospodarczego, Lokalne Stowarzyszenie Gospodarcze Gminy Zbuczyn, Lokalne Stowarzyszenie Gospodarcze Gminy Suchożebry),

- charities (e.g. Skórzeckie Stowarzyszenie Dobroczynne, Wołyńskie Stowarzyszenie „Równy Start”),
- purpose-driven organizations (e.g. Komitet Budowy Szkoły in Dziewulach, Stowarzyszenie na rzecz Zespołu Szkół im. Jana Pawła II „Optymizm” in Zbuczyn),
- sports clubs (e.g. Wojewódzki Ludowy Klub Sportowy – Iganie Nowe),
- educational associations (e.g. Towarzystwo Społeczno-Kulturalne „Razem”, Stowarzyszenie Kulturalno – Oświatowe „Kosem”, Stowarzyszenie Kulturalno- Oświatowe „Klub Ludzi Twórczych”),
- environmental organizations (e.g. Stowarzyszenie „Czysta Gmina – Zielony Dom”, Fundacja „Woda i Energia”).

Cooperation with NGOs is described in §2, point 1, subpart 22 of the Statute of the Siedlce District of June 26th, 2006. These types of organizations can serve the following purposes in the Siedlce District:

- health promotion and protection,
- social assistance,
- supporting people with disabilities,
- promotion of physical culture and tourism.

The district government announces demand for the activities of NGOs in competitions. Thus, for example, the head of the district government [*Starosta*] announced at the beginning of 2013 a competition for the performance of public works. Among the works listed in the competition were:

- promotion of physical culture and sports (including international youth exchanges, providing training for talented youth, organization of sports events),
- tourism (organization of bicycle rallies, seminars and courses popularizing tourism),
- social assistance – the distribution of gifts for the needy and rehabilitation of the disabled (*Ogłoszenie o otwartym konkursie*,

http://www.powiatsiedlecki.pl/index.php/component?option=com_remository/Itemid,162/func,fileinfo/id,2638/).

The beneficiaries of the first part of the competition was 7 sports organizations:

- Wojewódzki Ludowy Klub Sportowy in Siedlce – Iganie Nowe: received the highest amount of subsidies in the amount of 240 500 zł, a large portion of this sum (123 000 zł) has been obtained for the organization of sports trainings for talented young people,
- Powiatowe Zrzeszenie Ludowe Zespoły Sportowe in Siedlce: received funds in the amount of 45 000 zł for the organization of sporting events for youth and adults in rural and small-town areas,
- Powiatowy Szkolny Związek Sportowy in Siedlce: has been granted the amount of 19 000 zł, 17 000 zł of which was for the District School Youth Games and the District Gymnasium Games [*Gimnazjada*],
- Siedlecki Okręgowy Związek Lekkiej Atletyki: obtained from the county office a subsidy of 3 200 zł, 500 zł of which was for street run on the Independence Day anniversary – the 11th November, and anniversary of the May 3rd Constitution,
- Klub Przyjaciół Siatkówki Siedlce for participation of representatives of the Siedlce District in regional, provincial, national and international competitions received 1 000 zł,
- Ludowy Klub Sportowy „Grodzisk” in Krzymosze: 1 000 zł for participation in a regional football competition,
- Chorągiew Mazowiecka ZHP Hufiec „Podlasie” in Siedlce: 500 zł for the Spartakiada Drużyn Zuchowych i Harcerskich (Uchwała Zarządu Powiatu w Siedlcach z dn. 4.02.2013 r. nr 114/206/2013).

The foundation of social life is the common good, the organizational structure and values necessary for human life. Sports also have a social profile – socialization or integration – especially for teams. Sports thereby encourage people to participate in the social life of local communities,

strengthen the identity with homeland, as well as the solidarity with the team which represents this community (Uchwała Zarządu Powiatu w Siedlcach z dn. 4.02.2013 r. nr 114/206/2013).

The next announced competition was for the financial support for entities which are active in the field of:

- procuring and issuing donations for poor people and families from the area of the Siedlce District,
- renting out rehabilitation equipment and orthopedic devices.

This grant was received by:

- Caritas Diecezji Siedleckiej – 23 000 zł,
- Polski Komitet Pomocy Społecznej in Siedlce – 14 000 zł,
- Bank Żywności in Siedlce – 2 000 zł (Uchwała Zarządu Powiatu w Siedlcach z dn. 4.02.2013 r. nr 114/206/2013).

Similarly to their engagement in sports, charities can positively influence the development of the civil society in the local community. It happens wherever people are united for a common cause or for the benefit of a certain group. But this is not a strictly patriotic action. It stems from a completely different source, not related to the need to cultivate a certain identity.

The third competition concerned the organization of rallies, trainings, competitions and events popularizing tourism in the county. Its beneficiaries were the following organizations:

- Chorągiew Mazowiecka ZHP Hufiec „Podlasie” in Siedlce, which organized the 21. Nadliwczanski Pedestrian Rally (1 300 zł),
- Polskie Towarzystwo Turystyczno-Krajoznawcze Oddział „Podlasie” in Siedlce (9 700 zł), among others for the 32. Bitwa pod Iganiami Anniversary Rally (600 zł), 33. Nadbużański Rally (2 000 zł), 14. Mazovian Tourist Car Rally (2 000 zł), 18. Christmas Rally – Christmas Eve in Podlasie (1 500 zł),
- an EcoLogical Group for the 10. Bike Rally “Trail of the stork nests” (1 000 zł).

The local media take a very important place in the local politics of the District. The largest among them are newspapers: „Echo Katolickie”, „Tygodnik Siedlecki”, „Życie Siedleckie”, an Internet portal Info.siedlce.pl, the Katolickie Radio Podlasie and TV Podlasie Wschód. In Catholic media most information are Catholic Church-related. Other magazines, television and the Internet portal write more about the urban policies of Mordy and Siedlce than about the District as a whole. Information about other districts of Mińsk, Sokółów and Łuków, the municipalities belonging to these districts and the activities of their governments are also present in the news.

Further important element of promotion of social development are public consultations. They may involve the following roles of the local government:

- Care: taking care of public order, protection against unemployment, poverty and disease,
- Control and creativity: taking care of free competition and freedom of economic activity,
- Coordination: maintaining internal cohesion and social intervention in the distribution of public revenue,
- Production: production of various goods and provision of services (Kieżun, 2004, 37–38).

There are many situations that require consultation. „Undoubtedly it will be an important violation of the unwritten (customary) and written laws of the local community. Equally important will be an injury to property or personal goods” (I. Pietraszko-Furmanek, 2012, 21).

These activities serve to fulfill the tasks of the district, which include:

- social infrastructure (national education covering compulsory schooling and above-standard health care) and social care,
- technical infrastructure (local transportation and roads),
- public order and security of citizens (fire protection, flood control and building inspection),
- protection of the environment and spatial planning,
- solving local problems (Dojwa, 2014, 176).

In accordance with the Statute of the Siedlce District in the range of tasks which the District is charged with, there is also consulting with its inhabitants. Consultations in the Siedlce District often take place at the municipal level. However, the turnout at such meetings is usually not very large. Such consultations have an extramural form and are performed electronically (*Roczny program współpracy samorządu województwa mazowieckiego z organizacjami pozarządowymi...*, <http://www.powiatsiedlecki.pl/index.php/content/view/1099/252/>). However, the number of organizations interested in such cooperation does not exceed 3 to 5.

Weak involvement of local community members may stem from bad organization of the civic community in the District. It also manifests itself in the lack of involvement of the District policies, as evidenced by the reluctant participation of its members in the public consultations. The District government, however, does not organize them often enough to be able to prove the residents of the District bear the entire fault for this state of affairs. Perhaps if such events took place more often, that would motivate them to a more eager participation.

Social development in the local community also progresses through informal local groups and their initiatives in the fields of culture, sports and social assistance. "This activity may take the form of cooperation or mutual aid, which can convert them in time into non-governmental organizations, and from there it's only a step to social entrepreneurship" (*Inicjatywy lokalne*, <http://www.ekonomiaspoleczna.pl/x/610179>).

Local initiative as a form of performing public works by the local administration in collaboration with the residents has been introduced by the Act on the Public Benefit and Volunteer Work in 2010 (§2 pt. 4). "Citizens who recognize that the area governed by their local government needs particular investment or activity can make an application regarding the matter to the executive body of the local government unit. The people can file such an application as an informal group, or they can do it with the help of an NGO" (*Co to jest inicjatywa lokalna?*, <http://administracja.ngo.pl/x/523851>). The Act introduced a new method of implementation of the initiatives, which now can be carried out not only the government

but also by the citizens. Participation may be manifested through social work of individual persons or by private monetary donations or in-kind contributions.

In conclusion, the most important actions aimed at developing the civil society that have been taken by the District office in Siedlce in recent years are:

- open competitions for the implementation of public works,
- a program of cooperation with non-governmental organizations on the basis of open consultations with such organizations,
- financial rewards for outstanding young athletes,
- annual awards of the Head of the Siedlce District for the people who contributed to the field of social activities, local government and sacrificed to the service of the public,
- systematic support of grassroots initiatives, e.g. by providing equipment and room rental, a small financial assistance and promotion on the district's website.

As I noted at the beginning, this subject in the context of the Siedlce District has not been picked up widely in scientific publications and other studies and reports. To summarize the above definitions, the civil society can be broadly described as a social community, conscious of its rights and obligations arising from them, which actively cares for the common good and respect for all its members. Moreover, such a community is secured by mechanisms aimed at protecting the interests and rights of its members from undue state interference.

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