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The Political Participation of Radical Parties in a Local Democracy

Keywords: political radicalism, radical right, radical left, elections, local government

Słowa kluczowe: radykalizm polityczny, radykalna prawica, radykalna lewica, wybory, samorząd

Abstract

When criticizing the principles of liberal democracy, radical parties, both left and right, take advantage of this particular type of democracy by participating in local and nationwide elections. They take part in each subsequent election under their flag or by putting up candidates on the lists of other electoral committees. The major aim of the parties when participating in elections is to promote their political appeal and reaching the biggest number of local communities possible. Under the mechanisms of local democracy, including local government elections, radical parties can join in the decision-making system by investing relatively little resources.

Streszczenie

Partycypacja polityczna partii radykalnych w lokalnej demokracji

Poprzez krytyczne odniesienie się do demokracji liberalnej partie radykalnej lewicy i prawicy zyskują przewagę w tym konkretnym typie demokracji na drodze uczest-

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nictwa w wyborach samorządowych, parlamentarnych i prezydenckich. Partie te biorą udział w każdym kolejnych wyborach pod swoją banderą lub poprzez umieszczanie kandydatów na listach innych komitetów wyborczych. Głównym celem tych partii podczas udziału w wyborach jest promocja ich własnych poglądów politycznych oraz dotarcie do największej możliwej liczby lokalnych społeczności. W ramach funkcjonowania mechanizmów lokalnej demokracji, w tym wyborach samorządowych, partie radykalne mogą zyskać udział w procesach decyzyjnych, inwestując relatywnie niewiele zasobów.

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I. Introduction

The existence of political actors questioning some of the principles of the democratic political system is an interesting research subject at the beginning of the 21st century. Parties of radical political nature represent both the left and right sides of the political scene. They tread a fine line between their legality and illegality. In advocating their ideas and slogans, radical parties use all available resources and methods within the mechanisms and principles of democracy. Parties of this type try to intensify their operations both at the nationwide and local level. The time when they become particularly active is elections to representative institutions, especially at the local level. It can be argued that local government elections are the particular element of local democracy that radical parties find as a convenient means to join in the decision-making system at the local level. The paper aims to explain the reasons behind the participation of radical parties in local democracy, particularly in local government elections. What is the actual aim of radical parties behind their participation in local government elections? Are these actors aware of their actual election relevance? What is the core of their election appeal? Do radical parties differ in terms of their activities, information strategies, and slogans? What do they expect to achieve and what actions to take after winning seats in local councils? To be able to answer all these questions we need to become familiar with the message of those parties, their attitudes to elections themselves, and the meaningfulness of participating in them.

The broad scope of information, articles, and documents available on the websites of those parties makes it possible to carry out research based on the analysis of the materials created by the representatives of radical parties. It is also possible and cognitively interesting to conduct a comparative analysis showing the elements that distinguish radical left from radical right as well as their shared features.

II. Deciding Locally as the Goal of Radicals

As they are not capable of crossing the barriers at the nationwide level, radical parties try to be particularly active in local elections. While participation in parliamentary elections, doomed to failure, mainly serves to promote own political appeal, participation in local government elections provides a chance to introduce own candidates into representative institutions at the local level³. Well aware of their low election relevance⁴, radical parties⁵ put up their representatives on the lists of non-party electoral committees, or they try to create a common list under the flag of a single one party. Paradoxically, radical political actors do participate in the free election play despite questioning liberal democracy.

It should be noted that democratic systems have created defense mechanisms against radical parties thanks to which the existence of radical parties is impossible. Alternatively, radical parties find it hard to win representative mandates owing to election thresholds.

³ *Nacjonalizm w praktyce – rozmowa z kandydatem NOP w wyborach samorządowych*, <https://www.nop.org.pl/2018/10/19/nacjonalizm-w-praktyce-rozmowa-z-kandydatem-nop-w-wyborach-samorzadowych> (15.10.2020).

⁴ D. Waniek, *Czynarodowcy mogą zagrozić demokracji? Subiektywne spojrzenie na radykalizację praktyki politycznej w III RP*, [in:] *Demokracja współczesna. Wymiar polski i międzynarodowy*, eds. J. Kornaś, Ł. Danel, Toruń 2016, pp. 263, 277.

⁵ For more details see: A. Lipiński, *Radykalizacja czy „patologiczna normalność”? Ugrupowania i ruchy radykalne a partie polityczne w Polsce i Europie Zachodniej*, Warsaw 2013, https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Artur_Lipinski/publication/295547657_Radykalizacja_czy_patologiczna_normalnosc_Ugrupowania_i_ruchy_radykalne_a_partie_polityczne_w_Polsce_i_Europie_Zachodniej/links/56cb244a08aee3cee5415c3f/Radykalizacja-czy-patologiczna-normalnosc-Ugrupowania-i-ruchy-radykalne-a-partie-polityczne-w-Polsce-i-Europie-Zachodniej.pdf (1.06.2020).

Although radical left or radical right find it hard to enter the national parliament, they can still reach for mandates in local representative institutions. It is possible mainly owing to the way the electoral system is constructed and to the existence of well-respected individuals in local communities who promote the ideas of political radicals and at the same time work hard to the benefit of those local communities. It is this kind of candidates that have a chance to win a mandate in local government elections. Their chances to win the necessary number of votes at the local level are higher than at the nationwide level.

The idea of exercising authority locally is particularly attractive to small, marginal political groups. They operate locally and bring local communities together by dealing with the problems that are important to local residents (e.g. renewable energy sources, waste disposal, helping the elderly in the wake of the pandemic). The most important roles are played by local activists and local leaders at the commune and county levels. What seems to be an important element of the local government election is the creation of electoral committees that do not show any political or organizational affiliation. Thus, it is hard to determine their ideological character. Grassroots electoral committees, free of political provenience, reflect the “depoliticization” of the local political scene which aims at focusing the attention of the decision-makers on managing local communities and solving local problems. However, in practice, the decision-makers tend to be local activists of particular political parties.

Gaining influence on the decisions concerning local issues by introducing own members or non-party advocates can be one of the important goals of the political appeal of particular parties. It is particularly eminent among the radical right. An interesting example is the tactics of the far-right radicals in Germany where the National-Democratic German Party wins relatively large support at the level of the lands and municipal level⁶. As regards the latter level, the parties of the radical left are also very active and they are also capable of introducing their single representatives to the councils of communes and towns.

⁶ F. Gańczak, *Neonaziści biorą szturmem niemieckie samorzady*, <https://www.newsweek.pl/swiat/neonazisci-biora-szturmem-niemieckie-samorzady/dcysj31> (20.10.2020); M. Brandstetter, *Die NPD unter Udo Voigt. Organisation. Ideologie. Strategie, Reihe Extremismus und Demokratie*, Band 25, Baden-Baden 2013, p. 228.

III. National Radicalism and the Local Government

The pursuit to introduce as many representatives as possible into local institutions is particularly characteristic of the radical right which speaks about the necessity to be active at this level in its political appeals created not only for subsequent elections.

National radicals of the start of the 21st century recognize the importance of local governments not only in the context of their predecessors of the inter-war period but also through the possibility to impact (including propaganda) local communities. It was decided that participation in local government is one of the prime goals of this movement.

It has been proposed that the activities of right-wing radicalism should be implemented at the lowest level possible (estate councils) so that they could impact the local community at the grassroots⁷. Such activities are regarded as the basic elements of the organic work, “at the grassroots, solid foundation”, aimed at ultimately meeting the tasks not only at the local but also at the nationwide level. In this context, an important element of the strategy of the National Rebirth of Poland (NRP) is the recognition of the fact that “local governments facilitate the rooting of our ideals in the field and the promotion of the national-radical worldview and the questioning of the view of no alternatives to contemporary authorities according to the demo liberal leaders (...) Under the current situation, local governments should pave the way to national radicalism!”⁸. Local governments take an important place in the concept promoted by NRP of the bicameral system of representation within which a significant role would be played by the representatives of local authorities along with economic self-governments⁹. In 2014, before local government elections, as election chances were assessed as small it was decided that “the goal is clear – it is to show the system powers that nationalism is going strong and it is not going to lay down arms in its fight for normality”¹⁰.

⁷ N. Wasik, *Zarys myśli samorządowej w narodowo-radykalnych koncepcjach okresu międzywojnia*, <http://konserwatyzm.pl/arttykul/981/zarys-mysli-samorzadowej-w-narodowo-radykalnych-koncepcjach> (15.10.2020).

⁸ Ibidem.

⁹ D. Kasprowicz, *Narodowe Odrodzenie Polski (NOP)*, [in:] *Leksykon polskich partii politycznych*, eds. R. Glajcar, A. Turska-Kawa, W. Wojtasik, Toruń 2017, p. 179.

¹⁰ <http://nop.org.pl>, *Nacjonaliści w samorządach*, <http://www.nop.org.pl/2014/09/06/nacjonalisci-w-samorzadach/> (15.10.2020). In 2006, the National Rebirth of Poland (NRP)

However, it must be noted that the attitudes of the radical right¹¹ towards local governments are not homogeneous. Participation in local elections does not mean full acceptance of the form and character of the Polish self-government. According to the NRP, this type of self-governance that emerged after 1989 no longer meets the idea of “actual self-governance”¹².

Before the 2014 local government election, the radical right expressed opinions that the elections would not bring any effects, and that any changes in the current political circumstance could only be achieved through low turnout: “The faith in restoring normality in the future can only be based on the dissatisfaction of the society and the lowest turnout possible, increasingly lower year by year. It is the non-voters that give hope to the systemic empowerment in the future of the majority of the entitled and free of the demo-liberal state of Poles”¹³.

IV. Radical Left and the Local Government

The biggest party of the radical left to participate in the local government elections was the Polish Labor Party – August ’80. It was scratched from the register of political parties in 2017 at the request of the National Electoral Commission¹⁴. The election programme of the PLP for the election campaign in 2010¹⁵ comprised a number of proposals characteristic of the radical left side

obtained the total of 0.3% of the votes in the local government elections. In 2010, the NRP put forth candidates in the elections to regional assemblies in the following provinces: Lesser Poland, Lublin, West Pomeranian, Mazovian, Silesian and Lower Silesian. In the 2014 local government elections, the electoral committee of this party won 0.14% of the votes.

¹¹ T. Bojarowicz, *Partie i ugrupowania prawicowe w Polsce po 1989 roku*, Toruń 2013, p. 402.

¹² S. Stępień, *Koncepcje polityczne ekstremizmu prawicowego w III Rzeczypospolitej*, [in:] *Doktryny i ruchy współczesnego ekstremizmu politycznego*, ed. E. Olszewski, Lublin 2004, p. 301.

¹³ <http://dziennikradykala.blogg.pl/id,344744610,title,DEMOKRACI-DO-URN,index.html?smoybbtticaid=6144d6> (15.02.2020).

¹⁴ In the local government elections of 2002, as the Alternative Labor Party, it gained the total of 1.5% of the votes to regional assemblies in the whole country. In 2006, this party won 0.98% of the votes nationwide. In the 2010 elections, the Labor Party obtained 1.18% of the votes. Four years later, the party did not form an electoral committee and supported other candidates.

¹⁵ For more details on local government elections see, for example: J. Garlicki, *Wybrane aspekty rywalizacji wyborczej w wyborach do organów samorządu terytorialnego*, “*Studia Wyborcze*” 2014, vol. 17, pp. 123–144.

of the political scene. The basic election slogan of the PLP was “Fair Self-Government”. Consequently, a number of spheres of local activity were linked to the slogan¹⁶. The election appeal pointed to the need to allocate EU funds more effectively than before. The proposals included as follows: free education for children and youth and decent pay for teachers; cooperation of local authorities with research centers and university hubs; creating new jobs in areas stricken by high unemployment rates based on job contracts safeguarding (according to PLP) job security; cheap housing construction, including the implementation of the policy of constructing cheap social and communal flats for everyone; extension of cultural and educational centers; a network of kindergartens and nursery schools available to everyone; easy access to EU funds for raising vocational qualifications; supporting agriculture and food processing; co-responsibility for the security of citizens; development of the Internet and new technologies; efficiently working public offices for citizens to have their issues handled promptly; modern transportation solutions; the construction of motorways, express roads, airports and railways; quick access to hospitals and medical centres with professional healthcare based on public healthcare system; decent pay for personnel in all positions across the healthcare system; modern public medical rescue system; partnership-based cooperation with local communities, associations and foundations; environmental protection and sustainable development; the development of cultural institutions and wider access to them; handling the issues of the disabled; consulting the most important decisions with citizens and implementing the principle of direct democracy¹⁷.

The Communist Party of Poland (CPP) took part in the 2010 local government elections, too. The party established its own electoral committee (the Red Wrocław) in Wrocław, which managed to register its candidates in two constituencies¹⁸. The CPP addressed its election appeal to “the people of labor and all others who have been relegated to the margins of the political life

¹⁶ 1917.net.pl, *Uczciwy Samorząd – deklaracja wyborcza PPP – “Sierpień 80”*, <http://www.1917.net.pl/node/3304> (15.02.2015).

¹⁷ Ibidem.

¹⁸ A. Gołka, *Wrocław: listy wyborcze do Rady Miejskiej i Sejmiku wojewódzkiego wszystkich komitetów*, <http://www.mmwroclaw.pl/artykul/wroclaw-listy-wyborcze-do-rady-miejskiej-i-sejmiku,2883966,art,t,id,tm.html> (15.10.2020).

(the unemployed, the impoverished, ethnic minorities)”¹⁹. In its election appeal, the Committee focused mainly on the living conditions of the worse-off residents of the city. Interestingly, while elaborating on the multi-cultural nature of Wrocław the party leaders opposed the alleged Germanization policies of the foregoing city authorities²⁰.

Like in the case of the NRP, the CCP treated its participation in the election competition as an excuse to show up in the public sphere: “We were hoping that, despite our candidates’ defeat in the election, others would take notice of our demands and implement them if only partially”²¹. Another advantage was the possibility to present oneself in the media under the free-of-charge election programmes making it possible for the “party and its programme” to reach a broader group of recipients. Furthermore, the party leaders pointed to the low costs of the votes cast for the party’s candidates. On computing the overall expenditures towards the costs of running the election campaign against the 150 votes cast for CPP, it turned out that the cost of a single vote was only 7 zloty. In the analysis following the elections, it was agreed that “participation in local government elections brings nothing but benefits to the organization”²². What is symptomatic and characteristic of the rhetoric of the radicals is the appeal addressed to party members at the time of the elections: “Comrades! The time has come to rise from the couch – it is, above all, our obligation to the Party! By failing to get engaged in the socio-political life of our “little homelands” we will never succeed at the nationwide level and we will remain forever an organization of marginal significance”²³. It is noteworthy that both the radical right (NRP) and radical left (CPP) identically assessed the organization and conduct of the 2014 local government

¹⁹ S. Małek, *Czerwony Wrocław*, “Brzask” 2010, No. 11/214, p. 2, <https://www.scribd.com/document/119084242/2010-11> (15.10.2020).

²⁰ Ibidem, pp. 3–4.

²¹ K. Kaucz, *Wrocławskie wezwanie*, “Brzask” 2011, No. 1/216, p. 9.

²² Ibidem, p. 10; Adam Gmurczyk from the NRB pointed out bluntly: “We perceive electoral campaigns only as a form of disseminating our views. None of them has ever cost us anything, because we promoted our party via public media, as part of the airtime allotted to electoral committees, or on the Internet”. *Wywiad tygodnika „Angora” z prezesem NOP Adamem Gmurczykiem*, <http://www.fronda.pl/forum/wywiad-tygodnika-angora-z-prezesem-nop-adamem-gmurczykiem,29847.html> (15.10.2020).

²³ K. Kaucz, op.cit., p. 10.

elections. The two radical wings decided that the elections were conducted in an extremely unprofessional way.

V. Conclusions

Radical parties tend to treat local government as a vehicle for doing work for local communities. Radical parties do not move away from their nation-wide slogans covering contemporary issues²⁴. To both left-wing and right-wing radicals, the local government is an interesting field of activity. Both groups recognize the importance of local governments, but it is the right-wing radicals who approach the issues of local government with more attention. In their ideology, they include elements of the analysis of the idea of self-governance. The radical left, characterized by higher levels of activism and putting action above ideological deliberations, tries to focus its efforts on the tactical use of local governments for its purposes. While enjoying negligible political relevance, it is very important for this type of organizations to participate in local government elections to emerge in popular awareness, and this at a relatively little cost. It must be admitted that by adopting the tactics of joining in the world of politics and taking advantage of democracy at the local level, parties of this type gain a possibility of making a mark on the political scene as exemplified by the activity and successes in local elections of German radical parties. Furthermore, radical parties perceive local government elections are perceived as an opportunity to join in the decision-making system at the local level.

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²⁴ What is one of the most important contemporary problems is, among others, the issue of social security from the perspective of the refugee crisis after 2015. For more details on this subject: J. Marszałek-Kawa, D. Plecka, A. Hołub, *Social Security. Selected Aspects*, Toruń 2018.

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