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The Standards of Youth Councils' Operation in Poland. An Attempt at Analysis

“Such are countries, as is the education of their youth... Also, I am convinced that only public education can produce consensual and good citizens”².

Keywords: youth, youth policy, commune/district councils, youth civic participation, Youth Council

Słowa kluczowe: młodzież, polityka młodzieżowa, rady gmin/powiatów, partycypacja obywatelska młodzieży, Młodzieżowa Rada

Abstract

Youth Councils provide an excellent way to involve young people in civil activities. They are established by groups of young people selected by their peers in democratic elections usually organized in schools. Youth councilors are the representatives of all young people in a given territory. Their activity aims at increasing the sensitivity of local authorities to the needs of young people and giving opinions on the activities of local governments. It is their task to show that every person, including youngsters, can exert an impact on their surroundings. The establishment of Youth Councils can be beneficial for both parties: young people can take an active part in decision making, while local authorities can draw new ideas and inspiration from their cooperation with the young.

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² Jan Zamoyski, in the Foundation Act of the Zamojska Academy, 1660.

Streszczenie**Standardy funkcjonowania w Polsce młodzieżowych rad – próba analizy zagadnienia**

Młodzieżowe Rady to znakomity sposób na zaangażowanie obywatelskie młodego pokolenia. Tworzone są przez grupę młodzieży, która została wybrana przez swoich rówieśników w demokratycznych wyborach organizowanych najczęściej w szkołach. Młodzi Radni są reprezentantami młodzieży na danym terenie. Istotą ich działania jest uwrażliwienie władz samorządowych na potrzeby młodych obywateli oraz wyrażanie opinii o działaniach tych władz. Zadaniem ich jest pokazanie, że każdy człowiek - również ten młody - może mieć wpływ na własne otoczenie. Powołanie Młodzieżowej Rady może przynieść korzyści obu stronom. Młodzieży, która może w ten sposób aktywnie uczestniczyć w procesie decyzyjnym oraz władzom samorządowym, które z tej współpracy czerpią nowe pomysły i inspiracje do działania.

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I. Introduction

The fact that the subject of young people has entered into the public discourse follows from the recognition that they constitute an important social group. They are viewed as a source of innovation, potential, and a driving force for all changes. The attempts of politicians to address this age group results from young people's involvement in social activism. "The active participation of young people in decisions and actions at local and regional level is essential if we are to build more democratic, inclusive and prosperous societies. (...) Participation and active citizenship are about having the right, the means, the space and the opportunity and where necessary the support to participate in and influence decisions and engage in actions and activities so as to contribute to building a better society. (...) Local and regional authorities, as the authorities closest to the young person, have a very important role to play in promoting youth participation. In doing so, local and regional authorities can ensure that young people not only hear and learn about democracy and citizenship, but rather have the opportunity to practice it. (...) It is vital, if participation is to be meaning-

ful for young people, that they can influence and shape decisions and actions when they are young and not only at some later stage in life”³.

Youth participation can be defined in various ways, depending on its key aspects or context. In his classification, Wilson divides participation into two categories; one is superficial or artificial participation (tokenism) and the other one is “deep” participation. The latter is understood as “active”, “authentic” and “meaningful”. “Deep” participation means that young people can experience elements of citizenship and democracy in everyday life, in real situations, and including all outcomes and activities⁴.

The young generation should be involved in social activism⁵, thereby shaping their skills and learning behaviors, or at least they should be provided advantageous conditions to do so. Then social activism can develop a set of determined behaviors in individuals who can thereby influence their surroundings⁶.

The way youth policy is perceived at present is a result of significant transformation over the course of time. It is no longer treated only in terms of upbringing and education. Modern social policy is about encouraging young people to take various initiatives at all levels of governance. Youth Councils are among the most important tools for increasing civil participation among young people.

This article attempts to analyze the issue of youth participation in making decisions at the level of local and regional communities through Youth Councils. The main goal of this text is to answer the question of what exactly this institution is that young people are supposed to participate in. What are Youth Councils and why do they play such an important role in the youth policy in Poland?⁷

³ Preamble of the European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life, <https://rm.coe.int/168071b4d6> (12.05.2020).

⁴ S. Wilson, *Schooling for Democracy*, Youth Studies Australia, 2000.

⁵ A more detailed analysis of the term *social activity* in the literature on the subject can be found in: M. Prokosz, *Aktywność społeczna młodzieży szkół średnich w środowisku wielkomiejskim*, Wrocław 2000; J. Marszałek-Kawa, D. Plecka (eds.), *Dictionary of Political Knowledge*, Toruń 2019.

⁶ M. Tyszkowa, *Aktywność i działalność dzieci i młodzieży*, Warsaw 1990, p. 188.

⁷ A detailed analysis of youth policy in the literature on the subject can be found in: Rządowy Program Aktywności Społecznej Młodzieży na lata 2015–2016, “Aktywna Młodzież”,

II. The History of Youth Councils in Poland

The history of Youth Councils in Poland dates back to 1990, when the system of local administration began to emerge after the political transformation. The first Youth Council was established in Częstochowa, in 1990. It was initiated by the then Mayor of Częstochowa, Tadeusz Wrona⁸, who had encountered a youth local government for the first time in France earlier in the same year. On September 19, 1990, the City Council in Częstochowa adopted the Resolution on the Youth City Council. The youngest councilor at the time, Wojciech Cierpień was appointed Proxy of the Board for the Youth City Council. The first election was held in 1991. Seventy similar councils were subsequently established across the country (as the Secretary of the Union of Polish Cities, Mayor Tadeusz Wrona disseminated the statute of the Częstochowa Youth Council). Wrona sought to involve young people in local government structures and select youth leaders. The Youth Council in Częstochowa was established with a view to teaching young people how to be responsible and how do local government structures operate. The next stage in the development of Youth Councils was indicated by the reinstatement of the Union of Polish Cities in January 1991⁹. The Union provided a forum for the promotion of the idea of local youth governments. Local authorities viewed Youth Councils as a significant element integrating not only the young generation but the entire community. On the initiative of the Youth City Council in Siedlce, the First National Convention of Youth City Councils was held in September 1996. The next convention in Koszalin saw the establishment of the National Federation of

project of May 19, 2014; Ordinance No. 5 of the Minister of Labor and Social Policy of February 7, 2014 on the establishment of a team for youth social activity, Official Journal of the Minister of Labor and Social Policy, Warsaw, February 11, 2014; M. Rodziewicz, *Proces kształtowania polityki młodzieżowej w Polsce na poziomie centralnym*, “Zbliżenia Cywilizacyjne” 2016, No. 1, pp. 92–114.

⁸ Tadeusz Wrona – Polish politician and member of local government; Mayor of Częstochowa in 1990–1995 and 2002–2009, deputy to the Polish parliament in the third term of office, in 2010 advisor to President Lech Kaczyński. For more, see *Encyklopedia Solidarności*, http://www.encycol.pl/wiki/Tadeusz_Wrona (12.05.2020).

⁹ For more on the establishment of the Union of Polish Cities, see <http://www.miasta.pl/strony/o-zwiazku-miast-polskich> (12.05.2020).

Youth City Councils¹⁰ on December 18, 1996. In 2000, as the Vice-Chairman of the Parliamentary Commission for Regional Government and Regional Policy, Tadeusz Wrona, succeeded in including Youth City Councils in the Law of Commune Government. This law was amended in 2001, and Art. 5b was added, which provided for the establishment of Commune Youth Councils to work in an advisory capacity (analogous to councils operating at the level of towns).

Art. 5b. of the Law on Commune Government of March 8, 1990 stipulates the following:

1. “The Commune undertakes to support and disseminate the idea of self-governance among the inhabitants of the commune, including young people first and foremost.
2. At the request of interested circles, the Commune Council may give its consent to the establishment of a Commune Youth Council in an advisory capacity.
3. When establishing a Commune Youth Council, the Commune Council adopts a statute of the Youth Council which determines the procedure for the election of its members and the principles of operation”¹¹.

III. The Functioning of Youth Councils in Poland

Youth Councils are teams of young people elected in democratic elections (which are most frequently organized in schools) who are appointed by respective local governments to represent the young people from a given area. Youth Councils are not Non-Governmental Organizations because their specific character determines their place and role in local governments. Youth Councils are institutions facilitating the civil activity of young people, who can thereby develop their civil competences¹². They learn how to make deci-

¹⁰ <https://www.eurodesk.pl/organizacje/ogolnopolska-federacja-mlodziezowych-samorzadow-lokalnych> (12.05.2020).

¹¹ The Law on Commune Government of March 8, 1990 (Dz.U. 2020, item 713).

¹² A more detailed analysis of the term *civil competences of young people* can be found in *Kształtowanie kompetencji społecznych i obywatelskich przez organizacje pozarządowe w Polsce*, Warsaw 2015, http://biblioteka-krk.ibe.edu.pl/opac_css/doc_num.php?explnum_id=917.pdf (15.05.2020); *Skuteczna praca z młodzieżą. Przewodnik po partycypacji młodzieży* (Working

sions which are significant from the point of view of a given local community. They co-decide about matters of importance for young people. They are consulted with respect to issues concerning the young generation that local governments are handling. Local authorities should therefore ensure appropriate conditions enabling Youth Councils to perform their advisory functions. The Councils report what needs young people have, and implement their own initiatives for local communities¹³.

The objective of establishing Youth Councils is to involve young people in the process of decision making with regard to young people and their immediate surroundings. A Youth Council is supposed to represent the young inhabitants of the area. It should instill the ideal of self-governance in them and shape their civil attitudes. The establishment of a Youth Council facilitates a dialog between young people and the representatives of the Commune Council, commune head/mayor and officials. Youth Councils can implement a very wide range of goals, including for instance involving young people in consultations and forming their attitudes to self-governance. Youth Councils provide the instruments to participate in public debate and the knowledge of how to do so. Through Youth Councils, young people can have an influence on shaping local policies so that they take the needs of young people into consideration. Working in the Youth Council translates into the development of civil awareness and greater involvement in designing projects and investments developed with the needs of young members of a given community in mind. Thanks to Youth Councils, the civil dialog between the inhabitants and local authorities intensifies, thereby facilitating better recognition of needs and the implementation of effective solutions. An instrument of civil dialog designed for young people is effective when it is treated seriously. A well-functioning Youth Council lays the foundations for active citizenship in a given area. Youth Councils enable young people to select their representatives, co-decide about important common topics, and to represent their age-group. All projects aimed at young people offer an opportunity to develop ac-

effectively with young people A guide to youth participation), the study was developed under a programme of the Laboratory for Civil Participation with support from Stefan Batory Foundation.

¹³ For more on local community in the literature on the subject, see N. Lubik-Reczek, *Citizen participation at the level of local rural communities – tentative analysis*, “Przeegląd Polityczny” 2019, No. 2, pp. 144–145.

tive civil attitudes in them. Although young Polish people are taught theory in schools, their activity levels are poor. It is therefore essential to encourage young people to show interest in public matters. One such way for young people to get involved in the life of their community is to establish a Youth Council. The establishment of Youth Councils is provided for in the provisions of the Law of March 8, 1990 on commune government¹⁴. Such councils should be established when the commune authorities consent to talk to young people and feel the need to do so. If local authorities want to address the young in a responsible and efficient manner, they should ensure adequate instruments for such cooperation. Youth Councils offer a mechanism of this kind. Youth Councils should not be established against the will of young people, though. Consultations with those involved should be carried out. Youth Councils are not a mere copy of Commune or District Councils. Resolving to establish this institution, local authorities should take responsibility for the Youth Council not only on the substantive but also organizational level. In order to commence the procedure to establish a Youth Council, those interested should put forward a motion to the Commune Council. Youth Councils can be initiated not only by young people, but also by a group of commune councilors or commune auxiliary entities.

The fundamental document that regulates the operation of Youth Councils is a statute, which constitutes a part of the resolution of the Commune Council to establish a Commune Youth Council. The statute cannot merely copy the statute of the Commune Council or stipulate detailed and formal operating procedures. It should be borne in mind that the council members will be minors. Therefore, the language of the legislative act establishing a Youth Council should be transparent and readily comprehensible for the council members who are expected to implement the regulations adopted by the Commune Council¹⁵. The statute should include election regulations, identify forms of operation of the Commune Youth Council – including the procedure to give opinions and consult decisions, organize work and define the

¹⁴ K. Bandarzewski, P. Chmielnicki, P. Dobosz, W. Kisiel, P. Kryczko, M. Mączyński, S. Płazek, *Ustawa o samorządzie gminnym. Komentarz*, Warsaw 2010.

¹⁵ A detailed interpretation regarding the statute of Youth Councils is available from https://sip.lex.pl/?&_ga=2.64150895.1917225282.1589705454-1968622400.1589705454#/publication/469951126 (15.05.2020).

principles under which the work of the Council is monitored. Youth councilors do not create local laws but only consult the drafts of such laws. It is, however, important to make sure that persons in charge of drafting resolutions concerning the matters related to young people obtain the opinion from the Commune Youth Council. As soon as the Commune Council appoints the Youth Council, cooperation should be launched with the circles that will select the candidates for youth councilors. It is also imperative to organize a meeting dedicated to the Commune Youth Council in order to explain its purpose. Such meetings offer an excellent opportunity to demonstrate how the work of a Youth Council can contribute to the development of the civil skills of the young generation.

The elections of candidates to Youth Councils should be universal, secret, direct and equal. They are a significant element of education whereby young people get accustomed to voting and debating about the future of local communities¹⁶. Elections are a key instrument to constitute a Youth Council. It is imperative for the elections to be transparent. Everybody should know who an eligible candidate is. The election campaign can also provide an opportunity to talk about the situation of young people in a given commune. In line with the recommendations issued by the National Federation of Local Youth Governments¹⁷, graduates of high schools, for instance university students, should not be members of Youth Councils. Schools turn into constituencies. Small communes are allowed to organize elections even without schools, and the entire commune becomes a constituency in such a case. However, practice shows that it is easier to organize elections in schools, in which teachers

¹⁶ Public debates are another superb example of how to develop key competences in young people. The introduction of debates as a teaching instrument in schools has considerably influenced the support for social participation. For more on this topic, see N. Lubik-Reczek, *Debaty oksfordzkie jako narzędzie wspierania edukacji*, [in:] *Uwarunkowania i mechanizmy partycypacji politycznej*, ed. M. Rachwał, Poznań 2017, pp. 111–122.

¹⁷ The National Federation of Local Youth Governments is an association of communes and districts where local youth governments work. The Federation supports the activity of local youth governments. For more, see <https://www.eurodesk.pl/organizacje/ogolnopolska-federacja-mlodziezowych-samorzadow-lokalnych> (17.05.2020). Statute of the National Federation of Local Youth Governments (an association of communes and districts) adopted on May 16, 1998 including amendments introduced on February 2, 1999, March 17, 2000, April 20, 2002, April 28, 2003, and October 2, 2004.

can be involved in preparing the election. The school becomes the venue of the election campaign in which young people can talk about matters important for their commune. Before the election campaign can start, the election has to be announced to the public. All students in the school have to be informed of the place and deadline for submitting candidates, the tasks to be assigned to election winners and presented with the benefits of being a youth councilor¹⁸. The next step after submitting candidates involves the publication of their names so that other students will know who they can vote for. It should be stressed that the candidates run their own election campaigns, which are an element of civil education. Before the campaign launches, it is advisable to organize a meeting with an adult councilor who can share their experience in campaigning in local government elections. The campaign of the candidates for the Commune Youth Council should be short enough not to overwork the candidates and their electoral staff. The campaigns include holding election meetings, displaying posters, and handing out flyers. Debates organized for the entire school are a frequent element of election campaigns¹⁹. They address the most important challenges and problems young people are facing. The campaign can be conducted across the commune but it is definitely easier to focus on schools. Each candidate for councilor should draw up their election platform, which becomes their declaration. The election staff should also be seen during the campaign, which brings together supporters of a given candidate who help them in organizational matters. The way the elections are organized should resemble the procedure of elections to “adult” Commune Councils. The organization of elections in schools is supervised by School Election Commissions made up of students. All the students of a given school are eligible to vote in the election to the Youth Council, provided they are holders of a student ID. Voting should be conducted in a designated polling place ensuring voluntary voting. At the end of the Elec-

¹⁸ *Młodzieżowe Rady*. Short guide elaborated within the scope of project “Młodzieżowe rady w obwodzie zaporskim”, <https://docplayer.pl/69730556-Mlodziezowe-rady-krotki-poradnik-opracowany-w-ramach-projektu-mlodziezowe-rady-w-obwodzie-zaporoskim.html> (14.05.2020).

¹⁹ More information about the debates organized for young people with the purpose of developing their civil competencies can be found on the websites of the educational foundation Fundacja edukacyjna G5 and the Faculty of Political Science and Journalism, AMU.

tion Day, the School Election Commission counts the votes and draws up the election report. On the following day, the Election Commission displays its announcement about the number of votes garnered by individual candidates and indicates who has entered the Youth Council. A minimum of one month should pass from the moment of announcing the election results until the council bodies are selected according with the council standards. This time should be devoted to integrating the elected group, so that they can make an informed decision, taking the predisposition of councilors into account. The Youth Council should not have more than 40 members²⁰.

Youth councilors should be adequately prepared for their office. It is therefore important for them to attend a training session presenting the mechanics of public activity. Such a session can take various forms, both as concerns the presentation of knowledge indispensable for a councilor, including lectures, workshops, discussions and so on, and its acquisition. Additionally, every youth councilor has to become familiar with their individual tasks and consider their role as a representative of the local youth. The councilor's mandate is officially awarded provided that the following oath is taken: "I solemnly vow to work as a youth councilor for the good and prosperity of the young people of the commune/district of. . ., always to act in compliance with law and interests of young people, to represent my voters with dignity and fairness, take care of their affairs and not spare any effort in carrying out the tasks of the Council"²¹.

Youth Councils can be effective in their work provided that the young people are aided by a tutor – a teacher or officer appointed by the local authorities. The tutor should support young people and inspire them to take specific steps. Such a tutor is therefore a mentor, who shows what went as intended and what requires further work. Efficient cooperation between the Youth Council and their tutor translates into the successful development of the local community.

In the light of the Art. 5 of the Law on Commune Government, the core of the activity of Youth Councils concerns their members' participation in

²⁰ A detailed analysis of elections to Youth Councils is available from *Partycypacja obywatelska młodzieży. Przykład młodzieżowych Rad Gmin*, Warsaw 2012. A publication developed under the project "The best Youth Council! Polish and Lithuanian good practices of Youth Councils", pp. 21–23.

²¹ Resolution No. 32/VI/03 of April 27, 2003 of the National Federation of Local Youth Governments, pp. 2–3.

the process of decision making through giving opinions on projects²². Youth councilors should act as the consultants of local authorities, making decisions that are important for their electorate. Meetings with representatives of the Commune Council or Mayor need to be regular so as to allow young people to give their opinions on the decisions of the authorities on the matters that concern them on an ongoing basis. Youth councilors should also be engaged in decision making as early as at the stage of drafting a resolution or decision. When in office, they should be interested in matters concerning their place of residence and talk about the issues of importance for their community, and should involve their peers in the debate. Members of Youth Councils can also help in collecting the information that is necessary when making decisions., as well as providing information and consulting, they also implement projects addressed to young people in a given commune. Identifying the needs of young people, youth councilors choose the topics of projects and organize various ventures in cooperation with adults. Thanks to these initiatives the former can learn how to work for the local community²³. In their everyday work, they should not forget to fulfil tasks of broadly understood youth activation. This embraces all activities whereby young people take part in campaigns organized by Commune Youth Councils, eagerly get involved in various activities and organize such activities and make decisions themselves, if only the most basic ones.

Youth Councils should inform their voters about the role the Council is playing in the local government and show the scope of operation of local governments. In order to be efficient, Youth Councils should select the Presidium/ Board, Audit Committee and Problem Committees. Working in sub-groups facilitates getting all the members involved. The activities of Youth Councils should be documented, for example in the form of minutes, so that their successors can use their experience. The activities of Youth Councils are very often promoted on the subpages of the websites of the Commune Council. Youth Councils also have their profiles on social media, through which they reach

²² The Law on Commune Government of March 8, 1990 (Dz.U. 2020, item 713).

²³ A detailed legal analysis of the activities of Commune Youth Councils for local communities can be found in E. Gierach, *Rola samorządu terytorialnego w tworzeniu warunków uczestnictwa młodych ludzi w życiu społeczności lokalnych*, "Studia BAS" 2009, No. 2(18), pp. 116–124.

their peers who spend a considerable proportion of their time online. Commune/district authorities have a significant task of providing the Youth Council with a meeting venue where the Council members can meet, and organize workshops or integration events. Financing of Youth Councils should not be the sole responsibility of commune/district authorities and Youth Councils can also obtain resources from external sources.

IV. Conclusions

Youth Councils are teams of democratically elected young people appointed by local governments to represent their peers from their region. Over the thirty years of their existence, Youth Councils have become an important instrument for involving young people in decision making at the local level. The number of local youth governments is growing and they are increasingly effective. Youth Councils are therefore an important partner in talks with local governments. They fulfill their roles of representing young people in a given community and consulting the decisions of authorities, in compliance with Article 5b of the Law on Commune Government. Youth Councils' activities enhance civil awareness, knowledge of young people and their interest in the mechanics of local government. Another advantage of Youth Councils is that they strengthen civil dialog between the public and local authorities, thereby facilitating the better identification of needs and the implementation of efficient solutions at the local level. The concrete actions of Youth Councils for their local communities also facilitate better integration of society.

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