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## RESTITUTION OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN POLAND IN THE 1990S. SOCIAL PERCEPTION OF ADMINISTRATIVE REFORMS

**Abstract.** One of the most important steps in the transition from the so-called “real socialism” to democracy was the process of administrative decentralization. In less than ten years, after the “round table” agreements, Polish parliament was able to introduce reforms that changed the structure of local governments. It created three tiers of self-governments and provided redistribution of authority, responsibility, tasks and competences between the government (and their institutions) and local governments. The first aim of the article is to present this process and indicate crucial decisions and actions made by Polish parliament. The second part of the article is mainly based on the results of a research made by CBOS and non-governmental organizations. The data shows how the local government has been perceived during the last two decades by Poles, it brings the information about a sense of influence on local affairs, the importance of local elections, trust in local authorities, belief in the influence of local authorities on local development, perception of the role and autonomy of local authorities. The second part of the article also contains secondary analysis of data on voting turnout in Polish local elections.

**Keywords:** decentralization, administrative reforms, self-government, social perception.

### 1. Introduction

The political transformation that began in Poland in 1989 assumed the transformation of an authoritarian state into a democracy. One of the main foundations of democratic state is an efficiently operating local self-government.

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Decentralisation in Poland was carried out during first 10 years since the beginning of political transition in 1989. The law concerning restitution of municipal and community governments (Gminas) was adopted by Parliament in March 1990. First regional elections were held less than 2 months later, in May 1990. The second phase of decentralisation was carried out in the year 1999, when 49 voivodships were replaced by 16 larger units. At voivodship tier 16 Self-Governing Regions co-habit with “sixteen deconcentrated units of the national government which run the police, courts and a number of inspectorates” (Leviś 2018: 8). The second wave of decentralisation also introduced local governments on county (powiat) tiers (between “Self-Governing Regions” and Gminas). At the beginning of the year 1999 “sub-national government system consisted of three tiers with 16 regions, 315 counties (plus 65 cities of county status) and close to 2500 municipalities” (Swianiewicz 2010: 103).

The aim of the article is to present the general assumptions of decentralization reforms in the first phase of political transformations in Poland. The historical process of establishing a three-tier self-government in Poland was recreated on the basis of scientific articles, monographs and legal acts. The second part of the paper provides information regarding public perceptions of the Polish local government, as well as, presents the data on voter turnout in local elections. The available empirical data from the last 20 years (mainly created by the Public Opinion Research Center) allows to indicate how strongly the idea of local self-government has embedded in the perception of citizens. Therefore, the article can be considered as the review of scientific literature and available empirical data.

## **2. Decentralization process in Poland**

The model of Polish statehood shaped after World War II, despite varying degrees of repressiveness at different stages of its development, was marked by an undemocratic political system and a centralized economy and state administration. The collapse of the system symbolized by the Polish People’s Republic in mid-1989 made it necessary to build new political system institutions, partly modelled on the regulations of the Second Polish Republic and consolidated Western European democracies. The political transformations also included the restoration of local self-government to replace the state-centric system of national councils which operated from September 1944 to May 1990. It was an important element of the legal and political changes undertaken by the new governments of the Third Republic (Ajnenkiel 1977: 136–208; Witkowski 2007: 413–435; Kallas 2007: 393–398).

It should be noted that in the official public debate, the issue of local self-government was raised during the period of the so-called “Solidarity Carnival”, i.e. the legal operation of the independent trade union and social movement

“Solidarity” between September 1980 and December 1981. It suffices to recall here that in the autumn of 1981, a demand was put forward to hold democratic local elections by 15 February 1982, which was an important reason for bringing forward the introduction of martial law by the state authorities of the People’s Republic of Poland. The calls to move away from the inefficient and over-centralised model of national councils emerged in the scientific and expert circles as early as the 1980s, but began reemerging in the public debate during the time of the “round table” negotiations. A group on local self-government was established on the initiative of Jerzy Regulski within the committee on associations. It held several meetings at the turn of February and March 1989, meeting with representatives of the government, but its work ended without any deeper conclusions. It confined itself to writing a report of contradictions – the government side called for changes in the structure and organization of the system of national councils, the opposition-solidarity side focused its demands on recreating the idea of local self-government (Regulski 2014: 325–382; Kulesza, Regulski 2009; Bartkowski et al. 2016: 35–80).

This was reflected in the electoral program of the „Solidarity” Civic Committee announced in April 1989, which included a promise to create self-governing municipalities as an important element of public administration. This declaration was expanded and detailed in the government program presented by Tadeusz Mazowiecki in September 1989. At the same time, prof. Jerzy Regulski was appointed government representative for carrying out the self-government and administrative reform. In parallel, work on the concept of the Polish local self-government model proceeded in the second chamber of the Polish Parliament – the Senate, which emerged from free and democratic elections (Stępień 2020: 153–179; Regulski 2014: 414–460; Hall 2011: 125–127).

The inaugural date of the local government reform was the session of the Sejm on 8 March 1990. Then, a symbolic amendment to the 1952 Constitution was adopted, abolishing legal regulations relating to national councils and restoring local self-government to the constitutional order. It granted municipalities legal personality and the right to own property (introducing a separate category of municipal property). Local self-government was also granted the right to enact local laws and create its own budget as the unit’s financial plan. Local self-government bodies were subjected to supervision by the Prime Minister (Mołdawa 2008: 380–382). At the same time, the MPs passed a law on local self-government, which specified in detail the competences and organizational structure of local government units. The tasks of a municipality can be classified into several areas: 1) technical infrastructure; 2) social infrastructure; 3) spatial and environmental order; and 4) security and public order. In reference to the interwar solutions (originating from the Integration Act of March 1933), a dualism of local government bodies was introduced – with decision-making/control and executive bodies. Municipal councils elected by direct universal suffrage in a secret ballot

were defined as decision-making bodies. Their main tasks included enacting local laws and exercising control functions over the board. The executive bodies, on the other hand, were defined as collegial boards, headed by the village mayor, mayor or city president. Their primary task was to execute laws and manage their units on a day-to-day basis. The name of the executive body's chairperson was determined by the nature of the municipality – rural (village mayor), urban (mayor), metropolitan (city president) (Dolnicki 2009: 71–104; Barański et al. 2007: 112–139; Leoński 2006: 73–102; Piekara 2005).

Polish law defined a metropolitan municipality as one with more than 100,000 inhabitants. The status of city president was granted in two more cases – being a voivodeship city according to the administrative division of June 1975 or having the right to a city president when the local government reform was introduced in May 1990. The first case includes several minor urban centers such as Siedlce, Ciechanów, Ostrołęka, Suwałki, Łomża, Przemyśl, Chełm or Krosno. The other case involves urban centers around large agglomerations (Otwock, Legionowo, Pruszków near Warsaw; Pabianice, Zgierz around Łódź; Tczew and Sopot around Gdańsk), holiday and health resorts such as Świnoujście or Kołobrzeg (Wróbel 2008; Mizgalski, Sielski 2012).

The second important statutory regulation involved the electoral code for municipal councils, constituting a key element of electoral law at the local government level. The term of office of local government bodies was set at four years, and the right to call local elections was granted to the Prime Minister, in his capacity as the authority supervising local self-government. The third important statutory regulation, relating to the catalogue of rights and obligations of local government employees, was passed at the next session of the Sejm. In May 1990, when self-governing municipalities were established, a group of about 120,000 state employees switched to the category of local government employees, with the Prime Minister ceasing to be their formal superior and being replaced by the village mayor, mayor or city president (Ćwiertniak, Tarniewska-Peszko 1991; Piasecki 2003: 3–15; Mazuryk 2013: 153–166).

Other important legal regulations were passed at the May session of the Sejm and involved the division of powers between the central and local government administrations and the specific system of the capital – Warsaw. The Polish legislator took the position that the capital city, as the largest Polish municipality with about 1,700,000 inhabitants at the time, should have a separate legal status, which would take into account the responsibilities arising from its capital status (the seat of central state authorities) and the existing district layout. Under the act, Warsaw became an obligatory association of seven municipalities-districts – Śródmieście, Mokotów, Ochota, Wola, Żoliborz, and two located on the right side – Praga Północ and Praga Południe. Each municipality-district had its own decision-making and executive bodies headed by the mayor. A collegial City Board was at the head of the city as a municipal association. The legislator adopted a specific

mode of electing the President of the Capital City, as election was carried out by an electoral assembly of Warsaw municipality-district councillors. The Sejm then passed a law on the status of the voivode as the head of the joint administration and the government representative in the area (Niziołek 2008: 104–110; Faliński 2013: 21–116).

With this legal framework, the local government model could be put into practice. The Prime Minister called the first local government elections after World War II on Sunday, 27 May 1990. These were also the first free and democratic general elections in post-war Poland, the results of which could not be predicted (except for the Senate election in June 1989). On 28 May 1990, municipalities ceased to function as local bodies of state authority and local self-government units were established. It is worth noting that in the first stage only local governments at the municipality level were established. This was determined by various social, economic and political factors. The scale of the economic crisis prevented deeper and more fundamental changes in public administration structures. Moreover, there was no consensus among experts and politicians on the final shape of local self-government; the district aroused major protests and resistance among some politicians. It was decided that the *small steps method* would be followed from here, starting the construction of the Polish local government model from the basic unit which did not raise any major objections. It was concluded that the experiences from the municipal stage would be useful at further stages of public administration reform (Emilewicz, Wołek 2000: 25–34; Olszewski 2007: 121–263; Piasecki 2009: 143–197; Zieliński 2013: 261–304).

The second stage of the administrative and local government reform came under the government headed by Jerzy Buzek. It can be safely said that it was even more difficult and complicated than the municipal stage. This was because it consisted of the restoration of self-government institutions at the district level and creation of new regional self-governments established at the voivodeship level. The district was defined as the second level of local self-government, a kind of „big brother”, so to say. Its functions were defined – like in the German model – as complementary and supportive to the municipal administration. Disputes arose not only over the catalogue of competences and tasks assigned to the district – the municipalities were afraid they would be deprived of some of their local authority – but also over the specific map of the districts to be established on 1 January 1999. The matter was all the more complicated as the district level *de facto* ceased to function in May 1975, but it lost its self-government status *de iure* back in September 1939. And a simple return to the interwar solutions was not only impossible, but also inadvisable. The formation of a real district community had to be connected with the potential and resulting possibilities of performing public tasks. Hence, the discussion was very heated and multithreaded, the number of district units ranged between 150 and 300. Eventually, the preparatory works followed two paths – the statutory regulations to define district tasks and

authorities were being developed while the criteria for creating a district map were being designed (Boć 2001; Dolnicki 2009; Milczarek 1999).

The law on district self-government (as a kind of local constitution) was passed at the meeting of 5 June 1998. It defined the district as a self-governing community which “by law is constituted by the inhabitants of a district residing in a specified territory”. The self-government bodies of the voivodeship are not supervisory or control bodies for the district and the municipality, and they are not higher authorities in administrative proceedings. The tasks of the district were designed as complementary to the municipal administration and they include: 1) secondary technical infrastructure; 2) secondary social infrastructure; 3) ensuring order and safety of citizens in the supra-municipal dimension; 4) creating spatial and environmental order; and 5) promoting the district and cooperating with non-governmental organizations. The structure of district authorities was based on municipal regulations – it provides for a dualism of decision-making/control and executive bodies. Councils come from direct, universal suffrage, they are elected by secret ballot. In turn, collegial boards (consisting of three to five members depending on the district) are elected by the decision-making bodies and headed by the district starost. The term of office of district-level authorities was also set at four years, in order to make it possible to hold self-government elections jointly at all administrative levels (Zieliński 2013; Izdebski 2009; Kisiel 2003; Podgórski, Martysz 1998).

The district structure provides for the establishment of rural and urban districts. The former, numbering 308, were established in January 1999 and they are associations of several municipalities. Urban districts, on the other hand, constitute a town with district rights, there were 65 of them in January 1999. In the case of urban districts, the tasks of a city municipality and city and district authorities are merged. In this case, the competences of the district council are performed by the city council and the competences of the district board are performed by the city president as a one-man city board. Urban districts were established on the basis of voivodeship cities (according to the administrative division of May 1975) and urban centers with over 100,000 inhabitants. A distinct legal solution was envisaged for Warsaw, which in January 1999 became an urban district combining 11 Warsaw municipalities (established under a new statutory regulation in March 1994) (Bukowski et al. 2013; Nowacka 2005; Niewiadomski 1998).

The most serious problem in the second phase of administrative reforms was the creation of regional self-governments. In contrast to the municipal and district levels, Poland had virtually no experience in this respect. At the level of a self-governing voivodeship, there is practically no administration providing services. The core task of the self-governing voivodeship was to coordinate social and economic development of individual regions. The establishment of regional self-governments was a response to the challenges arising from the integration processes in Europe and to the expansion of tasks and functions of

public administration and its place in the structure of a modern state. Despite some similarities, the example of German lands could not provide a direct inspiration for Polish experts and decision makers due to the federal nature of the German state (Właźlak 2010; Zawadzka 1993; Nowacka 2010).

The creation of self-governing voivodeships was a two-stage process. In June 1998, the Sejm passed a law on voivodeship self-government. It defined the voivodeship as a regional self-governing community which “by law is constituted by the inhabitants of a voivodeship residing in a specified territory”. The self-government bodies of the voivodeship are not supervisory or control bodies for the district and the municipality, and they are not higher authorities in administrative proceedings. The structure of voivodeship self-government authorities is based on municipal and district regulations – it provides for a dualism of decision-making/control and executive bodies. Voivodeship assemblies are elected by direct universal suffrage in a secret ballot. In turn, collegial boards (with five members in each province) are elected by the decision-making bodies and headed by the voivodeship marshal. The term of office of the authorities at the level of a self-governing voivodeship was also set at four years, in order to make it possible to hold self-government elections jointly at all three administrative levels (municipality, district, voivodeship). The formation of a real regional community had to be connected with the potential and resulting possibilities of performing public tasks. Hence, the discussion was very heated and multithreaded, the number of regional units ranged between 12 and 16. The initial government proposal provided for the creation of 12 voivodeships, but it did not receive the required support in the Sejm and Senate. As a result of a compromise between the government and opposition groups with an active participation of the President, a decision was made to create 16 self-governing voivodeships. After that, references were made in the public debate to the number of voivodeships from the period of the Second Republic of Poland, although the comparison was very far-fetched due to the systemic position of the new administrative unit, its competences and authorities. Only the number was the same at 16 (Izdebski 2009; Błaś et al. 2003; Barański et al. 2007).

When discussing the issue of local governments, it is useful to refer to the principle of subsidiarity, which is crucial for the functioning of the new order. The idea introduced in the social encyclical by Pius IX stating that:

[...] Just as it is gravely wrong to take from individuals what they can accomplish by their own initiative and industry and give it to the community, so also it is an injustice and at the same time a grave evil and disturbance of right order to assign to a greater and higher association what lesser and subordinate organizations can do [...] (Pius XI 1931)

is not just a cliché, but a guardian of self-governance. It justifies the particular social order and lays the foundations for building participation in our country. This is confirmed by an excerpt from the current Constitution of Poland: “Hereby establish this Constitution of the Republic of Poland as the basic law for the State,

based on respect for freedom and justice, cooperation between the public powers, social dialogue as well as on the principle of subsidiarity in the strengthening the powers of citizens and their communities” (Dz.U. Nr 78 poz. 483 ze zm.).

### 3. Social perception of administrative reforms

Articles on the public image of local self-government typically refer to data from CBOS Reports obtained from surveys on local government and the perception of public authorities, carried out on representative random samples of adult Polish citizens (e.g. Boguszewski 2016: 163–174; Herudziński 2019: 61–78). Detailed studies on particular topics, such as the specifics of participation in local elections, constitute a valuable supplement to the overview of the cited data sources (e.g. Gendźwiłł 2017; Gendźwiłł, Żółtak 2020). It is also important to take into account official data, e.g. on voter turnout, as well as reports produced by non-governmental organizations supporting the development of civil society and local democracy (e.g. Trutkowski 2016; Gendźwiłł, Żerkowska-Balas 2018). Studies that aim to present Polish opinions on local self-government usually cite data on the importance of local elections, electoral participation, assessment of local government activities, a sense of influence on local affairs. The purpose of this part of the article is a synthetic presentation of updated data, taking into account the 2018 elections and the research conducted mainly in 2018–2020. Moreover, studies concerning trust in the public sphere, awareness of election results at the local level, public perception of the role and competences of local government and its autonomy from central government were taken into account. In connection with the above, the most relevant CBOS surveys were examined, namely the surveys conducted on the 20th and 30th anniversaries of the restitution of local government in Poland, expanded with data from studies into Poles’ attitudes towards authorities at different levels (e.g. trust). The dimension of how local government is perceived in Poland has been supplemented with reference to the electoral behaviors of Poles.<sup>1</sup>

The public image of local self-government can be constructed based on the basis of different theoretical orders. The discussed issue can be referred to the theory of transformation (Sztompka 1997: 5–19), legitimacy of power (Burdziej 2016: 167–199), political (electoral) behaviors (Gendźwiłł 2017: 81–102), or civil society (Boguszewski et al. 2018: 175–188). The selected perspectives provide an opportunity to define declarative ways of perceiving self-government in Poland and draw conclusions based on the level of civic participation. A specific

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<sup>1</sup> The second part of the article deals with the public perception of local government. Public participation at the level of local government, as an extensive issue, is the subject of separate studies. In this respect, separate works concerning the last 30 years may be cited, including an article by Barbara Jaworska-Dębska (2020).



feature of social research into local government is that the subject of assessment is different, e.g. at the level of each municipality, and the obtained results are averaged. In studies into central government, the same institution is subject to assessment (Wenzel 2002: 2).

With regard to participation, the most commonly used indicator is voter turnout. In this area, we can compare changes in the level of citizen participation in local elections over time, or identify the difference in turnout in parliamentary and local elections<sup>2</sup> – the so-called turnout gap. As Adam Gendźwiłł notes, “empirical analyses usually take into account the difference in turnout [...] between elections held within as short period of time as possible, or the difference in average turnout levels in a selected period” (Gendźwiłł 2017: 83). In the case of Poland, we will take into account turnout in elections from the last 20 years, which is due to the fact that since the local elections held in 2002, Polish citizens have also elected single-person executive bodies of municipalities – village mayors, mayors and city presidents. That was the last change in the electoral law that could significantly change the interest in local elections. During this period, local elections were held in Poland in 2002, 2006, 2010, 2014 and 2018, while parliamentary elections were organized in 2001, 2005, 2007, 2011, 2015 and 2019. An average of 47.96% went to the polls in local elections, 50.38% in parliamentary elections. Therefore, the turnout gap in the last 20 years was 2.42% on average. It should be emphasized that it has increased in the last 4 years due to a record turnout in the 2019 parliamentary elections when 61.74% of those eligible went to the polls – an all-time high in the Third Republic of Poland. In the 21st century, the average citizen participation in local elections in Poland is similar to the average in the Visegrad Group countries (Hungary 48.97%, The Czech Republic 45.13%, Slovakia 48.7%), but a significant difference in the turnout gap between local and parliamentary elections should be noted. In the case of Slovakia it was just under 13%, in the Czech Republic almost 16%, and in Hungary nearly 18% (www.volby.cz; www.volby.statistics.sk; www.valasztas.hu) (see data for 2001–2016 excluding the most recent pairs of „local-parliamentary” elections: Gendźwiłł 2017: 84).

The importance of local elections was also the subject of surveys conducted on representative random samples of adult Polish citizens. Less than nine months before the last local and regional elections in Poland (the first round took place on 21 October, the second on 4 November 2018), the public considered local elections to be the most important of all held in Poland. On a ten-point scale, on the basis of which respondents assessed the significance of particular electoral acts (from 1–2 *practically irrelevant* to 9–10 *very important*), local elections received

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<sup>2</sup> Incidentally, it is worth recalling Jerzy Bartkowski’s statement presented in the last edition of the 2020 State of the Countryside Report, pointing out that “local elections have both local and national dimensions. Locally, they are a process of renewing the authority at this level. The national dimension is a popularity test for the ruling camp” (Bartkowski 2020: 162).

an average response of 7.63 and came ahead of presidential (7.24), parliamentary (7.20) and European Parliament elections (6.12) (Gendźwił 2018: 1).<sup>3</sup>

In the context of the 2018 survey, it is worth noting that the Polish perception of local elections as the most important ones, but also assigning ever greater importance to all the other types of elections, have been a constant trend in Poland for over 10 years. As the author of the survey points out, referring to recent years, “the trend is clearly upward, which can be interpreted as appreciation of local government policy in the opinion of citizens” (Gendźwił 2018: 3).

The interest of citizens in the electoral process at the local level is also evidenced by their interest in election results. In light of the CBOS survey conducted after the 2018 local elections,<sup>4</sup> the majority of Poles know the results of local elections – or „are more or less familiar with them”. A clear advantage of the former answer was declared by respondents with regard to the village mayor/mayor/president of their municipality/city (86% vs. 6%; with 8% of the respondents admitting that they did not know who held the post). In the case of election results for city/municipal councils and voivodeship assemblies (awareness of district councils was not surveyed), a regular pattern emerged – the lower the level of local government, the greater the knowledge of respondents (Bożewicz 2018: 1).<sup>5</sup>

The above mentioned opinion of the authors of the CBOS Reports is confirmed by other studies, including those directly concerned with the assessment of local government activity in Poland. In the period since 2002, significant changes in Polish opinions have also been noted in this aspect. When in April 2002 respondents were asked about their opinions on the local authorities whose term of office was coming to an end, that group still included presidents, mayors and village mayors who were not directly elected. The assessment of the authorities at this level was strongly polarized. The percentage of people declaring positive opinions (42% of respondents) was only marginally higher than those expressing exactly the opposite views (38%) (Wenzel 2002: 2).<sup>6</sup> When we compare the results of subsequent surveys conducted by the same institution, consistently on a representative random sample of adult Polish citizens, a significant increase in positive opinions as well as a decrease in negative opinions is seen. In September 2010, 69% of respondents expressed satisfaction with the work of local authorities

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<sup>3</sup> The survey was conducted on a representative random sample of adult Polish residents (N=951 persons).

<sup>4</sup> The survey was conducted on a representative random sample of adult Polish residents (N=999 persons). The question regarding the election was: Do you know the election results? Possible answers: yes; yes, I am more or less aware; no, I am not interested at all; hard to say.

<sup>5</sup> The percentage distribution of respondents' answers, taking into account three of the above-mentioned answer options (without “hard to say”), was as follows: city/municipal councils (47% – 26% – 27%); voivodeship assemblies (27% – 24% – 48%).

<sup>6</sup> The survey was conducted on a representative random sample of adult Polish residents (N=1044).

and only 17% gave those authorities negative marks (Boguszewski 2010: 8).<sup>7</sup> Similar findings came in a survey conducted before the 2018 elections (also in September). The percentage of positive opinions reached 70% then, with 19% negative. The most recent survey (from March 2020) shows a further increase in the acceptance of the authorities' activities (74% of positive opinions, 19% negative) (Feliksiak 2020a: 5).<sup>8</sup>

What should be emphasized when referring the above mentioned findings to the assessments given to other political institutions in Poland is an absolute exceptionality of the results achieved by local government. For example, in 2002, "net positive ratings", i.e. the difference between positive and negative opinions, was 4pps for local government, compared to 54pps for the President, -23pps for the Senate and -43pps for the Sejm (based on: Wenzel 2002: 2). In 2020, "net positive ratings" for local government increased almost 14 times (to 55pps), for the President decreased more than 2.5 times (to 21pps), and in the case of the Sejm and the Senate, despite some changes, they were still negative (-10pps and -9pps respectively).

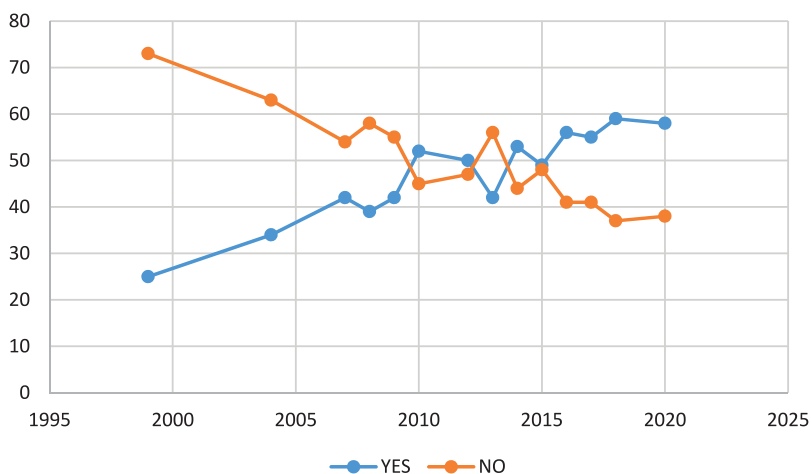
The way local governments are perceived by the public may also be evidenced by the citizens' sense of subjectivity and agency in the public sphere. As Rafał Boguszewski noted in reference to public opinion polls conducted in 2014, a difference can also be seen in this aspect "in the assessment of the impact that Poles feel on the affairs of their city, municipality and on the affairs of the country" (Boguszewski 2016: 167). The results of the 2020 survey indicate that the percentage of Polish residents who declare a sense of subjectivity in the local dimension significantly exceeds the percentage of those who believe that they have no influence on the affairs of their city/municipality (58% vs. 38%). Significantly, since the beginning of the 21st century, there has been both an increase in the number of people expressing their conviction that they have influence on local affairs and a decrease in the number of respondents declaring no such feeling (Feliksiak 2020: 3).

In May 1999, i.e. after the new administrative division of the country was introduced, the percentage of people convinced of their own influence on the affairs of their city/municipality was 25%, while almost three in four respondents said they did not have such influence. Over the course of almost 21 years, public perception of the issue has changed significantly. The "sense of agency" with respect to local affairs has increased by 33pps, while the belief of its absence has decreased by 35pps. The "hard to say" answers always accounted for less than 5% (Feliksiak 2020: 3). It is worth noting in this context that with regard to the sense of influence on the affairs of the country, in spite of the same trend, the conviction of having no agency exceeds the declared sense of influence (by 19pps).

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<sup>7</sup> The survey was conducted on a representative random sample of adult Polish residents (N=986).

<sup>8</sup> The survey was conducted on a representative random sample of adult Polish residents (N=958).



**Chart 1.** Do you think that people like you have an influence on affairs in your city/municipality?

Source: Based on data from Feliksiak 2000: 3.

One of the indicators on the basis of which it is possible to determine the public assessment of the activity of public institutions is the level of trust placed in them by citizens. Trust is an important factor stabilizing the functioning of a political system.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, it is assumed that social trust is an outcome shaped by previous experience with other individuals, and public (political) trust is an outcome of experience of treatment received from authorities, so it is the main perception of governance (Mungiu-Pippidi 2015: 5). Studies dealing with the influence of citizens' trust (distrust) in public institutions on the functioning of the political system and its institutions mention many negative aspects of citizens' distrust in the public sphere. Citizens who do not trust their authority are less willing to obey the law, "they will have some suspicions about the public works, public expenditures and also the justice. That distrust among the citizens paves the way for their resistance against the rules and even riots against the government" (Şahin, Taşpinar 2015: 3). As it is stated by Steven Van de Walle, "low trust, may give rise to various exit and voice behaviors, such as moving to alternatives, complaining, protesting, voting differently, evading taxes, or challenging decisions by public officials" (Van de Walle 2017: 120).

<sup>9</sup> Trust is also an element of social capital that can be considered as a basis for the legitimacy of a political system. This perspective is strongly emphasised by Robert Putnam (1995; 2000); however, the perception of social capital as a "public good" providing the society with benefits in public and economic life is also offered by James Coleman (1990) and Francis Fukuyama (1997). Among Polish scholars, it is worth noting the work of Piotr Sztopka (1997), who emphasises the role of trust in the functioning of a democratic system, referring to such things as trust in the state and its institutions and presenting the paradoxes of democracy.

The phenomenon of public trust is often associated by scholars with the concept of good governance. As noted by G. Shabbir Cheema,

key components of good governance that affect trust in government are: public sector capacity; decentralization and local governance; electoral and parliamentary processes; civil society engagement and partnerships with the government and the private sector; accountability and transparency of governance; and conflict management and recovery (Cheema 2010: 8–9).

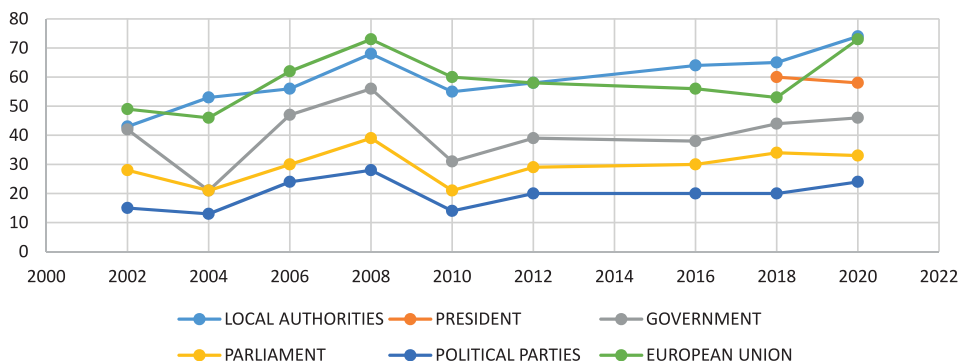
As many researchers point out, “trust is a multifaceted, complex, and rather ambiguous concept, regarded by many as difficult to define and so to investigate, which results in a multitude of definitions” (Beshi, Kaur 2020: 339). In the area of social sciences, in the context of defining the term of trust, three names consistently arise: Niklas Luhmann, Anthony Giddens and Georg Simmel (Meyer, Ward 2009: 2). For the purpose of this part of the article, also due to the limited space, we turn to Polish sociologist Piotr Sztompka. He defines trust “as a bet on future uncertain actions of others” (Sztompka 2007: 151). It means that despite the uncertainty about the intentions of other participants in social life, we take actions that are based on the belief that other people’s attitudes and behaviors will be beneficial to us. In this way, we tame the risks we experience on a daily basis and remain subjects of social life. Trust can be assigned to different categories, depending on the criterion adopted. Taking into account the topic of the article, the most important thing is to identify the division resulting from defining the object that is endowed with it. Therefore, we can distinguish the following types of trust: interpersonal – of one person directed towards other people (family, friends, neighbours, strangers, etc. – it can be presented in the form of aggregated data); social – addressed to various social groups (e.g. nations, religious communities, local communities, etc.); public – which is placed in institutions and organizations operating in the public sphere (uniformed services, non-governmental organizations, various levels of government) (Sztompka 2007: 103–107). As Marcin Wiśniewski points out, “in a broad sense, the society’s trust in authority is defined as a comprehensive perception of its effectiveness in solving problems, counteracting economic and international threats, and its conduct that should be fair, honest and truthful” (Wiśniewski 2015: 323).

Surveys on public trust, including trust in public institutions, have been conducted in Poland by CBOS for nearly 20 years (every 2 years, except 2014). In relation to local authorities in cities/municipalities, they point to a clear upward trend. In 2002, in the first survey, 43% of respondents expressed their trust in the authorities at this level, 41% declared no trust<sup>10</sup> (Wciórka 2002: 6).<sup>11</sup> In the

<sup>10</sup> It is worth noting that the survey was conducted prior to the entry into force of the Act of 20 June 2002 on the direct election of the village mayor, mayor and city president, and before the 2002 elections.

<sup>11</sup> The survey was conducted on a representative random address sample of adult Polish residents (N=973).

next survey conducted 2 years later, citizen confidence increased by 13pps, and in 2020, trust in city/municipality authorities was expressed by a record 74% of respondents, with only 17% declaring distrust. Trust in the authorities at this level in 2020 exceeds trust in the Sejm and Senate (by 41pps), the Government (by 28pps) and the President (by 16pps).



**Chart 2.** Trust in selected public institutions

Source: Based on data from Omyła-Rudzka 2020: 11.<sup>12</sup>

In the whole period covered by the survey, the only significant breakdown of trust in local city/municipality authorities was recorded after the 2008 survey, when it reached its second highest rating after 2020 (68%), only to drop by 13 pps in 2010. Since then, however, a steady upward trend has been seen.

Among the public life institutions and organizations that can be considered as political, a similar level of trust in 2020 was reported only towards the European Union. The institution of the President was added to the list of public institutions towards which respondents could express their trust only in the 2018 survey. The overall data appears to clearly support the formulation of a statement that Poles perceive local government institutions in a decidedly positive light.

An interesting complement to the data on the high level of trust in local government is the public perception of its role and competences as well as its autonomy from central government. These aspects were the subject of a survey conducted by CBOS on the 20th anniversary of the restitution of municipal self-government in Poland<sup>13</sup> (Herrmann 2010). In terms of the role and competences of local government, the respondents were provided nine categories of activities<sup>14</sup>

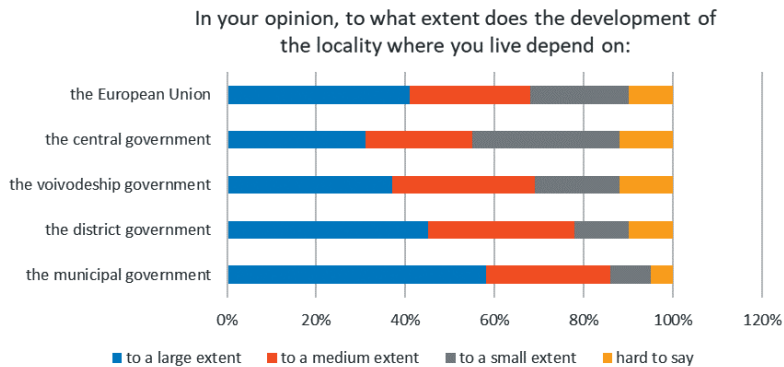
<sup>12</sup> The survey was conducted on a representative random sample of adult Polish residents (N=958).

<sup>13</sup> The survey was conducted on a representative random sample of adult Polish residents (N=1041).

<sup>14</sup> These were activities involving the organisation and supervision of: social welfare institutions; schools and educational-pedagogical facilities; health care facilities; educational facilities; cultural institutions; and responsibility for: infrastructure investments; dealing with

which should be the responsibility of particular levels of government in their localities (from auxiliary units of municipalities to the European Union). In eight categories of issues, the respondents said the most important role should be played by the municipal government. Only when it comes to dealing with unemployment problems were municipal and central authorities given equal importance. Higher expectations towards central authorities than regional and local authorities other than municipalities (at the voivodship and district levels) were only found in the abovementioned aspect of dealing with unemployment problems. The same number of responses was given to voivodeship and central authorities in the categories of “supporting the development of entrepreneurship” and “environmental protection”, but as noted earlier, the respondents mainly expressed the opinion that this should be the competence of municipal authorities (Herrmann 2010: 6). Moreover, the survey results indicated that Poles are in favour of a considerable autonomy for local governments – 45% of the respondents agreed with the view that “local governments should be completely independent in their decision making”, 9% took the opposite view (all decisions should be consulted with the central government), and 37% believed that local governments should make all decisions, with only the most important ones consulted with central authorities (Herrmann 2010: 8).

The conviction of Poles that local governments should be given autonomy from the influence of the central government (total or limited to consulting the most important decisions) is accompanied by the view that local governments, rather than the central government, have a greater influence on local development. Detailed data is presented in Chart 3.<sup>15</sup>



**Chart 3.** Residents’ opinions on the influence of the authorities on the development of their locality

Source: Based on data from Hipsz 2015: 4.

unemployment problems; fostering the development of entrepreneurship; ensuring public order and citizen safety; and environmental protection.

<sup>15</sup> The survey was conducted on a representative random sample of adult Polish residents (N=1027).

The results of the survey indicate that Poles attribute the greatest influence on the development of their localities to the activities of local government (the lower the level, the greater the number of respondents is convinced of this). It is noteworthy that they are more often convinced of direct influence of the European Union on local affairs than of the central authorities. It is probably connected with the perception of benefits which local governments derive from using European funds.<sup>16</sup>

The considerations on the issue of trust in local government can be concluded not so much from the perspective of public perception of local government, but by attempting to determine the actions of the central authorities that may indicate a change in trust that those in power have towards local authorities. Interesting findings in this respect were presented in 2 reports drawn up by the Stefan Batory Foundation, published in 2018 and 2020 (Sześciło 2018; Sześciło 2020). Both of them indicate that the government is taking actions consistent with the so-called *policy of new centralism*, which does not subordinate local government directly to the central government but is based on mechanisms of “gradually depriving local government of essential resources necessary to implement independent local policies, creating a clientelist model of central government-local government relations, bypassing local government bodies in relations with local communities, and formulating media messages aimed at undermining public confidence in local government” and belief in its efficiency and effectiveness (cf. Sześciło 2020: 2). Activities of this kind collide with opinions expressed by village mayors, mayors and city presidents, obtained during in-depth interviews in nine provinces as part of a project run by Cezary Trutkowski (2016).<sup>17</sup> When it comes to the postulates concerning the relationship between the central authorities and local government, local leaders formulated opinions consistent with the concept of “reversing the centralization processes and returning to the principle of subsidiarity” (Trutkowski 2016: 45).

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<sup>16</sup> This issue was not the subject of the CBOS study cited above. The high absorption of EU funds by Polish local governments is indicated by scientific studies devoted to this subject: Wojarska, Zabielska 2015; Tokarski 2017; Swianiewicz 2012.

<sup>17</sup> The in-depth interviews were part of a broader survey, including a poll conducted among secretaries of local government units at the municipal level. The entire survey was published as part of a report from research carried out by the Foundation in Support of Local Democracy in cooperation with the Centre of Expertise for Local Government Reform, Council of Europe, entitled “An effective local government office. Developing personnel competence to build efficient local administration”.



## 4. Conclusion

Decentralization processes in Poland were carried out after 1989, and it included several administrative reforms. The Third Republic inherited from The Polish People's Republic a centralized structure of state administration. The construction of a new, democratic state with a market economy meant the need to restore local self-government. Administrative reforms were carried out throughout the 1990s. The restitution of municipal and community self-government in May 1990 is considered to be the first phase of the decentralization process. The second wave provided further changes in administrative structures. In 1999 three tiers of self-government were established. The most important problem was the division of tasks and competences between government and local government and ensuring relative financial autonomy for local government units.

To answer the question how decentralization process in Poland has been perceived by citizens during the last two decades, the results of multifarious public opinion surveys were used. The results of all surveys indicate a growing trend in the social acceptance of self-government activities. Poles mostly believe that local government should be autonomous from central authorities and see a wide range of its responsibilities. For over ten years, over two-thirds of Poles have positively assessed the activities of their local authorities. Electoral behavior is also an interesting indicator of the Poles' attitude towards their local government. During the last two decades the so-called turnout gap in Poland (the divergence between participation in local and parliamentary elections) has been several times smaller than in other countries of the Visegrad Group. Most voters in Poland are interested in the results of local elections and declare that they know the name of the person holding the executive office in their municipality.

A useful illustration on citizens perception of administrative reforms is provided by the research on trust in public institutions. At the beginning of XXI century trust in city/municipality authorities was at similar level as trust in government. In the year 2020 it was expressed by a record 74% of respondents. In the same period, trust in the government, parliament or political parties remained at a similar, low level. The cited data allows us to formulate a general opinion about the acceptance of territorial self-government by Poles.

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## RESTITUCJA SAMORZĄDU TERYTORIALNEGO W POLSCE W LATACH 90. SPOŁECZNE POSTRZEGANIE REFORM ADMINISTRACYJNYCH

**Abstrakt.** Jednym z najważniejszych kroków w przejściu od „realnego socjalizmu” do demokracji był proces decentralizacji administracyjnej. W niecałe 10 lat po porozumieniach Okrągłego Stołu polski parlament był w stanie wprowadzić reformy, które zmieniły strukturę samorządów. Stworzył trzy szczeble samorządów i zapewnił redystrybucję władzy, odpowiedzialności, zadań i kompetencji między rządem (i jego instytucjami) a samorządami. Pierwszym celem artykułu jest przedstawienie tego procesu oraz wskazanie kluczowych decyzji i działań podejmowanych przez polski parlament. Druga część artykułu opiera się głównie na wynikach badań przeprowadzonych przez CBOS i organizacje pozarządowe. Dane pokazują, jak samorząd był postrzegany przez Polaków w ciągu ostatnich dwóch dekad, dostarczają informacji o poczuciu wpływu na sprawy lokalne, znaczeniu wyborów samorządowych, zaufaniu do władz lokalnych, wierze we wpływ władz lokalnych na rozwój lokalny, postrzeganiu roli i autonomii władz lokalnych. Druga część artykułu zawiera również wtórną analizę danych dotyczących frekwencji wyborczej w polskich wyborach samorządowych.

**Słowa kluczowe:** decentralizacja, reformy administracyjne, samorząd, społeczne postrzeganie.