

The Changing Role of Councillors in Poland: Contexts and Capabilities*

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Abstract: *During twenty five years of 'independent' local government municipal councillors in Poland have undergone considerable change. Intensive reforms, a turbulent environment and innovative trends have resulted in significant pressure for transformations to their role, with this even more visible than in Western countries. This paper explores these factors and addresses the question as to what extent these new ideas are visible in politics which affect representative democracy at the local level. It concludes that over the last two decades the traditional role of local councils and councillors as decision-makers, administrators and even representatives of local communities has been constantly diminished and thus they cannot be perceived at present as a cornerstone of local democracy any longer. Certain innovative concepts, however, in particular the shift from traditionally understood local government to local governance, have created additional possibilities for emerging new roles of the representatives at the municipal level.*

Keywords: *Councillors, Local Politics, New Trends, Poland*

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Introduction

Central and Eastern European countries began to reform their local government systems in the 1990s after the Communist system collapsed. One of the very first steps in the decentralization process in the majority of the countries was to introduce independent local authorities at the municipal level and delegate part of the central power to them. Among the established institutions, directly elected local councils were assigned a key role.

Since the onset of democracy, however, the role of elected representatives has been under constant pressure for change and development. Firstly, in Poland, as in many other young democracies, the legal provisions for the activities of local authorities were altered several times. This concerned not only the way local councillors were elected, but also changes in their status and responsibilities. Secondly, new institutional arrangements were introduced following western trends. The collective executive board, elected by the councillors, was replaced by a directly elected mayor in all the municipalities in 2002. This reform once again brought about a complete change in working patterns and forced councillors to redefine their positions and functions. In addition, since the onset of democracy in 1989, the political environment has been changing dynamically and therefore political parties have made attempts to enlarge their influences at the local level. The trend is particularly visible in large urban municipalities, where councillors have to represent not only local communities but also the political formation they belong to (PKW 2010). Finally, over recent years local authorities have been influenced by the concept of New Public Management (NPM) and governance. An emphasis has been placed on efficiency, effectiveness and the professionalization of local administration, on the one hand, and on improvements in the quality of local democracy, on the other hand, through the inclusion of additional actors into the decision-making process, *inter alia*, entrepreneurs, NGOs and citizens (Lynn, Heinrich, Hill 2000; John 2001). Central authorities are also pushing for further reforms aimed at encouraging the deeper involvement of citizens in the decision-making process. The proposed changes include widening the procedure of local consultations, the introduction of public hearings, civic interpellation and the possibility of submitting resolutions directly by citizens. If the proposals are approved, the councillors will be confronted with a further shift from a representative towards a participative democracy.

While in many countries concerns about the role and quality of local representation are at the heart of the debate over the development of local government (Rao 1998; Copus 2008), minimal attention has been paid to these issues in Poland. The objective of the paper is to consequently explore the changing role of councillors in Poland. The article focuses on different factors influencing local representatives, primarily the above-mentioned legal and institutional arrangements, the political

environment and certain concepts still new in the Polish context, such as New Public Management and local governance. The paper also makes an attempt to initiate a broader discussion over the developing role of local councillors in Poland.

The author only refers to councillors at the municipal level in the paper¹. This is for a number of reasons. Firstly, municipalities, defined in the Constitution as the fundamental units of local government, have the longest tradition, having been created right after the democratic changes in 1990. Secondly, the most important institutional reforms which have affected the role and functions of local councillors were introduced at this level of local government. Thirdly, the municipalities are closest to local communities, which results in a different, more personal relationship between the local representatives and the citizens. Finally, the last three terms of local government (2002–2014) indicate that pressure for change and development, both from central authorities, political parties and citizens, is simply the most visible at this level. Moreover, it seems that certain reforms have already resulted in a number of tensions.

The article is one of the results of the research project PRVOUK P17 *Sciences on society, politics and the media in contemporary challenge*, conducted at Institute of Political Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences, Charles University in Prague. The author refers in the analysis to the empirical data obtained from the National Electoral Commission (Pol. Państwowa Komisja Wyborcza — PKW), the Centre for Public Opinion Research (Pol. Centrum Badania Opinii Społecznej — CBOS) and the results of several other projects that have already been conducted in Poland and which have focused on the changing position of councillors (Kowalik 2003; Piasecki 2004; Swianiewicz 2008; Swianiewicz 2010). Particularly valuable was the evidence published by the Małopolski Institute of Self-Government and Administration (Pol. Małopolski Instytut Samorządu Terytorialnego i Administracji) and the interviews conducted with their employees (Kwiatkowski, Modrzewski, Płatek 2011). The author also refers to the results of a survey and interviews she conducted during the project ‘Competent Local Officer — Efficient Office’ which was carried out in 14 municipalities from the Mazowieckie, Łódzkie, Podlaskie and Lubelskie regions. Although the primary goal of that research was to investigate local officers’ attitudes towards mayoral governance, a number of the respondents also referred during the interviews local councillors and their role in the governing process. Thirty in-depth interviews were conducted between September 2010 and April 2011 as part of the research.

The paper is divided into four main parts. The first elaborates the councillors’ role from a theoretical perspective and refers to the broader context of the reforms that have already been implemented in Poland. The author argues that since the 1990s the dynamics of change have been extremely high, which has resulted in the significant transformation of the municipal government and the role local councillors play

within it. The next three sections elaborate in more detail the possible impact on local councillors of the change in legal and institutional settings, the political environment and the introduction of new trends such as New Public Management and governance. The paper concludes that although local representatives are still formally perceived as the foundation of local democracy, the introduced reforms undermine their position and role at the centre of the local decision-making process. Moreover, it seems that their 'representative role' has been constantly underplayed as well.

Local councillors: the Polish context

The idea of electing representatives who make decisions on behalf of the local community constitutes an important concept in local government. The process of election is a significant act of political participation for citizens as it provides them with a chance to replace local representatives, hold decision-makers to account, but also express their views on various issues (Sweeting, Copus 2012). The role local councillors play in local government is, however, complex and full of challenges.

First and foremost, councillors should act as the *representatives* of local communities. As such they are supposed to translate the needs and issues emerging from society into political action and constitute a reliable and effective link between citizens and local authorities (Heywood 2002, Mouritzen and Svava 2002 cited in: Verhelst, Steyvers and Reynaert 2009: 6). Even this basic role may have different dimensions and meanings, however, as councillors can act as *free-agents* of the interests of the electorates, *delegates* who place the wishes of the people at the centre of their political attention and action or *politicos* who act as trustees where possible or delegates when required (Eulau 1959 cited in: Copus 2008: 593). Secondly, councillors have an *administrative role*, as apart from representing the citizens, they determine the priorities for municipal government and wield the executive power. This role is, however, more internally directed than the former one as the councillors have to confront other local organs and politicians (Verhelst, Steyvers, Reynaert, *ibid.*). In addition, in many countries where local government is penetrated by political parties, councillors are also positioned as *local politicians* who represent the formation they belong to.

Nevertheless, additional typologies can be found in the relevant literature. Newton provides a classification based primarily on councillors' attitude towards local issues. The author distinguishes on this basis the following: the *parochial* — who focuses on the issues experienced within the ward; the *people's agent* — who not only concentrates on the problems of the individual constituencies but also perceives himself/herself as a trustee of the entire council area; the *policy advocate* — who is more focused on governing from a policy perspective or wants to implement his/her manifesto; the *policy broker* — who is more interested in being an arbitrator over policy matters than in pure

ideological issues; and finally the *policy spokesman* — who focuses on constituencies from a broad policy perspective (Newton 1976 cited in: Copus 2004:185). Despite the typologies and classifications, it seems that councillors have to find a balance between these different roles. Moreover, depending on the *'theatre'* — council, public meeting, media — they act in a different manner (Copus 2004: 193).

To understand the role councillors play in local communities, as well as the capabilities to develop it and the tensions they experience, one needs to refer to the broader context, the structural and cultural settings of a particular local government. In the case of Poland, as in many other Central/Eastern European countries, the restoration of local government and the implementation of extensive reforms over an extremely short period of time has been crucial. Several issues seem to be worth noting when analysing the structural and cultural settings of the country in greater detail.

Firstly, like many countries in the region, Poland had to cope with major problems at the beginning of the 1990s, such as the excessive politicization of local structures, corruption and lack of democratic control on the side of society, all of which resulted from the previous regime (Radzik 2011). In spite of these aspects, a decentralisation process, far-reaching territorial reforms, and the restoration of local institutions were begun. Moreover, in comparison with other CEE countries, Poland decided to reform its local government using the 'jump into a deep end approach' (Swianiewicz 2002: 54). This meant that vital local reforms were introduced as quickly and deeply as possible. It also resulted, however, in the fact that legal and institutional solutions implemented at that time were later changed and improved several times.

Secondly, while in the beginning of the 1990s the values of the local government consisted primarily of democracy, decentralisation and independence from central control, in later years greater emphasis was placed on the efficiency of local institutions and enhancing public participation. The Rule of Law in the Weberian sense, however, involving ideas such as New Public Management and local governance were introduced almost simultaneously, whereas in western countries one preceded the other over a number of decades (Campbell, Coulson 2006: 544). This caused numerous tensions, mainly between legalism and managerialism, but also between the values of democracy and competence.

Thirdly, concerning the shift from traditional local government to local governance, in Poland, as in many other CEE countries, the idea of 'more participation' was almost always identified with 'more democracy.' The concept of developing participatory and deliberative tools was consequently widely supported by the central government and certain local authorities (primarily mayors) as well as by NGOs and citizens.

Additionally, what distinguishes the East from the West is the role political parties play in local government. Firstly, in comparison with western countries, they are still

more weakly institutionalized at the local level in CEE. In Poland, the proportion of party members in relation to the size of the electorate is one of the lowest in Europe (Mair, van Biezen 2001). Secondly, whereas in most western countries political parties are widely represented at the local level, citizens tend to vote for independent candidates in Poland (CBOS 2010; CBOS 2014). Quite often party membership is perceived as a sign of wishing to achieve private goals or being involved in 'dirty political games.' Moreover, the ideology on which local government was built in the 1990s stemmed from the conviction that local issues should be distinct from national politics. There is consequently often no place for ideological or party debates at the local level (Swianiewicz 2010: 18). Lastly, the political arena is unstable and the majority of the parties represented at the local level immediately after the onset of democracy no longer exist any longer.

Finally, one more detail should be noted for a better understanding of the Polish context. Although there are 2,479 municipal councils in Poland their members are not elected in the same way. Majority rule operates in all municipalities except those with country rights². At the moment (2015) there are 66 municipalities which have this status.

Legal and institutional arrangements

There were at least four major reforms, which shaped the position and role of local councillors, introduced in Poland after 1990 at the municipal level. The first of these was the abolition of the possibility to combine the functions of a councillor or mayor with that of a member of the national parliament. As noted above, in the beginning of the 1990s a number of solutions were tested out including the possibility of '*cumul des mandates*'. This was not deemed a success in Poland, however, as the majority of the councillors manifested a deeper involvement in national issues than in local ones. '*Cumul des mandates*' was finally abolished in 1997. The idea of *incompatibilities* was, however, taken much further, provoking controversies at times (Kulesza 2012: 8).

The second reform, introduced in 2002, was the replacement of the collegiate board appointed by councillors with directly elected mayors. This reform resulted from several factors, from the need to attract people to the polls, to the need for a more visible and accountable executive. From the standpoint of this article, however, particularly relevant arguments are those related to a desire to stabilize the executive power and obtain independence from the arithmetic majority within the council. It was previously not uncommon for a board to be dismissed only because a single member switched her/his political affiliation (Kowalik 2003: 38).

Although a number of authors have referred to this reform and have attempted to assess its impact on local governance (Piasecki 2006), in principle practically no

one has actually analysed its influence on local councillors. It would seem, however, that the reform has significantly altered their role and impacted the form of their activity. This has been, first and foremost, with the introduction of directly elected mayors, whereby the councillors' influence on the executive has been significantly depleted. In the previous system, councillors had a right to appoint, control and even appeal for a dismissal of the board if they did not accept its financial policy or for other reasons. At present their only authority in this field is the right to initiate a referendum on the dismissal of the mayor, but the final decision rests with the citizens. In addition, councillors lost their influence on the policy directions chosen and implemented by the executive (Swianiewicz 2008: 11–12).

Interestingly, however, empirical research conducted among the executive councillors (former board members) immediately prior to the reforms coming into force in 2002 indicated that they were in support of the new arrangements. The data indicate that 70.7 % members of the boards supported the introduction of directly elected mayors, while 10.2 % believed that no changes were required (Kowalik 2003: 46). Curiously enough, female mayors expressed an approval of the existing system twice as often as male ones. This might stem from their perception that in direct elections their chances to successfully compete against the male candidates were limited. This is clearly related to the still existing societal stereotype in Poland according to which a man is a better candidate for a mayoral post (*ibid.*). The acceptance of the direct election of mayors was also confirmed in research conducted in 2007 among councillors of municipalities over 10,000 inhabitants (Swianiewicz 2008: 5). Five years after the reform was introduced, 87 % of the councillors supported the solutions (*ibid.*).

Nevertheless, the high level of approval for the new arrangements might also have resulted from a lack of awareness of how far-reaching the consequences of the changes would be. Certain local officers interviewed in the project 'Competent Local Officer – Efficient Office' in 2011, for example, pointed out that after the introduction of directly elected mayors difficulties in internal management emerged. It is extremely difficult to run day-to-day management in a number of municipalities as the mayor's political affiliation is different from that of the council majority and both sides attempt to block one other. Moreover, the FRDL report regarding the situation of the local government after twenty years of development indicates a growing imbalance between the mayors and the council, and as a consequence, the weakening role of councillors (Kwiatkowski, Modrzewski, Płatek 2011: 153).

It seems, however, that the introduction of directly elected mayors also impacted councillors in another way. In some cases it helped non-party candidates obtain seats. This took place primarily in cities, where electoral lists were created under the umbrella of a popular, independent mayoral candidate. In this context, the mayor plays the role of the so-called 'electoral locomotive' for potential councillors (Swianiewicz 2010: 24).

The objective of the third reform, also introduced in 2002, was to significantly reduce the number of councillors. The question of the appropriate number of elected representatives was actually at the heart of the debate about democratic governance, representation and civic involvement in a number of countries. In Poland the change was mainly the result of populist discourse stressing an interest in having a ‘cheap state’ and suggesting that having too many councillors was too expensive and unproductive (Purdam, John, Greasley, Norman 2008: 3; Swianiewicz 2011: 493). Additional arguments mentioned in the discussion over the reduction of the number of representatives were related to the fact that a smaller number of councillors might help achieve higher quality and more efficient discussions between them during council meetings as well as influence the competitiveness of municipal elections. The effects of the reform were particularly visible in larger municipalities, primarily in cities over 200,000, where the number of councillors was significantly reduced (Table 1). Interestingly, however, although the reform made it more difficult to obtain a councillor’s post, again 62 % of the local representatives supported its introduction (*ibid.*). As Swianiewicz indicates, it was in all probability the result of the predominance of the advocates of reforms in the public discourse. Opposing this dominant trend would be problematic for politicians in Poland, even if their power is endangered by the reforms (Swianiewicz 2011: 493–494).

Table 1: The number of municipal councillors in Poland (1990–2015)

Size of the municipality	Number of councillors 1990–2002	Number of councillors after the reform in 2002
Up to 4,000 inhabitants	15	—
Up to 7,000 inhabitants	18	—
Up to 10,000 inhabitants	20	—
Up to 15,000 inhabitants	22	—
Up to 20,000 inhabitants	24	15
Up to 40,000 inhabitants	28	—
Up to 50,000 inhabitants	—	20
Up to 60,000 inhabitants	32	—
Up to 80,000 inhabitants	36	—
Up to 100,000 inhabitants	40	23
Up to 200,000 inhabitants	45 and 5 more for every next 100,000 inhabitants but in total no more than 100 councillors	25 and 3 more for every next 100,000 inhabitants but in total no more than 45 councillors

Source: Act of 8 March 1990 on Local Government, Dz.U. [Journal of Laws] 1990 No. 16 item 95

Finally, over the more than twenty years of independent local government the manner in which local councillors are elected has changed a number of times. This issue will be developed in more detail, however, in the following section as it is more complicated and refers primarily to the activity of local committees and political parties.

Political Parties

As mentioned in the preceding paragraphs, the activity of political parties on the municipal level in Poland is significantly lower than in other countries, in particular in those located in Western Europe. This does not mean, however, that parties do not attempt to increase their influence on local governments. Although the trend is definitely more visible on county and regional levels, it is gradually impacting municipalities as well. This trend has undoubtedly been regularly supported since 1990, mainly by changes in local electoral law approved by the votes of Parliament members.

After the establishment of independent local governments in 1990, the first two terms (1990–1994; 1994–1998) were dominated by independent groups and committees, mainly derived from the ‘Solidarity’ movement. The so-called ‘war on top’ began in 1998 as the parties that had the same ‘Solidarity’ origins began to compete against one other in national politics and seek out support on the local level. As a result, a decision was made to change the electoral law and only use the majority rule in the smaller municipalities up to 20,000 inhabitants³. Larger municipalities, counties and regions switched to proportional representation. The reform also introduced a 5% threshold of support for political parties and electoral committees which they had to reach in order to participate in the seats division⁴. In addition, in 2006, only two months before local elections, thanks to the joint votes of the governmental coalition of Law and Justice (Pol. Prawo i Sprawiedliwość — PIS), the populist Self-Defence of the Republic of Poland (Pol. Samoobrona RP) and the Nationalist League of Polish Families (Pol. Liga Polskich Rodzin — LPR), the Parliament introduced the system of the so-called ‘group of candidates.’ The electoral committees and parties that were in the group were allowed to participate jointly in the division of seats. The solution supported those that were grouped, while others had a smaller chance of obtaining a seat. Smaller committees and parties tended to benefit from these ‘groups’ as they gained support at the expense of their larger partners. The rule was under constant criticism since it did not serve to create strong and stable majorities. It was eventually abolished in 2008 (Jarentowski, Celiński 2008: 17). Finally, in 2014, after long discussion, the majority rule was reintroduced into all municipalities, except for those with county rights.

Despite these changes in electoral law, while analysing the results of local elections after 1990, one still notices that local councils are dominated by non-party councillors. In the first municipal elections held in 1990 almost 78% of seats were obtained by councillors originating from the 'Civil Committee of Solidarity' and other independent local committees. In subsequent years the trend has been kept and without a doubt it can be said that the percentage of 'independent' representatives in Poland is higher in comparison to almost any other European country (PKW 1998-2014; Swianiewicz, 2010:19). As already stated, there are a number of reasons for this situation, ranging from the wider society's distrust of political parties, to the relatively weak institutionalization of parties at the local level, to the high volatility of the political scene. Several issues are deserving of attention within this context. Firstly, the party which manifested a fairly continuous presence in municipal councils was the Polish Peasant Party (Pol. Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe - PSL). The formation is well represented, first and foremost, in the municipalities with up to 20,000 inhabitants. Significantly, as the FRDL report indicates, PSL is rarely seen as a typical political party, but rather as a permanent feature of public life, whose representatives are concerned, not only during political campaigns, about the welfare of the local community. In addition, in rural communities it is commonly believed that if you vote for PSL, you do not vote for any representative of a political party but for someone you have always voted for (Kwiatkowski, Modrzewski, Płatek 2011:156). Secondly, the impact of political parties on constituencies is mainly visible just before elections, primarily during the electoral campaign. After the elections, parties at the local level are more interested in their own issues, these being distinct and distant from national matters. This can result in the establishment of so-called 'exotic coalitions' between formations that normally remain mutually inimical in Parliament.

Finally, in the context of the dominance of independent councillors in municipal councils, another issue is worth pointing out. Supposedly independent mayors and councillors occasionally become directly or indirectly involved in political issues. It is extremely difficult, however, to investigate and assess the size of this phenomenon since a mere nominal criterion, based on the names on the lists, does not reveal much information (Kurczewski 2007; Dudzińska 2008; Swianiewicz 2010: 26–29). Therefore, a number of these councillors can be called either crypto-partisan as they have a clear political affiliation but prefer not to flag it in an electoral campaign, or local partisans as they represent an obscure electoral committee, for example, 'Our Municipality' or 'Friendly Municipality.' Interestingly, although the formal status of these local groups is different, they have an internal hierarchy and are typified by behaviour characteristic of political parties. Moreover, quite often these committees are formed around a popular, charismatic leader, such as a mayor. Thus only a small percentage of independent councillors can be described as real independents (Swianiewicz 2011: 497). The phenomenon has diverse and complex roots and may result

from the preferences of the electorate. According to the Public Opinion Research Centre's survey conducted as of 2002, Polish voters favour 'independent' candidates as opposed to party members (CBOS 2002–2014). The candidate him- or herself is also the most important criterion during the actual voting. Immediately prior to the 2014 elections, 65 % of the people declared such a preference, whereas party affiliation was only significant for 17% of the respondents. It was difficult to assess for 18 % (CBOS 2014: 8).

NPM and Local Governance

One might argue there is a significant difference between the rhetoric of New Public Management and local governance and the level of its implementation in Central Eastern European countries; both concepts have an impact on local government in Poland.

The idea of NPM was to relieve politicians from detailed decisions and focus their attention on establishing more general goals, a framework and principles (Nyholm, Haveri 2009: 111). NPM focuses on empowering managers, promoting customers and market orientation mechanisms as well as encouraging autonomous organisations. A number of the responsibilities which previously were under the authority of local authorities were transferred to new players, for instance, executive agencies and/or boards of directors.

The introduction of new forms of management, among others the procedures of contracting-out, public-procurement or performance budgeting, was a challenge in all the CEE countries. On the one hand, traditional local institutions (councillors, mayors, local officers) had to begin operating in a new fashion, and on the other hand, new, often informal, institutions were established. The paradigm considerably changed the way of thinking about local functions, finances and the process of decision-making. It also contributed to the professionalization of local administration.

There is only limited data regarding the impact of the NPM concept on local councillors. Nevertheless, several issues seem to be of importance. Firstly, the implementation of its ideas may occasionally clash with the level of education and awareness of local councillors. As one of the local officers comments:

'Some of the councillors do not know anything about local government and the way it should operate. They have ideas out of the blue, contradictory to common sense and law. It is very hard to explain the rules of performance budgeting to them if they do not have any basic financial knowledge.'

(Local officer, interview conducted during 'Competent Local Officer – Efficient Office' project; 2011)

Also one of the councillors refers to this issue in the following way:

‘The executive power knows best. True, among local officers there are professionals, people who are prepared, have expertise, and are versed in the law. The councillors are quite often people who do not know anything about certain matters, whether municipal management or finance, something they do not deal with. It is our job to give opinions on motions.’

(Councillor from the Łódzkie region, interviews conducted by FRDL 2011: 86)

Swianiewicz points out another interesting phenomenon related to this issue (Swianiewicz 2011: 499). In his view, certain local officials, primarily mayors and councillors, want to act in a modern and professional way and thus over-use specialised terminology. They often support innovative solutions, far-reaching reforms, without any genuine knowledge of the issues in question. The rather low level of competence on the part of council members and their unprofessional attitude to work is also noticed by some mayors. One of them comments on the issue as follows:

‘I think that there should be people who have achieved success on the council, who have something to say. Not a frustrated teacher, or someone unemployed although articulate. Regrettably, there have been cases like that. Such people are not able to contribute anything substantial’.

(Mayor of a city in Śląsk, FRDL 2011: 86)

Secondly, another obstacle towards the implementation of new ideas might be a relatively low level of councillors’ fluctuations between the terms. As the FRDL report indicates, many municipalities have had the same council members since the 1990s (Kwiatkowski, Modrzewski, Płatek 2011:87). Although, on the one hand, incumbent representatives guarantee a certain continuation, they, on the other hand, occasionally create a barrier for the development and introduction of new concepts. As one citizen comments:

‘During the previous term there were mostly the same people on the council. Now it has slowly started to change. You could see ossification, the notorious presence of the same people and a lack of initiative. At least in the eyes of the residents.’

(Citizen from municipality located in Śląsk, FRDL 2011: 87)

In addition, the way local authorities operate has also been recently influenced by the growing complexity of mutual dependences and the shift from local government to local governance. Despite the importance of efficacy as in NPM, this con-

cept focuses more on improvements in the quality of the steering of society and the economy. The governance reforms pushed governments to include other actors in the decision-making process. Interestingly, Campbell and Coulson indicate that this trend was even more visible in the East than in western states. In the CEE countries 'the idea [of governance — KRM] was understood in terms of the need to move from traditional vertical co-ordinations (from which flowed many of the failing of the communists systems) to a horizontal approach, which meant organizing through networks' (Campbell and Coulson 2006: 544). In consequence, local authorities were required to negotiate with various other players, in order to achieve collective action.

As regards local governance in Poland, significantly more attention has been paid recently to solutions aimed at enhancing citizen involvement in local issues. The trend is supported in a number of ways. Firstly, as in many countries with a Communist past where popular involvement was limited for an extended period of time, the idea of 'more participation' is often directly connected at present with 'more democracy.' Secondly, after twenty-five years of 'independent local government' a significant part of society feels alienated from the political process, which often results in low turn-outs in local elections and a distrust of local authorities (Verhelst, Steyvers, Reynaert 2009: 13). Moreover, people believe that local representatives have the wrong stimuli to act. Indeed, CBOS research points out that 54 % of those surveyed negatively assessed the work of councillors, stating that councillors primarily pursue their own interests; 24 % claimed that these were the interests of their friends, colleagues or relatives. 16 % of the respondents indicated that councillors obtained their seats thanks to a predominance of the interests of a party or a political group. Only 19 % of respondents claimed that councillors were guided by the interests of all municipality residents (CBOS 2002: 13). In addition, central authorities also broadly support new legal solutions associated with public involvement. Under the auspices of the central authorities, a package of reforms reinforcing citizen participation is being prepared. The idea is to change the procedure of local consultations and introduce further solutions such as public hearings, civic interpellation and the possibility of submitting resolutions directly by the people.

The introduction of reforms might be hampered, however, in at least two ways. Firstly, the level of citizen indifference towards local issues and low social capital are still present in Poland (Radzik-Maruszak and Mieczkowska-Czerniak 2013). Secondly, a more relevant issue is that certain local authorities are either not suitably prepared to introduce new solutions or afraid of losing their leading position on the local scene. The former is mostly the case with smaller municipalities where local authorities prefer to use more traditional ways of citizen involvement, whereas the latter occurs in larger municipalities (cities) where innovative solutions associated

with participatory governance have already been introduced. An example can be found in the city of Lublin where the Self-government Activity Project (Pol. Projekt Aktywności Samorządowej — PAS) project, which aims at improving the quality of services by establishing partner relations between citizens and local authorities, is being put into effect. During the implementation of the first phase of the project, however, certain councillors already tried to hamper the initiative as they felt their decision-making role was being ‘usurped’ by the mayor and citizens (*ibid.*). In this context, the objection of the Union of Polish Cities (Pol. Związek Miast Polskich) along with a number of other individual local authorities to the reforms proposed by the President’s Chancellery is also significant.

Conclusions

The role councillors play in local government and their capabilities to develop it are the result of a number of overlapping factors. The recently introduced reforms seem to have intensified, however, the tensions and the councillors’ sense of balancing between different responsibilities. Moreover, in numerous cases the implemented solutions have brought into question the accountability of local representatives. Regarding the Polish context, a few vital issues should be noted.

Firstly, despite the official rhetoric it seems that since the 1990s the importance of the councillors’ role within municipal government has gradually declined. Among the implemented reforms, one of the most meaningful was undoubtedly the introduction of directly-elected mayors. The new executive has not only considerably reduced the councillors’ say in the decision-making process, but has also weakened their influence on community development and consequently impacted their administrative role. In addition, as the number of councillors was significantly reduced, their capacity for proper representation of citizens’ interests has also decreased. Moreover, arguments concerning the lack of cooperation between the tiers of local government have recently been raised. There is a demand to include the representatives of municipalities in county councils, and elect members of regional assemblies from county councillors. The solution may undoubtedly bring the levels of local government closer and facilitate their cooperation. It once again, however, pushes local councillors to redefine the role they play.

Secondly, new trends such as New Public Management and local governance bring new challenges and tensions. NPM primarily emphasizes the need for professionalization of local government. Although mayors and local officers are becoming increasingly skilled, the ‘quality’ of local representatives leaves a great deal to be desired. As corroborated by the above-quoted interviews, local officials indicate that a number of local representatives do not have sufficient knowledge and integrity to

work for the benefit of the communities. In addition, the idea of incompatibilities supports the exclusion of certain groups from being elected.

Although marked appreciation of electoral politics was visible in the 1990s, at present the shift from representative towards participative and deliberative arrangements is noticeable. In particular, a great deal of pressure on further reforms based on those arrangements is being exerted by central authorities. Despite the fact that in reality the proposed reforms have little chance of comprehensive introduction, solutions based on participatory and deliberative democracy will certainly be more pronounced at the local level. As the examples of certain cities have shown, it creates tension and pushes councillors to confront residents and city authorities (Radzik-Maruszak and Mieczkowska-Czerniak 2013). Paradoxically, however, it can constitute a stimulus for future development of new roles of councillors as mediators between these two groups or communities' partners who work closely with citizens. This transformation must be, however, accepted and supported by the councillors themselves. They cannot be afraid of taking on new challenges.

Interestingly, in contrast to many other countries, the role of municipal councillors in Poland is determined to a lesser extent by political parties. Political issues and the so-called 'nationalization of local government' are primarily visible in large cities. The trend toward 'independent politics' is supported by the high rotation of political parties and citizen preferences. The only party that has been constantly present in the local government since the 1990s is the Polish Peasant Party (Pol. *Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe* — PSL).

Notes

- ¹ The upper tiers of local government in Poland consist of 379 counties (*powiaty*) and 16 regions (*województwa*).
- ² This regulation was implemented for the first time in the 2014 local elections. Prior to this the majority rule only operated in municipalities with up to 20,000 inhabitants, while those with larger populations used proportional representation.
- ³ Prior to the reform majority rule was used in municipalities with up to 40,000 inhabitants.
- ⁴ In this context, it should be noted that in Poland a view is prevalent whereby majority rule supports independent candidates while proportional rule supports political parties. This is not as apparent, however, in other countries. For example, in Britain there is the prevailing opinion that majority rule affects the dominance of the two major political parties, while proportional elections provide an opportunity for independent candidates, see Swianiewicz 2010: 25.

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