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A Local Government Party in Poland? Causus of National League Association

Abstract: The purpose of this paper was to present ideas related to the creation of a self-government party in Poland, bringing together representatives of local authorities, community activists and all those for whom the idea of local self-government built „from the bottom up” was close to their hearts. The idea of creating a local government party appeared several times in discussions of members of Liga Krajowa association, which was an active entity on the political scene, a member of Electoral Action Solidarity of the Right, from the list of which League had its parliamentary representation. These concepts first appeared at the basis of the association’s formation and then had a close connection with its further presence on the political scene. The local government party was supposed to be an electoral platform with a specific right-wing and centre-right political orientation, as well as to be the most important support for representatives of local authorities, but all efforts in this regard failed.

Keywords: *local government party, right-wing, local elections, local government*

Introduction

In contemporary reflections on political parties in Poland, the least attention has been focused on transformations related to the real possibility of creating a formation responsible for the nationwide representation of people holding specific functions in local government. In the context of elections, we observe an increase in tensions and disputes of a political nature between parties reduced to the level of rivalry between the formation holding power and the broadly understood political opposition. The axis of this rivalry and disputes are no longer programmatic or world-view issues, but a choice between one political party and another, sometimes also a choice between an option and a person, in which logotype, figure of the leader, and sometimes also system of professed political values played a key role.

The increase in the activity of politicians, especially representatives of local government, i.e., councillors, mayors or city presidents, is visible during local government elections and is regularly observed during parliamentary elections. Especially the last character of political competition brought about a noticeable increase in the number of candidates – local government representatives – running for seats in the Sejm or Senate of the Republic of Poland. Such activities resulted not only from the electoral potential that a particular candidate had but also from his organisational efficiency, competence, and charisma, enabling him to successfully enter the competition.

Importantly, in 2018, an amendment to the Electoral Code was introduced, according to which the term of office of the mayor of a village, mayor, and mayor of a city was limited to two consecutive terms (Kowalik, 2016, pp. 159–176). It means that after the statutory end of their functions in local government, their representatives, or at least a significant part of them, will start looking for new avenues of activity, which will probably be transferred from the local to the central level, that is, from local government to parliament (Szczepański, 2021, pp. 171–185).

This discussion presents the internal disputes and discussions surrounding the formation and subsequent activities of the local government association National League, within which the ideas of forming a local government political party of local government representatives emerged. They were put forward in 1993–2010 and concerned different stages of activity (association development, peak activity, and progressive marginalisation).

Importantly, there are no references to this issue in the scientific literature, both nationally and internationally. The main reason for this has been the failure of politicians and local activists to form a party that brings together only representatives of local government. Such activity, as a rule, took the form of involvement in various associations, NGOs or local political party structures.

The following hypothesis was verified: the National League had the potential and all the necessary instruments to transform the association into an authentic and grassroots local government party. The following questions were used to achieve the research objective: was the existence of such a party desirable; what values and programme content would underlie the party; and how would the local government party compete with existing players on the political scene?

National League – Characteristics of the Local Government Environment

The National League Association was founded in 1993 as a result of the transformation of the Municipal League – a local initiative created in Częstochowa by the then mayor of the city, Tadeusz Wrona – into a nationwide social movement, bringing together representatives of local government, people of culture, art, teachers, doctors, community workers, as well as many other fields. This movement was a natural continuation of the Citizens' Commit-

tees, whose representatives performed their local government functions after the national councils' abolition¹.

The years 1994–1996 saw rapid organisational development of the association through the creation of numerous branches (Municipal Leagues, Village Leagues, and Rural-Municipal Leagues), which were generally created as informal political support for mayors and city presidents, each grouping from a dozen to several dozen members and supporting local leaders in the local government units they managed. Thanks to the significant expansion of its structures, the National League took part in the 1994 local elections, winning over 80 seats in 23 municipalities². Although the result achieved by the National League was not impressive, from the perspective of the recently established initiative, it was a kind of success that enabled the association to expand its political cooperation (Szczepański, 2019, pp. 120–121).

In June 1996, the National League joined a broad coalition as part of the Solidarity Electoral Action (AWS), while between 1997 and 2001, it participated in two parliamentary elections (in 1997 and 2001) and in local elections (in 1998), representing a broadly defined centre-right movement. In the Sejm of the third term (1997–2001), Liga had 16 deputies, while in the Senate, it had 4 senators who formed the National League Group within the AWS Parliamentary Club³. Its representatives also participated in the work of the Parliamentary Group of Social Movement Electoral Action Solidarity (RS AWS) and the Local Government Group Electoral Action Solidarity (Wrona, 2001, p. 114 et seq.).

The loss of the Electoral Action Solidarity of the Right (AWSP) in the parliamentary elections of 2001 and the decomposition of this community led the chairman of the National League, T. Wrona, to initiate actions aimed at integrating local government representatives for the 2002 local elections. In November 2001, together with Marek Nawara, Jerzy Jedliński and Jan Olbrycht, Wrona led to the creation of a broad social movement – the Social Initiative „Local Government Community” (Inicjatywa Społeczna „Wspólnota Samorządowa”). Despite the electoral success in 2002 and again in 2006, the activity of the National League and the Social Initiative „Local Government Community” was significantly limited, which

¹ The Union of Polish Cities, the Conference of Presidents, Mayors, and Province Governors in Poznań, the Joint Commission of the Government and Local Self-Government, and the Council for Local Self-Government at the President of the Republic of Poland were also very active and took important positions.

² The result included representation of the mayor in 4 cities (Częstochowa, Tarnobrzeg, Rzeszów, and Starogard Gdański), the vice-mayor in 7 cities (Częstochowa, Tarnobrzeg, Rzeszów, Mielec, Jastrzębie Zdrój, Katowice, and Łódź), the mayor in Nisk, Głuchołazy, Pleszew, Dzierżoniów, and Śmigiel, and the village head in Janów. The remaining seats were filled by League councillors (*Wyniki...*, 1994, p. 3).

³ Out of 16 deputies of the National League in the third-term Sejm, 8 of them ran for election representing the association, while the remaining 8 took part in the election under the banner of the election committee.

was dictated by the fact that the members of both organisations were looking for new forms of political activity associated with joining the Civic Platform (PO), or Law and Justice (PiS).

The programmatic mission of the National League was to organise numerous pro-family conferences of local government, later developed into the Jasna Góra Pilgrimage of Local Government, and to establish in 1997 the prestigious Grzegorz Palka Award, commonly referred to as the „local government Oscar”, given to representatives of local government, people of culture, community workers and politicians for their outstanding contributions to the development of local government. In addition, the National League appealed to a Christian system of values. Its members drew on the Catholic social teachings of the Catholic Church and referred to the teachings of Pius XI and John Paul II.

National League as a Local Government Party in Poland

In the activity of the association existing in Poland continuously since 1993, we can distinguish at least four concepts of creating an authentic local government party, grouping representatives of local authorities in its ranks.

The first of them lay at the basis of a broader phenomenon: the transformation of a local association, as the Municipal League was then, into a broad social movement, i.e., into the National League. These discussions were held during the Municipal League Assembly on November 9, 1993 in Częstochowa. It was unanimously agreed that the National League was to be a parapolitical force, and its strengths included localism and non-partisanship⁴. The proposal to establish a local government party based on the National League was put forward by the vice-mayor of Łódź, Elżbieta Hibner (1990–1996) (*Protokół...*, 1993, pp. 8–19; Winiarski, 1994, p. 5). In her idea, the National League bringing together representatives of local governments, including representatives of executive bodies, could be transformed into a party effectively competing with other political entities, thus having a better impact on the functioning of local government units. This idea was not accepted by the other participants of the debates, who preferred a general formula, a grassroots social movement supporting „small homelands” and local communities. Instead of a local government party, it was decided to form a nationwide association called the National League.

The second concept concerning creating a local government party had to do with the AWSP's defeat in the 2001 parliamentary elections and was sent to the National League office in Częstochowa in October 2001. This project assumed consolidating the local government environment and created a party called the Local Government Arrangement based on local branches of the National League (Urban Leagues, Rural Leagues and Rural-Rural Leagues).

⁴ The National League was to be an entity akin to a municipal party to support and implement the policies pursued by local government representatives (mayors and city presidents).

Table 1. Political party project – Local Government Alliance

Implementation period	Action Strategy
October 2001	<p>The basis for the integration of local communities is the Local Government Agreement, which will be based on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – existing civic organisations and informal movements join the Local Government Agreement based on a voluntary declaration of the authorities (the issue of signing individual declarations of participation in the Local Government Agreement remains to be resolved), – existing and newly created branches of the National League (a branch of the National League would be a form of cooperation for achieving electoral success for those who would like to take action for participation in public life but do not have an organised background so far). <p>The National League, with its existing structure and organisational and financial background, would be a base for the action of the Self-Governmental Agreement. Existing civic organisations and informal movements (regardless of territorial scope) would participate in undertakings organised by the League as a branch of the League. At least once a quarter, a nationwide meeting of members of the Local Government Arrangement would be organised, which would have a programme character, and the subject of the meeting would be the most important issues for the functioning of local government. The authority of Local Government Arrangement would be the meeting of its members. In each province, there would be an organiser of the Self-Government Agreement, whose main tasks would be:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – inspiring the consolidation of various organisations and individuals for success in local government elections (and creating the formation of new such entities), – activity for creating common representation in elections to local self-government assemblies, organisation of self-government conventions on the voivodeship level. <p>The Office of the National League would conduct administrative and financial service of the Agreement strengthened by associates – organisers of the Agreement (or persons indicated by them)</p>
October–December 2001	Implementation of organisational assumptions related to the creation of the Local Government Agreement
January 2002	The first national meeting of members of the Self-Government Alliance (adoption of a schedule of activities until local elections)
February 2002 – for local elections	<p>Implementing the organisational assumptions mentioned above and those adopted at the January meeting of the Local Government Alliance members. Supporting the Local Government Alliance members in their election campaigns.</p> <p>Summary of the work done and the results achieved in the local elections – the convention of the members of the Local Government Agreement.</p>
Until one month after the local elections	<p>The basis for financing the activities of the Local Governmental Agreement would be:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – up to the provincial level, own funds of the entities forming the Agreement, – above the provincial level, funds of the National League obtained from the organisation of national conferences, income from sales of the national publication (ordered by self-governments „controlled” by members of the Agreement). <p>Travel costs to the events organised at the national level are covered by the members of the Agreement on their own.</p>

Source: Own elaboration based on (*Projekt...*, n.d.).

There were two goals for the new party: the main goal and a stage goal. The first was to create a party capable of achieving 20-30% public support in the 2005 parliamentary elections. The second was closely related to the local government elections of 2002 and assumed electoral success. The characteristic feature that allowed for the creation of a new political party was the so-called „opening balance”, which consisted of the defeat of the right-wing and centre-right political parties, including the decomposition of the RS AWS, the Conservative-Popular Party, the Christian National Union and the Alliance of Polish Christian Democrats; as well as the consolidation under a common (future) banner of the existing local government movements that were electoral platforms in the local government elections of 2002, united by the will to create a common programmatic platform (*Projekt...*, pp. 2–3).

The concept for establishing the Local Government Alliance as a political party included a detailed strategy laid out in 2001–2002. Preparations for its formation were to officially begin in October 2001. From October to December 2001, the National League and its local branches were to bring together as many future members as possible and hold the first meetings to prepare programme documents.

At the beginning of 2002, it was planned to conduct the first nationwide meeting of members of the Local Government Alliance, and from February 2002, to actively support them during the election campaign. Only at the end of the local government campaign (November–December 2002), it was planned to organise a national convention of all members in order to summarise the achieved results, as well as to undertake further actions for party development (these details are summarised in Table 1) (*Projekt...*, pp. 3–4).

The above solutions did not live to see implementation for three reasons. Firstly, because the leader of the National League was actively involved in the working meetings preceding the creation of the Social Initiative „Local Government Community”. Second, the project came too late to the National League office, preventing its practical implementation. Third, at this stage of the National League’s activity, its members were again not interested in creating a political party. It was not until subsequent proposals to form an actual local government party that this changed.

The third concept emerged after the local government elections in 2002 and was related to the electoral success achieved by the Social Initiative “Local Government Community” in the local government elections of 2002 (Kapsa & Wrona, 2021, pp. 269–270). The involvement of the National League and Wspólnota Samorządowa in those elections led to gathering under the common banner of an electoral committee of more than a thousand representatives of local authorities and candidates for aldermen, mayors and city presidents.

Not wanting to waste the potential that the “Local Government Community” had at its disposal, its coordinator and the chairman of the National League, T. Wrona, organised several meetings to give answers about the further direction of activity and the possible formalisation of the social movement. They took place on: November 30, 2002 in Warsaw (“What next for the Local Government Community?”); January 11, 2003 in Częstochowa

(“Local Leaders the Hope of the Third Republic”); and January 22, 2003 (with plenipotentiaries of the “Local Government Community”) in Warsaw. Neither brought any answers about the future (Kapsa & Wrona, 2021, pp. 271–276). The discussion moved from the central level to the voivodship level on February 12, 2003. Grażyna Sićko, media plenipotentiary of KWW “Local Government Community”, prepared a survey consisting of three questions concerning preferences and expectations for further cooperation: 1) “Local Government Community” should maintain its current formula while expanding its field structures”; 2) “If so, should “Local Government Community”, after expanding its field structures, look for a coalition partner?”; 3) “Local Government Community”, after building strong field structures, should transform into a party” (Ankieta, 2003, pp. 1).

From the information obtained directly from G. Sićko it is known that more than 1000 completed questionnaires were returned to the seat of the Self-Governing Community of Mazowieckie Voivodship (*Interview with Grażyna Sićko*, 2018). Many answers referred to creating a political party, but most respondents did not accept them. Once again, in a self-government environment, the option of formalising the “Self-government Community” as an entity of supra-party character with extensive field structures won. All information in this respect was passed to the coordinator T. Wrona, which resulted in establishing an association called Social Initiative “Local Government Community” in September 2003.

The fourth and last concept related to the real possibility of creating a local government party emerged in connection with the elections to the European Parliament in 2004 and the National League’s joining the centre-right electoral committee called the National Electoral Committee formed, among others, on Maciej Płażyński initiative. This Committee gathered several hundred members, mainly from the former AWS, including numerous local government officials. It was founded on the idea of introducing its own representation to the European Parliament and establishing a new political party representing the broadly defined local government circles. However, the Committee failed to cross the electoral threshold and gained only 1.56% of support. The idea to unite the local government circles was revived only at the turn of 2009 and 2010, which was directly related to Maciej Płażyński’s plans to run in the presidential elections. Talks on this topic were conducted, among others, by T. Wrona and were to concern not only with the support given to the future candidate but also with the possibility of managing the electoral committee in the form of its further evolution towards a political party. The decision on Płażyński participation in presidential elections was to be officially announced in April 2010 and was preceded by his participation in the celebrations of the 70th anniversary of the Katyń massacre. This politician died on April 10, 2010 due to the plane crash of the Polish TU-154 plane in Smoleńsk, which made it impossible to take any actions related to the discussed issue.

Summary

Both behind-the-scenes and official talks held among local government officials on the possibility of formally establishing a political party failed to materialise for several reasons. First, each time such a proposal was officially put forward, the dominant formula was the formation of supra-party entities, which, in the opinion of representatives of local governments gathered in the National League and then in the Social Initiative “Local Government Community”, was the “strength” of the created association and their strongest characteristic. Secondly, from the analyses presented, it appears that there was no distinctive leader who would skillfully bring the submitted idea to fruition. Third, the lack of decision-making power at the national level of the structures in question led to the marginalisation of the concept.

The hypothesis posed in the introduction of this paper was verified positively. The National League, as an active political entity, being a member of a broad social movement and then an electoral committee, co-governing Poland in 1997–2001, had all the possible instruments to transform the association into an authentic grassroots political party both in the initial period of its formation and at the peak of its activity. A major argument against forming such a party was the association members’ fears of even greater partisanship of local government. It meant that transforming the association into a party would negate building this institution “from below” without any political parties’ participation but with the citizens’ support. Therefore, the existence of a local government party was not desirable, and its possible formation would only benefit those who intended to seek nationwide representation in parliament. A local government party would certainly represent a “certain”, hard-to-measure quality on the political scene due to its membership base and the potential electorate. It would also be a serious competitor for other political parties and electoral committees in local environments. Given the lack of an officially formed grouping of this nature, it is difficult to determine unequivocally how it would fare. Certainly, the activity of a local government party would be an interesting case for further dissertations and scientific analysis.

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