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EUROPEAN FUNDS AS A NEW TOOL OF A LOCAL AUTHORITY. SELECTED CASE STUDIES OF MUNICIPAL LEADERS.

Europeanization processes taking place in Poland have an impact on various areas and subjects of social life. An important direction of studies of these processes relates to their conduct and performance at the local level. Particularly interesting is one aspect of Europeanization, involving the use of EU funds. The emergence of EU funds has had a visible impact on various areas of life and actors at the local level, resulted in a significant extension of the tasks, but the actual making power of local government. In the analysis of transformation of local political cultures account for an important part in the activities undertaken by individual local actors of the ruling elite. Opening up new sources of funding has created a new instrument of power, has opened new possibilities for action, but also new areas of conflict, control, responsibility for local government entities. Two cases of urban leaders discussed in the article demonstrate that political actors may adopt different strategies to aid funds. Referring to the concept of R. Merton, they can take a more local orientation or present the characteristics of a cosmopolitan leader. The content of the effectiveness of strategies adopted by the municipal leaders to use EU funds depends on the functioning of the city's political culture, a system of forces and practices. European funds do not appear so in a vacuum, do not also create a completely new reality. Be implemented in the field of urban policy, where there they found the actors, relationships, values and modify them, but it is difficult to consider them as a factor that causes rapid, revolutionary change.

Key words: Europeanization, EU funds, a local authority, city leaders, urban policy

1. INTRODUCTION¹

The processes of Europeanization taking place in Poland have got the impact on the various areas and subjects of social life. The important direction of the research on these processes concerns their course and characteristics at the local level. As writes Joanna Kurczewska, the particularly valuable cognitive approach is based on the understanding of Europeanization as the social and cultural process. (Kurczewska 2008: 40) This approach:

(...) applies both to objectified social structures, as well as to the various forms of individual and collective consciousness. In this approach, Europeanization (...) is the complex system of many processes with its own logic of action, processes that interpenetrate themselves to form a variety of configurations of institutions and values (Kurczewska 2008: 36).

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Particularly interesting is one of the specific aspects of Europeanization associated with the use of the funds. The emergence of these measures has had a significant impact on various areas of life and social actors at the local level. It resulted in significant extensions of the tasks but also the extension of the actual power of a local government, therefore the field of interest concerned with the local political and cultural changes taking place in its relation to the processes of raising of the European Union funds is worthy of investigation.

Local political cultures can be understood, as writes Jacek Kurczewski, as „local and regional differences of practices that is accepted ways of political action”. Activities related to the raise and use of the EU funds are new types of political actions initiated at the local level which can be described as new local political practices (Kurczewski 2007: 9). In the analysis of the changes of local political cultures the important part is the efforts of various local bodies of the ruling local power elite. The opening of the new funding sources has created for them a new instrument of power, has opened new possibilities for actions, but also new areas of conflict, control and responsibility.

Joanna Kurczewska emphasizes the importance of the studies on local elites for the understanding of the processes of Europeanization – „A researcher should focus on the behaviour of local elites” because of their „cognitive uniqueness” compared to the other actors of the social change” (Kurczewska 2008: 28). Studies of these elites, their roles and responsibilities, including the pro- and anti-European roles „allow to discerning their continuation, imitation or modification their life orientations and behaviour of other members of the community (...)” (Kurczewska 2008: 41).

The theses and questions about the process of Europeanization and its impact on the change of a local political culture should relate to the reality of cities, which, due to their specific socio-spatial specificity are particularly interesting subjects of research. In this context in the focus of attention are actions of city leaders – presidents and mayors.

The basis for determining the president or the mayor as the „leader of the city” is primarily a local government legislation which intends direct election for these positions, and grants them privileges that allow them to perform the key role in a city policy. Very important are also the other criteria, such as the style of power, achievements, popularity, ability to formulate and force through their vision of a city policy, the ability to mobilize other citizens to the activity and cooperation.

In this point of the paper it may be useful to recall the concept of Robert K. Merton, who uses the term „influential people”, „influencing people”, as those who listen to others, whose opinion is important to other people, especially in a decision-making situation (Merton 2002: 427, 430). Robert Merton focuses on the specific type of influence – the ‘personal’ influence, „in the form of explanation and advice, as well as a role model” and notes that „(...) positions in the class, power, and prestige hierarchy increase the potential influence but do not determine its actual scope” (Merton 2002: 458). From the point of view of the research, formulated by R. Merton’s concept of the two basic types of people having an influence – a „local” and a „cosmopolitan” type, seems to be inspiring (Merton 2002: 431)

The basic criterion for distinguishing between these two types of orientation are the communities they live in².

The different orientations are associated with the different resources which form the basis for a large personal influence of individuals:

(...) an influential man with a cosmopolitan orientation gains supporters, because he knows and he can; a man with a local attitude – because he understands. The first one is wanted due to his professional skills and experience, the second one – due to his great understanding of intangible, but emotionally significant details (Merton 2002: 442–443).

This paper attempts to answer the question about the impact of the European Union aid funds on actions and positions of municipal leaders, and the role that their politics play in their projects related to the raising and use of these funds. Helpful to capture these phenomena seems to be the identification of goals and strategies which are undertaken by the municipal leaders and an analysis of their relations with the other social actors.

The history of the activities of the Polish authorities and leaders of cities in the raising and use of aid funds is intense but relatively short. Therefore, it seems that a valuable starting point to capture and understand the transformation of local (municipal) political cultures can be constructed with case studies related to specific local communities. With understanding the processes which take place in a particular local area it is opened the possibility to ask questions and formulation of research problems of a more general nature. The basis for the search for answers to these questions in this paper will be two case studies of leaders from Podkarpackie Voivodeship – the president of Rzeszów and the mayor of Dębica in the first years of the integration of Poland in the European Union.

2. EU FUNDS IN THE POLICIES OF THE CITY LEADER IN RZESZÓW

The president of Rzeszów since 2002 has been Tadeusz Ferenc, who took power in the early 90's in the city considered to be a right-wing one, being a former member of the communist party and activist of the post-communist left-wing in the city. He has gained a unique popularity among the inhabitants of the city. It can be seen as the result of his personal characteristics that have shaped his activity. He strengthened his image as a strong man, sometimes even unceremoniously treating subordinated officials but also demonstrating understanding of

² R. Merton writes about this in the following way: „the concerns of the locally oriented people are largely limited to their particular community. Busy with their local problems they take a very little attention to the wider community, events on the national and international level... The cosmopolitans are the opposite group. Rovere interests them only to some extent... But they are also oriented to the outside world ... and perceive themselves as the integral part of this world. They live in Rovere but actually they live in the Great Society” (Merton 2002: 433). In the light of the above mentioned fragment, the approach presented by Merton, with the perception of influential people as interpreters of information on public, domestic and foreign affairs (as opposed to others who are only recipients of this information) seems to be interesting (Merton 2002: 431).

the needs of „ordinary people”. He has become famous due to the rapid response to requests and complaints of residents and his open style of life (Nijander-Dudzińska 2008: 92–93).

The term of Tadeusz Ferenc coincided with the Polish accession to the EU and the inflow of the aid funds. It made possible for him to initiate and carry out investments that improved the situation in the areas perceived by the people as being particularly problematic, such as roads and public transport and environmental conservation. During his first term the EU funds were mainly dedicated to these purposes. Similar projects dominated the spending of funds in the next term. However, it can be observed that the practices and effects of the use of aid funds by the president’s team have often become the subject of debate and criticism from the opposition and the local media. The charges were primarily related to the delay in the implementation of the projects, however, the protests were not particularly intense and effective³.

The president’s team policy regarding the collection and use of the EU funds can be considered as successful. It can be provided with high, even leading position of Rzeszów in the rankings on the use of the aid funds constructed by the external research institutions⁴.

The increasing activity in the raising and use of the EU funds led to an increase in the debt by Rzeszów and this fact has become the next object of criticism from the opposition. At the end of 2010, the city’s debt was just over 268 million PLN what accounted for 38,4% of the city’s income⁵. Using Paul Swianiewicz’s categorization that was not the basis for rating Rzeszów to the category of the „highly indebted governments” that is, whose debt had exceeded 60% (Swianiewicz 2010). The president acknowledged loans as a necessary means for the development of the city⁶.

The use of EU funds affected the dynamic development of the urban investments. As a result, between 2002 and 2010 it was possible to solve problems that previously teams were not able to deal, mainly because of the lack of financial possibilities before the Polish

³ The examples of the activities critically assessed by the opposition and the press is the issue of oversight by the officials the return date of the request for a transfer to the following year unspent money from the state budget. First, overlooked the fact that the city has granted 4 million PLN to build a ring road, and then was the submission to the Ministry of Finance for a transfer of funds to the following year delayed by one day; (Bujara 2008, 2010).

⁴ In the ranking „The use of foreign funds”, published by the Local Government Letter „Community” in 2007, Rzeszów took the high fourth position among the provincial towns in the category of use of total foreign funds per capita. In the next rankings Rzeszów held a high position. In 2010 „Community” published ranking, in which this time were taken into account all the funds raised from the European Union since Polish accession to the EU (since 2004). Rzeszów took first place among the cities which possess the county rights. In the published statement of the Union of Polish Metropolises (2006) Rzeszów was ranked relatively well, also in the category of the 12 largest cities in terms of the use of EU funds for investments per capita. The sum of 1 thousand PLN was comparable to those results reached by Warsaw, Poznań and Łódź, and much higher than Białystok, Katowice and Lublin (Swianiewicz 2010; ART 2007; Bujara 2006).

⁵ During the debate on the city budget in 2009, the president answering to the criticism from the oppositionary Law and Justice on this issue, said: „The debt has increased, but even more increased the budget of the city. Six years ago, the debt was 31,5 percent of the city. It is exactly the same” (Gernand 2008: 1).

⁶ In the interview on the proposal of the Minister of Finance to reduce government debt, he said: „Nobody takes credit for his own pleasure. They take it in order to develop the city, the formation of its new investments that provide new jobs, additional income tax to the budget” (ibidem).

accession to the EU. It had mainly affected renovations and the extension of urban roads. Spectacular achievements in this field almost entirely were dedicated to President Ferenc, who was nicknamed „the president asphalt” (Gernand 2008: 1). In the second term of President, especially during electoral campaigns appeared the voices of the very small share of investment in the field of culture, recreation and sport. However, it did not affect the outcome of the elections in 2010, which once again were won by the incumbent president.

3. DĘBICA – THE STUDY OF THE CONFLICT WITH EUROPEAN FUNDS IN THE BACKGROUND

In 2006, as a result of the direct election of the mayor of Dębica, Paweł Wolicki, the candidate of Prawo i Sprawiedliwość⁷ (*Law and Justice*) took the position of mayor of this city. New and young (thirty four years old) mayor has had the experience of working as a manager and also experience of working in the local government as a counselor. He has gained large support among voters in Dębica, what also may be proved with the fact, that in the elections to the city council, in which he also started, he received the most number of votes of all the successful candidates – 13, 95%⁸.

The first three years of his term in the office of the local government of Dębica were harmonic, and in the cooperation between the mayor and the city council were not present any major conflicts. The mayor of the city council could count on the support of the majority of the twelve counsellors⁹. This balance of power allowed the mayor relative freedom in his urban policy. His activity was characterized by the noticeable investments, which was possible largely thanks to the activity which the mayor and his team showed in the raising of European funds. In the period 2006–2010 the amount of these funds was about 50 million PLN. The most important project is the accomplishment or initialization of the investments in the city, where the most spectacular investment was the design of the large swimming pool complex¹⁰.

At the beginning of 2010 (the last year of his term and the year of local elections), the Dębica’s local government scene was dominated for a few months by the rapid and loud conflict within the municipal bodies. On the one side of the barricade was the mayor and his supporters in the council, (they lost the majority in this body), on the other – the group of councillors of the opposition known as the „thirteen”. The conflict broke out when the mayor presented the draft of the budget for 2011. The draft was rejected by the city council as a project dangerously increasing the debt of the city – the proposed level of debt was 55% and according to the opposition it approached the limit of the law of 60%. The mayor was accused of prodigality and of exposing the financial security of the city. There were also some opinions of the „election” and „populist” character of the budget. The mayor argued that the loan is necessary in order to take advantage of a unique opportunity created by the aid funds. He

⁷ PKW data, www.pkw.gov.pl

⁸ Ibidem.

⁹ Ibidem.

¹⁰ The list of investments and projects can be found on the mayor’s website www.pawel-wolicki

anticipated the implementation of the anti-debt programme in the near future when EU aid funds would expire (Oskarbski i Sroka 2010).

In January 2010 the draft budget was submitted to the Regional Audit Office in Rzeszów which initially had presented a negative opinion on the draft budget resolution, and after its rejection prepared its own draft in which were eliminated almost all the planned investments, including those ones that were in progress, on which ones the magistrate acquired the EU funds and the projects where contracts have already been signed with contractors. The mayor warned that the cancel of the investment could lead to the loss of EU funds and the inability to acquire new ones in the future. The culmination of the conflict over the budget took place in March 2010 when the mayor and his team resigned (Ewe 2010; Kopa 2010; Kowalski 2010). During the remaining time of the term the duties of the mayor were fulfilled by the representative of the government – Mariusz Szewczyk (Sroka 2010).

The analysis of the conflict in Dębica, and particularly its origins, leads to the other aspect of the impact of the Europeanization process on municipal political life. This is the aspect of the loss of the majority by the mayor in the city council, as the result of the conflict between him and the chairman of the city council. The chairman is the father of a well-known journalist, a nationwide television star, who has repeatedly declared publicly his connections with his home city and his intention to promote its development. He wanted to achieve it by attracting to Dębica an investor from Germany (EU), who planned to build a supermarket in the city. The agreement on the location of the investment was not achieved, ultimately rejected by the mayor's decision what, according to some observers, resulted in the leaving the coalition by the chairman and his critical attitude towards further action of the leader (Galek 2010a).

4. EU AID FUNDS AS THE INSTRUMENT OF POWER OF MUNICIPAL LEADERS

An analysis of the activities of the municipal leaders in Rzeszów and Dębica undertaken in the face of the use of the European funds can form the basis of a few observations on the characteristics and changes in the field of the municipal policy.

The examples of the president of Rzeszów („the asphalt president”) and the mayor of Dębica (the author of the vision of the future of the city as a sports centre), the availability of EU funds increases the chances of local leaders to formulate and implement their own original vision of the development of the city, for which they take responsibility, and their career and political future depends on the success of these plans.

The presented cases show fact that local political actors may adopt different strategies towards aid funds.

For the president of Rzeszów these funds were simply a cash injection, and the president as the popular and powerful leader had considerable freedom in their use. His personality „covered” the money, the completed projects were primarily the investments made by Tadeusz Ferenc, their „Europeanism” seemed to be less important. Referring to the mentioned

above typology of Merton, the orientation of the leader can be considered as the local one. The strategy adopted by this orientation seems to support and maintain the image of the role of the locally oriented man. Mayor of Dębica, as we can assume, has used urban investment from the EU funds to build his own core of political power and the image of a young, dynamic manager, with the vision of a modern city. He has got features of „cosmopolitan” in the Merton’s typology, but his strategy is ambiguous. We can see the „cosmopolitan qualities” in his actions and personality. Their expansive presentation gives the impression that the leader is trying to overcome the perceived uncertainty among local influential people, having a similar local orientation and taking a strong and stable position in local society.

Differences in the strategies adopted by the leaders in the field concerning the use of municipal funds seem to be reflected in their official speeches. President Ferenc presents the completed projects primarily as his personal success. He speaks about „funds”, „quotas”, etc., and their „Europeanism” seems to be almost hidden. The exception is the often emphasis on the high position of Rzeszów in the rankings and charts determined by external research institutions. In the statements of the mayor of Dębica the European funds are permanently present, their „raising” is presented as the success in itself. His frequent use of specialised terminology can be interpreted as a conscious emphasis of his high level of competence in this field and using colloquialisms, such as „cash from the EU” can be considered as the tool used to emphasize pragmatism and fluent knowledge of this complicated issue.

The presented strategies are different in terms of efficiency. The president of Rzeszów, experienced, popular, having a safe and disposable political basis, pragmatically used the raised money, without focusing on the details and underestimating the accusations. It does not seem that the attempts of the critical evaluation of his policies undertaken by the opposition and the municipal media have undermined his position as a leader, unless we recognize the fact that in 2010 he has begun his third term in office with a little worst election result than four years earlier.

The mayor of Dębica, who acted in a different political context, without significant public support or secure political base in the city council, experienced resistance to the plans of implementation of his investment ideas, and the projects involving European funds have become the most evident cause of the political crisis and the loss of his power in the city. The mayor won re-election to the position of mayor in 2010, but under different conditions. In the second round of the elections only 172 votes decided about his winning with the mayor (on behalf of the government) Mariusz Szewczyk, who represents Platforma Obywatelska (*Civic Platform*) (Galek 2010b).

An analysis of the presented cases showed that the content and effectiveness of the strategies adopted by the leaders of the city towards the use of EU funds depends on the functioning of the city’s political culture, the balance of powers and accepted practices. As it was shown in the example of Dębica local political practices overlap (and „thicken” emotionally) social, family and personal relationships and values. European funds do not appear in a vacuum, they also do not create a completely new reality. They are introduced in the field of urban policy, where there can be found the actors, relationships, values and modify it, but it is difficult to perceive them as a factor which causes rapid and revolutionary changes.

5. SUMMARY

The need to search for the essence of these modifications, as well as the places and relations in which they are most significant for a social life is an interesting area of research within a frame of the broader trend of reflection on the process of Europeanization. The presented case studies can be the basis for the formulation of hypotheses and research problems.

The appearance of European funds has opened up the possibility, or even the need, for the existence of new local actors of the political practices. One of the related problems concerns the generational change. Young local politicians have got a chance to use the European projects for the construction of their political positions, demonstrating their higher competence in the specialized field than their older competitors. In this way, the generational change on the local political scene can take place more rapidly, but it is not possible to doubt its inevitability. This problem also focuses attention on the officials involved in the „handling” of projects. Although, they are less visible than politicians they are essential in the processes of a municipal policy, and the success or failure of a leader depends largely on the actions of his „team”. Their knowledge and skills make them possible important opportunities of influence, hence the interest in the point of their views and aspirations, as well as relations that link them to politicians.

European funds launch new strategies used by social actors in power at the local level. Therefore, questions arise about the methods of their construction, sources of inspiration, content, social perception, efficiency and its determinants. Remarkable are also the transformation of language and rituals used in local politics.

The inflow of EU funds dedicated to projects at the local level is inspired by the question if it results in the actual empowerment of the local government in relation to central authorities. However, increasing debt resulting from the need to obtain funds to cover their own contribution has shown that the system of local government and finance in Poland is still very much connected with the whole system of finance and state policy. It means that the process of investigation on Europeanization research at the local level still needs to take into account the context of the state.

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FUNDUSZE EUROPEJSKIE JAKO NOWE NARZĘDZIE WŁADZY LOKALNEJ.
WYBRANE PRZYPADKI LIDERÓW MIEJSKICH

Procesy europeizacji zachodzące w Polsce wywierają wpływ na różnorodne obszary i podmioty życia społecznego. Istotny kierunek badania tych procesów dotyczy ich przebiegu i charakterystyki na poziomie lokalnym. Na szczególne zainteresowanie zasługuje zwłaszcza aspekt europeizacji związany z wykorzystywaniem unijnych środków pomocowych. Pojawienie się środków pomocowych UE wywarło widoczny wpływ na różnorodne obszary i podmioty życia na poziomie lokalnym. Spowodowało istotne rozszerzenie zakresu zadań, ale i faktycznych kompetencji władz samorządu lokalnego. W analizie przemian lokalnych kultur politycznych istotne miejsce przypada działaniom podejmowanym przez poszczególne podmioty lokalnej elity władzy. Otwarcie nowych źródeł finansowania stworzyło nowy instrument władzy, otworzyło nowe możliwości działania, ale i nowe obszary konfliktu, kontroli, odpowiedzialności dla podmiotów władzy lokalnej. Omówione w artykule przypadki dwóch liderów miejskich ukazują, że aktorzy polityczni mogą przyjmować różne strategie wobec funduszy pomocowych. Odwołując się do koncepcji Roberta Mertona, należy zauważyć, że mogą oni przyjmować orientację bardziej lokalną lub prezentować cechy lidera kosmopolitycznego. Treść i skuteczność przyjmowanych przez liderów miejskich strategii dotyczących wykorzystywania funduszy europejskich zależy od funkcjonującej w danym mieście kultury politycznej, układu sił i przyjętych praktyk. Fundusze europejskie nie pojawiają się więc w próżni, nie tworzą także całkowicie nowej rzeczywistości. Zostają wprowadzone do miejskiej polityki, gdzie działają aktorzy i istnieją określone relacje oraz wartości, i modyfikują je, ale trudno uznać je za czynnik wywołujący gwałtowne, rewolucyjne zmiany.

Słowa kluczowe: europeizacja, fundusze UE, władza lokalna, lider miejski, polityka miejska