

Patron State. Relations between Power and Dependence in a Small, Local Community

Twenty years after the establishment of local government in Poland at the level of rural and urban municipalities, the phenomenon of mayors, i.e., the heads of such communities, being repeatedly re-elected to the same office was raised. The reasons behind this prolongation of power were discussed. Some political parties, such as Prawo i Sprawiedliwość and Ruch Palikota (Law and Justice; Palikot's Movement), submitted proposed legislation to the Polish Parliament to limit the terms of offices for the representatives in local government holding positions of executive power. However, this proposal did not go beyond the stage of plenary talk either in 2011 or 2012. The main argument in favor of term limits concerns pathologies existing at the local level including nepotism, corruption, and the lack of citizen control of the local authorities. On the other hand, opponents believe that this approach is undemocratic. After all, it is the local community who has the right to choose its representative; and it is only in the hands of the community to limit their mandate. If a local community repeatedly places its trust in a candidate, it only indicates their positive perception.

The phenomenon of a multiple-term tenure system at the level of rural and urban municipalities was also the reason for starting this project. Its main purpose was to examine the relationship between how local citizens' imagine the role of the state and how they perceive the local authority. I aimed at becoming acquainted with the local citizens' points of view on actions, relations, and mechanisms observed in their environment. I was interested in the ways in which representatives of small communities think, rather than verifying or assessing of the validity of these observations.

The theoretical proposal of this work is the concept of the patron state. It is a fusion of popular ideas about the state and the representatives of the local authority who personify these ideas. In this construct, I suggest viewing the state (power)-citizen relationship as parallel to the patron-client relationship. This asymmetrical relation at the local level is expressed by the dependency between power and dependence. The discursive manifestations of the patron-client phraseology have a bearing on the de facto functioning informal relations in the local community, which cover not only links within the local elite, but primarily between this elite and the residents. Thus, they represent a kind of guarantee of stability and continuity of power in the area.

The concept of the patronal state is not a predetermined theoretical category verified in a particular community. On the contrary, in accordance with the methodological assumptions of the Grounded Theory, it emerged from the various data gathered in the course of the study (in-

depth interviews, participant observation, analysis of the local press, statistical data, and netnography). The picture of the state created by the participants of the study emerged during conversations concerning the operation of the local government in the context of its evaluation, structures, and the expectations of the local citizens. The functioning model of the state was, in their opinions, the opposite of the locally construed authority-citizen model they experienced. Previously formed behavioral patterns are, therefore, evaluated and compared with those that “happen” at the central level.