“Citizen and His Role in Shaping the Political System” – Report from the Third Polish Conference of Chairs and Departments of Political Systems, April 3–4, 2014 Ostromecko near Bydgoszcz

by Zuzanna Osmólska

The Third Polish Conference of Chairs and Departments of Political Systems was held in the Palace in Ostromecko near Bydgoszcz on April 3–4. This time this event was organized by the Chair of the Political System of the Republic of Poland of the Faculty of Political Sciences and International Studies at the Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń in cooperation with The Fund for International Cooperation Support n.a. Professor Czesław Mojsiewicz, Adam Marszałek Publishing House, and Eastern Studies Center. The event was held under the scientific patronage of the Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń and Polish Political Science Association, while PiK Radio provided media patronage. Prof. Danuta Plecka (NCU) acted head of science, while Zuzanna Osmólska, MA, Katarzyna Miętkiewicz, MA and Paweł Jaroniak, MA were secretaries during the conference.

The organizers suggested “Citizen and His Role in Shaping the Political System” as main theme of this year’s meeting. The plan of the conference included two lectures of valued experts on political systems theory and discussions. Among the speakers were the outstanding experts on the subject matter: Prof. Andrzej Antoszewski from the University of Wrocław and
Prof. Tadeusz Godlewski from the Nicolaus Copernicus University¹. However, among participants were representatives of almost all university centres in Poland dealing with political systems. Amongst nearly fifty guests were scientists from the University of Warsaw, the University of Gdańsk, the University of Wrocław, the University of Silesia in Katowice, the University of Warmia and Mazury in Olsztyn, the University of Łódź, the Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin, the University of Rzeszów, the University of Zielona Góra, the Kazimierz Wielki University, the University of Szczecin, the Pedagogical University of Cracow, the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, the Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw, and, of course, the Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń.

The Third Polish Conference of Chairs and Departments of Political Systems was opened by Prof. Roman Bäcker – the Dean of the Faculty of Political Sciences and International Studies at the NCU and Chairman of the Polish Political Science Association, Adam Marszałek, Ph.D. – President of Marszałek Publishing Group and Prof. Danuta Plecka (NCU) – the head of science.

On the first day the organisers encouraged the participants to hear the lecture of Prof. Andrzej Antoszewski entitled “Political Systems Theory as a Contribution to Human Sciences”, in which the author addressed a lot of important issues for the political systems theoreticians. Among other things, he noticed the fact that experts in the field during their work often focus too much on legal deliberations and that contemplating legal norms replaces deliberation on the reality. Professor Antoszewski used the example of the conflict in Ukraine to show that we will not learn the origins of conflict and we will not be able to make any prognosis for its development, if we base only on analysis of law; an in-depth analysis of reality and informal rules is absolutely necessary.

This issue constituted one of the main subjects of discussion which was held after the lecture of Prof. Antoszewski and which was moderated by Prof. Michał Strzelecki. In this regard several statements merit special attention.

Waldemar Tomaszewski, Ph.D., University of Warmia and Mazury in Olsztyn: I find here a reference to the middle of the 19th century when constitutionalism was being formed, to Ferdynand Lassalle, who in his work *On the Essence of Constitutions* showed that the constitution, in order to be an actual normative act, should take into consideration the forces that function in the state in a given moment. Is it not the task of political science to determine what are forces these, how do they function,
how much real power do they have in the state, and so why constitutionalists should not use the experience and research of political scientists before they create laws?

Prof. Andrzej Antoszewski, University of Wrocław: Of course studying constitutional norms is an important matter for us, because it is a starting point. But this starting point tells us only about a certain desired standard of taking action. Meanwhile, if we are to say thus: constitutional law are norms that regulate behaviours of entities in politics; then apart from these constitutional norms informal rules play an extremely important role. I refer to informal rules, such as certain regularities manifesting themselves in a recurrence of some behaviours, which, however, are neither created nor communicated nor learnt via formal channels, but they are, they exist. We can show numerous examples of such informal rules which are in practice applied in political life. And now a question to constitutionalists arises: how do they react to it? How is it possible to change these informal rules? In order to know how to change them it is necessary to know why they usually come into existence. They come into existence probably due to the fact that legal structures are imperfect, incomplete, too expensive to be applied, etc. It is certainly a field of study for us and then it is possible, of course in agreement with constitutionalists, to suggest: it will not work, because we already know that people in such situations behave in this way, so there you are. Therefore, we must take into consideration a number of factors that the law is not able to directly take into account, for example, the character of political culture of the Polish people (I do not refer to the level, only to specific properties of this culture), the character of Polish traditions – what we value and what we do not value in the past. These are very important signs that to some extent allow us to predict how people will behave in certain situations. Therefore these informal rules are a large field of study for researchers of political systems.

Marcin Jastrzębski, Ph.D., Kazimierz Wielki University in Bydgoszcz: I think that such a cooperation and co-sharing exist. Referring, for example, to Lassalle, the textbooks on constitutional law discuss his concepts. The most well-known constitutionalists, such as Prof. Garlicki, Prof. Winczorek or Prof. Sarnecki – they very extensively discuss informal issues and they do not limit themselves strictly to constitutional norms.

Amongst many other issues addressed in the discussion it is important to mention a subject that is equally important for the main theme of the conference: the problem of understanding citizenship, defining citizenship, civil rights, and civil identity from the point of view of political science.
Prof. Tadeusz Godlewski, Ph.D. Hab., Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń: There is a certain problem in political science with distinguishing man and citizen. However such a distinction exists […]. In international matters the basis for intervention or non-intervention may be the protection of human rights, which means that there is some nuance, not only when it concerns the sovereignty of other states. But there is more to it than that. There is also the phenomenon of migration which applies to persons who live in a society, do not have citizenship, but they would be interested in participating even in creation of law that is applicable to them. Of course, there is the question whether it is possible to measure the openness of a political system with the criterion of attitude towards people, which is a wider criterion than citizens, or whether we shall choose to measure openness with regard to citizens, who have rights and participate in legitimizing authorities, controlling authorities, etc. However, assuming that in the context of the phenomenon of migration and globalization we talk about citizens of Europe, the world, it is very telling. Perhaps the notion of “a citizen of Europe” means more than “a person from Europe”, for instance, our passports are signed by the European Union. However, there are a few problems that do not allow us to equal man and citizen.

Prof. Andrzej Antoszewski, University of Wrocław: Civic attitude and civil identity are notions that are not really a subject of deeper reflection. We know what national or religious identity is, but civil identity? If we were to ask, to gain some insight (such a research was, as a matter of fact, conducted and is quoted by, for example, Jacek Raciborski in one of his books on citizenship), it is revealed that our civilness after 1989 looks more or less like this: we gained the right to “mouth off ” about the authorities – and we use it, we gained the right to choose – half of us does, but this is not connected with gaining the right to decide on our own matters. And now, if we look closer to the research findings of the Public Opinion Research Center on our attitude to democracy and self-government in a longer time period, it turns out that democracy is a wonderful idea, but does it function well in Poland? No, it functions very poorly. Do we want to take matters into our own hands? No, we do not. Our citizenship still has a demanding attitude, but since we want to be citizens, “citizen” is a proud sounding name, then we demand that our needs are finally met. It is of course a distorted understanding of citizenship and we stumble over it.

The last of the most interesting issues discussed in the first day of the conference, which is worthwhile to quote, is the subject of distinguishing many notions and categories applied in political systems
theory, with special reference to many metaphors that are not always understood correctly.

Magdalena Mikołajczyk, Ph.D., Pedagogical University of Cracow: My question regards the relationship or rather our intuitive feeling of the notions of political system and political stage. Since to this standard layer – of the public surrounding of the political system, diversified society, society with leaders, overactive individuals, passive society – an another strictly political mechanism is added, that is the decision-making mechanism, furthermore, there is still this “media mirror”, something that is communicative, we cannot see politics, we can see only its reflection. The examples that we cite are legal or media examples. We perceive politics in a grotesque mirror, because media show what they want to show, or what they are paid to show, or what the public demands to see. And this is the moment when the system becomes a stage, if there is such a transformation and not two completely alternative metaphors. Professor Antoszewski wrote the article *Polish Political Landscape- System or Chaos?*, is stage a system – can it be more organized, or perhaps these are two paradigms?

Prof. Andrzej Antoszewski, University of Wroclaw: Of course we apply theatre terminology very extensively; we have a political actor, political stage, political audience, and so on. It is sometimes only such a verbal adornment, but sometimes we may try to give it a more rigorous meaning, for example, in regard to stage – in literature there are political, bureaucratic, election, corporate, etc. arenas. These are spaces that are characterized by particular relationships that occur only within its boundaries; in this context it has its meaning. […] And everywhere where we say “system” we try to notice some long-lasting relationships that are repeatable and rather predictable, which change only in certain conditions. Among these theatre terms, the term “political actor” appears quite often. Here one should pay attention to somewhat neglected issue of veto players. I refer to the concept of Tsebelis who introduced this notion, but he understood it very formally as the one who has the power of veto, the right to animate certain audience. And here a question arises: who does perform the role of a veto player in a specific decision-making processes? For example, can the parliament be a veto player, if it is making decisions? Certainly it can […]. It is necessary to treat the role of a veto player very extensively, to think, in what situations we deal with a single player or a collective, when the society can play the part of a veto player – this is juggling categories. I talk about it to strongly emphasize the fact that very often we quarrel about categories. Of course in
terms of communication it is important to establish understanding of these categories [...] but the most important is the purpose we establish them for. They must be subordinated to the purposes of our research.

Many participants of the discussion also referred to methodological problems in researching political systems (Michał Słowikowski, Ph.D., University of Łódź; Michał Pierzgalski, Ph.D., University of Łódź) and the problem that Prof. Antoszewski mentioned in his lecture – distinguishing humanities from social sciences and incorporating political science into the latter (Michał Pierzgalski, Ph.D.; Marek Jarentowski, Ph.D., Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw). In the discussion also the problem of Ukrainian conflict, researching the political systems of post-authoritarian countries, and the political passivity of the Polish society also appeared.

During the second day of the conference the lecture “The Ruling and the Ruled – Civil Political Competence as a Criterion of Democracy” was given by Prof. Tadeusz Godlewski (NCU in Toruń). In his paper he presented the notion of civic political competence, their meaning for the consolidation of democracy, and how they shape the relationships between the ruling and the ruled. The discussion after the lecture was moderated by Prof. Katarzyna Sobolewska-Myślik (Pedagogical University of Cracow).

Amongst several issues discussed during the debate the subject of the influence of civic competence on the political activity was the most often recurring one.

Michał Słowikowski, Ph.D., University of Łódź: I think about the relationship between civic competence, knowledge, and political activity of electors and whether representatives of the political class indeed are interested in that we know more about politics and their programmes. I am under an impression that the more we know the more discouraged we become and the higher is the probability that we (as citizens) reach a conclusion that we no longer need politicians, but we need somebody who would efficiently manage the state [...]. An increase in competence and awareness can lead to a situation that politicians we will no longer be needed.

Prof. Tadeusz Godlewski, Nicolaus Copernicus University: It is very difficult to detect such a relationship. It is necessary to notice that the majority of citizens, even if they have competence in knowledge, giving their opinions or even deciding, they do not want to enter the realm of action, they do not want to posses this last competence – competence in political action.

In this context the issue of the relationship between the kind of political activity and activity of citizens was mentioned.
The discussants speculated whether civic political competence indeed were significant in this regard.

**Mariusz Popławski, Ph.D., Nicolaus Copernicus University:** I ponder over the connection between characteristics of competence, acquired competence, non-acquired competence and this proportion of citizens that participate in elections on different levels. It seems that in terms of competence the self-government elections are the most accessible, while the turnout for these elections is the lowest.

**Przemysław Maj, Ph.D., University of Rzeszów:** In my opinion, it is not that these citizens in self-government elections are stupid. They do not know how to vote and therefore the percentage of invalid votes is relatively high in comparison to, for example, presidential or parliamentary elections. If we consider self-government elections in the Podkarpackie Province in 2010, how is it possible to explain that citizens in election to provincial assembly in some communes gave 20–30% of invalid votes and in some cases this percentage was even higher, while in the election for commune administrator or commune council the percentage of invalid votes did not exceed 5%? If we find an answer to this question I think it will be the key to solving this riddle of invalid votes in self-government elections.

The participants of the discussion also mentioned the issues of deliberative democracy (Maria Winclawska, Ph.D., NCU in Toruń), civil budget (Prof. Ryszard Chruściak, University of Warsaw), using the institution of referendum as a mean to control the authorities (Tomasz Słomka, Ph.D., University of Warsaw), and the relationship between ideological identification and the level of acquired civic competence (Beata Słobodzian, Ph.D., University of Gdańsk).

Both lectures (given by Prof. Antoszewski and Prof. Godlewski) and two debates that lasted for several hours ideally matched the subject of the conference suggested by the organisers, which is extremely important, especially for researchers of political systems. The participants unanimously agreed that the issue of citizens and their role in shaping the political system is a subject often omitted in system research. Thus, the issues discussed during the conference certainly contributed to extending the knowledge and research perspective.

The initiative of an annual conference of chairs and departments of political systems meets with more and more enthusiasm of the interested parties. It is certainly a outstanding opportunity not only to exchange ideas, opinions and experience, but also to participate in a friendly meeting in the “systemic” circle and share deliberations on the essence of research on political systems in Poland. Such events
as the conference in Ostromecko certainly integrate the scientific community and initiate a number of scientific undertakings, thus enriching the Polish political science in the process.