

*Katarzyna Narkiewicz**
University of Zielona Góra

THE PROBLEM OF REFUGEES AS A FACTOR OF ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP OF INHABITANTS OF ZIELONA GÓRA

The article attempts to answer the question whether the migration crisis in Europe, and related to it, the issue of possible accepting in Poland refugees from Syria, Iraq and the North-African countries, can be considered as a factor of active citizenship of Poles. The research material covers the statements on accepting refugees that appeared in public space between September 2015, that is from the beginning of the debate on the possible measures of solving the migration crisis, and January 2017. That is also the time when other civic activities, both supporting and opposing the idea of accepting refugees, took place. The subject of analysis is a local community of Zielona Góra.

In the first part of the text statistical data on the Poles' citizenship is presented together with an attempt to interpret the observed situation from the historical perspective. The second part of the text consists of a simplified agenda of civic activities of Zielona Góra inhabitants induced by the notion of accepting in our country refugees from Syria, Iraq or the North-African countries. The final part of the article contains conclusions and attempts to answer if the problem of refugees really is a factor of civic activity of inhabitants of Zielona Góra and, in a wider perspective, of Poles.

In his work called *Sociology*, Anthony Giddens defines civic society as "a sphere of activity in the area between the state and economy, covering family, school, local associations and non-economic institutions"¹ (Giddens 2012, p. 1090). Therefore, this sphere covers any activities of the civic background. It can be observed that different societies are civic to a varying degree. Alexis de Tocqueville, the intellectual father of the concept of a civic society, admired stability of the American system (Tocqueville 1996). Civic society is also a phenomenon of the Protestant countries. The post-Communist countries, including Poland, aspiring to be democratic, also endeavor to elaborate civic standards. In the first years of political transformation, it seemed that among the former Communist countries, it was Poland who had the best start-up capital to build civic society. However, after the apogee of "Solidarity" movement, sociologists observe a distinctive decline in political and civic activity of Poles.

* Katarzyna Narkiewicz, PhD student at the Institute of Sociology, University of Zielona Góra, scientific interests: attitudes, migration crisis, youth and their attitudes towards newcomers kttkm@wp.pl.

¹ All quotations in the article translated by the author of the article.

The comparison of the official turnout in ten post-Communist countries (new members of the European Union) during parliamentary elections (all the compared countries have a parliamentary system) [...] shows that Poland is a definite outsider of the ranking – while the average turnout for the majority of states in the post-Communist period fluctuates around 60-70%, in Poland it is 47,31% (Czeźnik 2009, pp. 5-6).

The level of civic activity can be also measured by the number and size of non-governmental organizations. The Klon/Jawor Association, on the basis of the research, estimates that in Poland approximately 70% of organizations are really active. The others either suspended or terminated their activity without unregistering from the REGON register database. It means that in Poland there are circa a hundred thousand associations and foundations². The same research shows that the number of the registered associations and foundations varies depending on the region of Poland – the biggest number is in Mazovia, more than twenty thousand, half of which in Warsaw. More than ten thousand organizations are registered in each: Greater Poland, Lesser Poland, Silesia and Lower Silesia. Definitely, the least number of organizations is registered in the following voivodships: opolskie, lubuskie, podlaskie and świętokrzyskie – approximately 3-4 thousand in each (*Kondycja sektora...* 2015). According to the web-portal Lubuskie.pl one hundred forty nine non-governmental organizations are registered in Zielona Góra. They are supposed to act in the three areas: physical culture, culture, and social policy. Is that a lot or a little? The number of organizations per ten thousand inhabitants in three countries of Central and Eastern Europe varies from 125 in the Czech Republic via 63 in Hungary, to 32 organizations in Poland. “It means that in the states of our region, which are the natural points of reference for the situation of the sector in Poland, the rates of saturation with non-governmental organizations (possibly due to the smaller number of inhabitants) are two and four times higher than in our country” (*Baza danych NGO*).

While discussing the forms of civic activity it has to be noticed that the recent decades of 20th century and the beginning of the new millennium are perceived as time of important subjective and objective transitions within civic activity. In this context, among others, transformation of civic roles, rising new modalities of political communication are recalled [...]. In this context the power of individuals and groups forming society moves from specifically defined electoral and party roles to new, non-institutionalized forms of political and civic culture [...]. In other words, more and more often, the real power of individuals and groups within democratic societies slides towards the potential of disciplining the subjects who are depositaries of political power by citizens-consumers [...]. These relatively new hybrid forms of political-economic civic engagement are increasingly based upon symbolic activities: a media-tized visibility of certain issues increases its chances of occurrence in political agenda. Symbolic power (also understood literally as power of symbols) is one of the most important resources for

² The research “The situation of the NGO sector in Poland 2015” was conducted on a countrywide random sampling of 4 thousand associations and foundations.

citizens-consumers, thus the potential of creating and distributing symbolic representations of certain issues is connected with the growing status of media (Nowak 2013, pp. 4-5).

The virtual and real activity against signing the ACTA agreement, which took place in many European countries in 2012, can serve as an example of such realization of the idea of active citizenship. Within the recent two years, the issue of accepting refugees from Syria at civil war, Iraq, and the North-African countries has become an important element of public discourse in the states of the European Union.

Poles and migration – the historical background

The states which have been historically shaped over the centuries – mainly the Western European countries such as France, Germany, the United Kingdom or Benelux, adopt an intense assimilation policy towards the newcomers – they endeavor to incorporate them as quickly as possible. On the other hand, there are the countries which emerged from emigration themselves. These include the United States, Canada, Australia, Argentina or Brazil. Both groups have known the phenomenon of migration since the French Revolution – at that time mixed with slavery and colonialism. Polish people however, since the times of Poland's partitions (Great Emigration) have not been afflicted by mass migration – Poles knew deportations. The period of Partitions of Poland was the time of creating national programmes – establishing in 1887 two secret organizations is considered to be the beginning of national movement. These were: Polish League, formed by the January Uprising veteran Zygmunt Miłkowski, and the Zet Polish Youth Association, formed by Zygmunt Balicki. In 1893 radical activists of the League, under the leadership of Roman Dmowski, seized power in the organization through the coup, changed its name into National League, and formulated political programme based on the rules of pragmatism, effective organization of political work, and the ideology of nationalism. As the sociologist and culture expert Walter Żelazny notes “The Polish People's Republic (PRL) paradoxically inherited political national-democratic programme” (Żelazny 2016, p. 63). We, the Poles, also dealt with otherness, in the anthropological sense, until the termination of the Operation “Vistula”. Later, at the beginning of the 50-ties of the 20th century, the acceptance of 14 thousand Greek refugees was concealed from society. The communist authorities also kept secret pacification of ethnic minorities such as Kashubians, Polishchuks or expulsion of Masurians. A campaign against the Jews echoed in 1968. The PRL propaganda, by the means of comparison with the Second Polish Republic caught up in conflicts on grounds of nationality, imposed on society a conviction about the benefit of national and religious uniformity. As stated by the cited above Walter Żelazny

In the matter of so called ethnic uniformity there was almost complete agreement between State and Church, nowhere officially confirmed. One will not find in press or books published in

the period of PRL, any statements by Church officials on national issues going beyond political correctness of that time. On the other hand, the believers were constantly reminded from a pulpit about the only national formation acceptable in Poland: a Pole-Catholic (Żelazny 2016, p. 65).

The question therefore arises whether today, a quarter of a century after the political transformation, the mentality of Poles has changed in this regard? Is still a person who is not a Pole-Catholic perceived as a stranger, an enemy? Hence, can the issue of accepting in our country refugees from Syria, Iraq, and the North-African countries become an important factor of the civic activity of Poles?

Poland and migration – statistical data

Nobody precisely knows how many immigrants we have in Poland. The biggest group are undoubtedly the citizens of Ukraine. In the period from 1st January till 31st August 2015 Polish consular and diplomatic posts in Ukraine issued almost 600 thousand (597.511) visas for the citizens of this country. The political asylum was granted to two Ukrainian citizens (*Uchodźcy w Polsce...* 2016). Till the end of May 2016 the refugee status was granted to 42 persons, including 21 Syrian citizens, 4 Egyptians, 4 Chinese, 3 Iraqis, 2 Russians and 2 Ugandans (*ibidem*). The list of the most numerous citizenships in possession of valid residence permit has remained unchanged within the last three years. The current sequence looks as follows: Ukraine 84 thousand, Germany 23 thousand, the Republic of Belarus 11 thousand, Russia 10 thousand, Vietnam 9 thousand, Italy 7 thousand, China 6 thousand, France 5,5 thousand, the United Kingdom and Bulgaria 5 thousand each. The data do not cover persons residing in Poland with visas (*ibidem*).

The data quoted above indicates of the marginal extend of the immigration phenomenon in Poland. Apart from that, or possibly because of that, the migration crisis in Europe, and connected with it the issue of accepting refugees in Poland, have become the factor of civic activity of many Poles. Constantly, but with a varying intensity stimulated by events, the debate on accepting refugees goes on in public space. In Zielona Góra things look the same.

Migration crisis – a global and local context

From the very beginning of the migration crisis Pope Francis asked for help and compassion for refugees. Also the leaders of majority of the European Union countries urge for solidarity in dealing with the problem of refugees. The representatives of the local community, the main actors of local political and government scene as well as representatives of scientific and church communities, took different approach towards these requests. The problem of refugees also divided average members of local com-

munities who started to express their opinions individually or within civic initiatives. In this context, an increasing activity of the users of social media and the Internet also has to be noted.

Zielona Góra – the voices of aldermen

Responding to calls for help to the victims of war in Syria Adam Urbaniak, the Chairperson of the Municipal Council of the City, declares that Zielona Góra can “easily accept two families, offer them communal flats and help find a job [...]. He adds unintentionally that preferably these should be Christian families persecuted in Syria” (Zatorski 2015).

Robert Górski, an alderman by the city mayor Janusz Kubicki, firmly says “No”. He is accompanied by Jacek Budziński from Law and Justice (PiS). They both argue that we have enough poor people among our inhabitants. However, if we were to help “it should be Christian families to be accepted first. Muslims later, and after the thorough check out if they have no connections with the Islamic State” (*ibidem*).

Tomasz Nesterowicz from the Democratic Left Alliance (SLD) asked if we should accept them, answers “Definitely yes”. He argues that because a few millions of Poles emigrated because of economic motives, there are no reasons why we should refuse to help refugees. He expects that the government should declare if they want to accept them temporarily or for a longer stay, so that they “grow into our society with their culture” (*ibidem*). In the end he adds that, according to him, Zielona Góra would be able to accept several persons (*ibidem*).

What does the City Mayor say?

At the same time the services of lubuskie voivodship, on special request of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, were collecting data about the potential number of persons that could be accepted by the local governments. In 2015 only 4 out of 82 lubuskie municipalities declared their readiness for accepting a total of 17 refugees. These were the municipalities of: Bogdaniec, Kostrzyn nad Odrą, Krosno Odrzańskie and Zbąszynek. This short list of municipalities offering their help in finding places to live for refugees lacked the biggest cities – Zielona Góra and Gorzów Wielkopolski. “We are not prepared to accept the refugees. We don’t even have proper overnight accommodation. In Zielona Góra, the waiting list for flats is rather long. We don’t have workplaces” said Monika Wiśniewska from the Office of the Mayor of Zielona Góra (*Kilka lubuskich...* 2015). She added that Zielona Góra responded to the call of Cottbus – Zielona Góra’s partner city in Germany – which already hosts a big group of refugees. She declared sending there 180 beds, 200 sleeping bags and circa 300 blankets (*ibidem*).

On April 6, 2016, the city mayor Janusz Kubicki was answering the questions of “Gazeta Lubuska” readers. One of them asked “How many more (up till now, that is June 2017, the city has not accepted even one – K.N.) refugees will Zielona Góra accept?”. The mayor’s response was that

Zielona Góra is not interested in accepting refugees. We don’t have enough flats for our inhabitants, so I see no possibility of accepting refugees. I believe that Poland should first remember about our compatriots who remained in the East and try to bring them home. Only later should we think about refugees. Let’s have a look at what the US do at the border with Mexico – they are to construct a wall. And, of course, Zielona Góra has not accepted even single refugee up till now (Kubicki 2016).

Declaration of University of Zielona Góra

On October 5, 2015, during the ceremony of inauguration of academic year, professor Tadeusz Kuczyński, the Rector of University of Zielona Góra, announced that, in spite of limited financial capacities, the university cannot stand aside these events. He also expressed his conviction that “enabling refugees studying is probably the best way to integrate them with the society which they enter” (Kuczyński 2015). The Rector also informed that in the near term the university authorities intend to send to the Ministry of Science and Higher Education an offer for 50 refugee students to study for free at the University of Zielona Góra. Additionally, they were meant to be exempted from any payments and would be granted free accommodation in dormitories. The Rector also announced efforts to obtain scholarships for them (*ibidem*).

Religious circles

On September 5, 2015, during the meeting with believers at praying the Angelus, Pope Francis urged that every parish, every religious community, every convent and sanctuary in Europe accepted one family of refugees. He ensured that migrants will also be accepted in Vatican. The Pope also addressed hierarchs of the church directly “I am asking my brothers bishops of Europe to support my request in their dioceses, reminding that mercy is the other name of love” (Pope Francis 2015). Father Andrzej Sapięha, the spokesperson of diocese, asked about the plans of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Zielona Góra-Gorzów, answered that the position of the Bishops Conference was published. He added “At the moment I am not able to say anything more” (Zatorski 2015).

Refugees in Zielona Góra? – web based activity

Here, a substantive discussion is a rarity. Anonymous comments that leave no doubt as to the intentions and beliefs of their authors prevail. Posts such as: “Shoot them at

the very attempt of entry”, “Get them f..k off here”, “Before winter I’m going to invest in a stove, a big, powerful one”, “Get all wogs out of Europe! Simply in a Christian manner” definitely prevail in virtual world. If somebody supports the idea of accepting refugees he or she will read that is mentally handicapped and will be asked if, having his wife or daughter raped, will still support the idea.

Religious circles – father Andrzej Draguła

The comments posted online deeply moved the previous spokesman of the Zielona Góra-Gorzów Curia, father Andrzej Draguła. He wrote in his blog:

The statements appearing in some circles that identify themselves as religious and eagerly refer to faith, show that their religion not only does not stop them from utterances full of hate but on the contrary – according to their own belief – it motivates them to do it, gives arguments and justifies this verbal hatred (and also incitement to violence). That is precisely why I wrote that, apart from other Catholicisms there is also Catholicism of hatred. A kind of “Christian Islamism”. Pure form of evil which uses religious arguments to justify its existence. Blasphemy of the highest purity (Draguła 2015).

Civic initiative – a group “Common Zielona Góra”

On December 15, 2016 on the webpage Avaaz.org appeared a petition written by a Zielona Góra inhabitant Ms Zofia Szozda who represents the group “Common Zielona Góra”. The petition “on creating settlement conditions for a family from Aleppo” (Szozda 2016) was addressed to the Municipal Council of Zielona Góra. The petition was signed online by 136 persons. The group also planned a public consultation on the matter, including local politicians, organizations and associations. A picket called “We are all with refugees” was scheduled on January 28, 2017 in Zielona Góra pedestrian area.

The Internet users about the initiative of the group “Common Zielona Góra”

The moment the information about the planned picket was released (January 4, 2017), the comments on the initiative of bringing a Syrian family to Zielona Góra were posted online. The most active were the opponents of accepting refugees. Besides well-known arguments about possible rapes and mental infirmity of the persons inviting, a new element – Zielona Góra “ordo caritatis” appeared. It was meant to remind that, first of all, many inhabitants of our city need help. An Internet user D.S. wrote: “It is very sad to me that some foundation or somebody prefers helping strangers to their own countrymen. It is embarrassing”. Another person (nick annnnnnnnnnna) asks: “Don’t we already have enough poverty and tragedy here?”. The person adds “Give a finger

and they will take a whole arm. You let in one and they will come in mass". Willingness to help others is also perceived as a way to realize particular interests, "promoting" oneself in a local community. PatriotaNieFaszysta wrote: "if we help our people nobody will write about it but if we help strangers, newspapers will write about it and it will be spectacular, there will be confusion. Isn't that the point???" A user nicked ZałogaDzi claims that "majority of these organizations only cares about publicity and taking money as long as EU gives subsidies". There also appeared, however definitely less numerous, the voices of support. A user Barbara Dymek wrote: "A grand applause for the group 'Common ZG' for their initiative [...] in face of such dreadful tragedy help is most desirable". A user Marianna said: "I can't believe my eyes! So much hatred in these comments. Guys, somebody wants to help others, and you are like a horde of biting dogs". In this context, a good conclusion of this exchange of views seem to be a comment by a user nicked "observer": "But even native Poles escape from Zielona Góra, so how do you want refugees to stand that?"³.

Citizens in action – marches and pickets

The representatives of rightwing circles expressed their opposition to the idea of accepting refugees organizing an anti-immigrant march on October 3, 2015. At the head of the march stood Janusz Korwin Mikke. At the beginning the protesters chanted "We want returnees not refugees!", "Kresowiaczy are also Poles!", "Poland – not Islamic, not secular but Catholic only!". With time the language of the protestors brutalized and chants like "F..ck Islam", "F..ck Allah!", "All Poland sings with us: refugees get f..ck out of here" could be heard.

The direct response to the initiative of "Common ZG" group collecting signatures to bring to the city a family from Aleppo was an anti-immigrant demonstration planned for January 21, 2017. The main organizer was association Rota Rzeczypospolitej. They were actively supported by representatives of political parties: Wolność, Młodzież Wszechpolska, Lubuszanie dla Rzeczypospolitej, Obóz Narodowo-Radykalny, Patriotyczny Falubaz and Patrioci RP. According to the organizers the picket was attended by 200 persons. During the meeting it was possible to sign a petition opposing the idea of "Common ZG" group. The speakers – representatives of the organizers – emphasized that "90% of so called refugees are in fact deserters who don't want to defend their homelands" (Dajworska 2017). It was again highlighted that "first, we have to help Poles who are here and the returnees" (*ibidem*). The representative of Rota Rzeczypospolitej said: "We are accused of having no heart, no conscience because we don't want to help poor orphans who have to flee their country at war. But excuse me, who started

³ All comments translated in their original form.

that war? Poland? Let those who started this war deal with these people!” (*ibidem*). Krystian Pacholski from Młodzież Wszechpolska emphasized several times that “Polish quota is zero immigrants [...] we stand for ethnic and cultural uniformity of Poland” (Pacholski 2017). Mateusz Turczyniak from the Wolność party said: “Today we witness that, under the occupation of the European Union, Islamic culture wants to destroy, eradicate Christian culture from our Europe. What is happening now is outrageous and is a crying shame [...]. Today Europe is collapsing, Europe is dying” (Turczyniak 2017). Mateusz Kowalski from ONR declared: “I am pleased to see the people who want to fight for security of lubuskie province, for our right to walk with our heads held high, to be the hosts of our land instead of being forced to hide and worry about our women” (Kowalski 2017).

Next demonstration, this time to support the idea of bringing a Syrian family to Zielona Góra took place on January 28, 2017. The demonstrators also urged the Municipal Council of Zielona Góra to adopt a resolution resembling the one adopted by the Municipal Council of Sopot in which they declare the will to accept and take care of 40 children from Aleppo. The city authorities were also requested to support an educational project called “A train to tolerance”. According to organizers this picket was attended by circa 70 inhabitants of Zielona Góra.

Conclusions

Due to limited space the article presents only a simplified agenda of civic activities related to the issue of accepting refugees from Syria, Iraq and the North-African countries in Zielona Góra. A normative assessment of these activities is not the objective of these considerations. It has to be emphasized that, next to the Committee of Defending Democracy (KOD) and defending the women’s rights, the issue of refugees was the most important factor of civic activity of Zielona Góra, and the entire Poland’s, inhabitants within the recent two years. The activities taken, regardless sympathies, social environment or a citizen’s position in social structure, were rather ad hoc in nature – both in virtual and real worlds. The issue that draws attention is a lack of institutionalized forms of activity – no new organizations or associations were created. The ones which were active in the analyzed period, had already existed before. The Poles’ reluctance to associate is well circumscribed in the portrait of our society drawn by sociologists. The data collected by researchers show that “[...] we associate reluctantly and we rarely get involved in the operations of organizations. We also don’t use our basic civil rights. Only one in two of us vote in elections, we don’t aspire to change the situation in our country in other ways: by signing petitions, taking part in demonstrations or communicating with politicians” (*Kondycja sektora...* 2015). Several factors should be taken into account while searching explanations of such weakness of the Poles’ civic

activity. These include, first of all, our near and distant history, traditions, the present economic-structural conditionality, and also dominant attitudes and value systems.

“The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Sociology” informs that “the notion of civic society has always been considered to be dynamic and covering social movements” (*Oxford. Słownik...* 2008, p. 347). The same dictionary differentiates social movements, as acts conscious and organized, from collective behaviours, treated as accidental and chaotic (*ibidem*, p. 293). The question therefore arises of whether such bottom-up, spontaneous and independent activity like the one connected with the issue of accepting refugees, observed in the virtual and real worlds, can be basically regarded as an example of civic activity. If we assume that civic activity is a sphere of activity oriented towards common good, understood as the welfare of others, the answer must be negative. In the case discussed here we definitely deal with activity which is chaotic and counterfeiting the welfare of others. On the other hand, the activity of citizens in relation to refugees is the fact that cannot be ignored while observing the behaviours of modern Poles.

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The problem of refugees as a factor of active citizenship of inhabitants of Zielona Góra

Abstract: The article deals with the issue of civic activity of Poles, as illustrated by the case of Zielona Góra citizens, in reference to the problem of accepting refugees from Syria and other countries at war.

The first part of the article presents statistical data on civic activity of Poles which is followed by an attempt of interpreting the presented results in historical and demographic context.

The second part of the article aims at presenting a short calendar of events connected with and, at the same time, creating the discourse on refugees which took place in Zielona Góra within the two years discussed in the article.

In conclusion the author tries to answer the question whether the problem of refugees really is a factor of civic activity observed in the city, not different from those taking place in the whole country, and whether these activities can be qualified as civic behaviour at all.

Keywords: refugees, public debate, civic activity

Problem uchodźców jako czynnik aktywności obywatelskiej mieszkańców Zielonej Góry

Streszczenie: Celem artykułu jest próba odpowiedzi na pytanie, czy kwestia ewentualnego przyjęcia w Polsce uchodźców z Syrii i innych krajów ogarniętych wojną może stanowić czynnik aktywności obywatelskiej Polaków. Analizie poddano społeczność lokalną – mieszkańców Zielonej Góry.

W pierwszej części tekstu przedstawiono statystyki dotyczące obywatelskości Polaków oraz podjęto próbę ich interpretacji z perspektywy historycznej i demograficznej.

Część druga – opisowa zawiera uproszczone kalendarium wydarzeń konstytuujących dyskurs publiczny na temat przyjmowania uchodźców, jaki toczył się w Zielonej Górze w ciągu dwóch lat objętych analizą.

W części trzeciej, zawierającej wnioski i podsumowania, autorka wraca do postawionej w tytule kwestii oraz zadaje kolejne pytanie dotyczące zachowań dyskutowanych w artykule.

Słowa kluczowe: uchodźcy, debata publiczna, aktywność obywatelska