

THE CONCEPT OF LOCAL DEMOCRACY IN A SOCIALIST STATE ON BASIS OF EXPERIENCE IN POLAND

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I. The very essence of socialist democracy, a form of State which aims to ensure its citizens the broadest possible participation in exercising state power, makes it necessary to include in the sphere of this participation the greatest possible number of areas in the State and social life (economics, administration, justice). This participation must also extend over all levels of power, that is, not only to the central level, but also to a local level (through the bodies of local power). The afore mentioned conclusion was reflected in the idea of councils (soviets), as a form of socialist State, characterized by a multi-level representation elected in general elections held not only on the central level but at all levels of administration. The local democracy, developing on the basis of a system of councils, thus constitutes one of the forms concretizing a more general notion of socialist democracy. The relation between these notions is much similar to that found between the general category of socialist democracy and particular categories, such as workers' democracy, trade union democracy, direct democracy. The feature which distinguishes local democracy from the afore mentioned categories is the fact that it is a form of including the working masses into the management of local affairs, that is, matters related to the rural community, town and voivodship. The basis for shaping local democracy is provided not only by the units of the administrative division (rural community, town, voivodship), but also by the units of the territorial division of a smaller scope, for instance a village within the rural communes or a settlement or even urban districts.

The criterion of citizens' participation in the management of local affairs (in villages, communes, towns, settlements, voivodships) provides the feature which distinguishes local democracy from other kinds of democracy falling in the general notion of socialist democracy.

II. In pointing to the above traits and specific features of local democracy, one cannot bypass, however, the general features of socialist democracy, which affect all forms of democracy occurring in a socialist state. These are the following:

1. It is a democracy of class character, which provides for not only participation of working people, both at a nation-wide and a local level, but also for the elimination of the influence of the class which lives thanks to exploitation. This line of development, characteristic of a socialist state, is safeguarded by the leading role played by the marxist—leninist party in the construction of socialism. In Polish conditions, this function is implemented in cooperation of other two political parties which profess socialism.¹

The driving force for the mechanism of socialist democracy (including local democracy) is provided by solidarity and mutual assistance of working people in reaching the common objectives. As the social classes living on exploitation lose the ground for their existence when democracy becomes a national democracy for working people in conditions of a developed socialist society, so is this direction of development also manifested by local democracy.

2. It is a democracy based on the social ownership of the primary means of production. The acceptance of the social ownership as a foundation of the system results in a planned character of the national economy and, consequently, in the possibility to plan social development. The fact that the development of not only the entire country, but also of its individual units of territorial division (rural communities, towns, voivodships) is realized in a planned manner causes that the participation of citizens in moulding long-range and short-term plans of social-economic development both at the central and local levels becomes one of the basic assumptions of socialist democracy. This means that local democracy, similarly as socialist democracy on a national scale, cannot only be a formal democracy which is limited in practice to the political act which the election of representatives is, but it should be, to an increasing extent, a social democracy, that is, such that it covers not only the political sphere, but economic and socio-cultural spheres as well. It should also provide for the participation of citizens, not only in the political life but also in the economic, cultural and social development of its region.

3. The planned character of the social-economic development in a socialist state provides for a uniformity of the state leadership. Centralism, indispensable in a socialist state, should not be, however, a bureaucratic kind of centralism but a democratic one which combines the realization of the national state objectives of centralism with a definite degree of independence in the management of local affairs.

This essential trait of democratic centralism was very strongly stressed by *Lenin*:

»Centralism, conceived in a truly democratic sense, provides for the possibility, for the first time created by history, of a complete and unrestricted development of not only individual local qualities but also of independent ventures, local initiative, diversity of paths, methods and ways to proceed to a common objective».²

»Democratism and socialist centralism has nothing to do either with schematism nor with establishing of schemes at the top. The unity in the basic matters, cardinal and essential matters, is not thus upset but is ensured through the diversity of details, local peculiarities, ways of approaching the point of the matter, methods of exercising control...»³

This »executive leeway» — so indispensable for managing the affairs of a given area — provides the institutional-legal premises for the development of local democracy.

The above-mentioned features alone indicate that the model of local power in a socialist state cannot be realized by means of the legal-political institutions and forms of the social order which were shaped up in other epochs and called to pursue entirely different — if not quite contrary — social aims.

III. It is necessary to state, from the point of view of the requirements of the development of socialist democracy, that the classical forms of parliament are insufficient, as these forms proceed from the assumption that the basic (and practically the only one) form of their participation in ruling is their participation in parliamentary elections. The limitation of the representation to the central level exclusively while the forms of direct democracy are negated leads to the situation in which...» the influence which the citizen exerts on public affairs only through parliament and parliamentary elections is more than insufficient. This influence is limited in effect to a very rare... solemn act which the casting of the vote in the ballot is».⁴

The criticism of parliamentarianism made from the marxist positions, particularly by Lenin, did not amount to the criticism of indirect democracy as such, but it was criticism of a definite conception of representation, based on the theory of division of power and thus leading in fact to the preponderance of the executive authority and limiting the representation in parliament which functions exclusively at the central level. The conception of the Republic of Soviet which was put forth by Lenin envisaged:

- 1) multi-level representation in the form of a »pyramid of soviets»,
- 2) association of indirect democracy with forms of direct democracy.

The two ideas listed above have been reflected in the constitutions of the socialist countries.

The credibility of the criticism of parliamentarianism, continued for long from the positions of marxism is corroborated by ever more articles in the Western literature which point to the necessity of complementing parliament with other forms of participation of the citizens in ruling, to the necessity of passing from the parliamentary democracy to the participatory democracy.

The bourgeois conceptions of self-government could not be accepted from the point of view of the development of local democracy. In question is also the conception putting the local self-government against the state power. This conception envisages an innate or natural sphere of powers for the self-government, treating it in an absolute manner as a system opposed to the State. Also in question is the conception treating the self-government as a form of decentralization of the administration and putting the self-government into the sphere of executive authority.

The idea of the »pyramid of soviets» opposes both the former and the latter conceptions. It treats the representative bodies elected at every level of the administration as organs of the state authority and ensures them superiority vis a vis administrative organs. In this way, the representative bodies, elected by society, discharge at the same time functions of self-government organs and state authority organs. These functions cannot be opposing.

It is also characteristic that the local representative organs are a sort of an extended parliament. Simultaneously, parliament is treated in a socialist state as a kind of a superstructure of the local representative bodies. So this is a conception of a uniform representation locating the local councils in the section of representation bodies and which is entirely different from the bourgeois conceptions of home rule, which treat it as a form of a decentralized administration and subsequently locating it within the section of executive power.

The system of councils, providing conditions for the participation of the population in solving problems of a given area and thus constituting the foundation for the development of local democracy, is at the same time a basic link in the mechanism of socialist democracy of a national dimension.

This means that local democracy cannot be of an absolute character under conditions of a socialist state, as there is no fixed barrier which would allow to separate the national interest from the local interests, national matters from local ones. So the conception of socialist democracy rejects these theories which would like to base local democracy on the principles of full autonomy vis a vis the central authority. These conceptions are unrealistic, not only in regard to a socialist state but any contemporary state as well.

The uniformity of the representative system in a socialist state (in contrast to the conception, situation, legal position and actual role of the territorial self-government in a bourgeois state) constitutes a factor which stimulates the harmonious development of the institutions of national democracy and local democracy.

IV. This paper has little possibilities of minute presentation of the forms of local democracy at all levels of the local power, being limited to the pre-

sentation of these forms in territorial units of the primary level, that is, to the presentation of the forms which cover the rural community, towns and rural communities.

There are the following basic forms of local democracy in these units:

1. Forms of democracy (direct and indirect) connected with the election and functioning of the local representation in the form of people's councils,
2. A socio-political mechanism of incorporating citizens into solving problems of their region,
3. Forms of democracy (direct and indirect) connected with the election and functioning of self-governing organs for the population in towns and villages,
4. Specialized forms of co-participation of citizens in the functioning of the local administration and administration of justice.

ad. 1. The forms of democracy connected with the functioning of a local representation are particularly important because of:

a/ their mass-scale character: the election of people's councils is held in general elections which represent the most mass-scale form of democracy, as they encompass all citizens,

b/ the social position of representation bodies which also function as local organs of the state authority and thus chart the line of action and control the local links of the administration, coordinating the activities and exercising control over the economic units and organs which are managed centrally,

c/ the close bonds with the organs of social self-government and with the forms of direct democracy: this has been manifested by defining people's councils as the basic organs of social self-government.

In-depth discussion of all forms of democracy connected with the functioning of a local representation would call for a separate paper. Concentrating our attention to the more important ones, the following should be mentioned in the first place:

- periodic general elections to people's councils which entail discussions of the election programme and meetings at which voters put forward postulates,
- sessions of people's councils, held at least four times a year, which adopt resolutions on the most important matters of a region, such as the economic plan, budget, programmes of development of particular fields of social and economic life, generally binding norms of a local character, etc.: these sessions are of a public nature and very often are preceded by social consultations concerning draft resolutions,
- people's councils' commissions and their activities: these commissions are auxiliary organs of the councils and function as consultative and control bodies,
- meetings of councillors with the electorate, councillors' duty hours and other forms of contacts between councillors and the electorate.

All of the above forms of democracy provide citizens with the possibilities of exerting an influence upon the composition of the representative organs and the activities pursued by people's councils during their tenure, as well as with possibilities for indirect (through representatives) say in the decision-making in their region.

ad. 2. Insofar as the socio-economic mechanism of citizen participation in solving problems of their region is concerned, this mechanism encompasses, first and foremost:

- the activities of the PUWP which maps out the programme of building of socialism, both at the national scale and local level, on the basis of numerous social consultations and a permanent bond with all the classes and social groups,
- the activities of the allied political parties which join in the process of building socialism, bringing with them definite classes and social groups (for instance the United Peasant Party, the Democratic Party),
- the activities of social organizations which bring a broad array of social activists into the process of elaboration of the programme of socio-economic development and its implementation,
- the activities of the National Unity Front which provides the broadest plane for cooperation of the political parties and social organizations.

All of the links of the socio-economic mechanism have their say in decision-making through their members elected to the people's councils. It is their activities, particularly the activities pursued by the Party as the leading force in socialist building, that determine, to a considerable extent, the functioning of the entire system of local democracy.

ad. 3. There are marked differences between the forms of self-government of towns people and rural population. In the towns the housing estates equipped with social facilities for agglomerations of 10—12 thousand residents make the basis for the organizational structure of self-governments of towns people. Each estate elects its own committee, which functions as a representative organ of a social character and represents the interests of residents and includes them into co-participation in solving their settlement's affairs. Meetings of residents, which play an important part in briefing the residents about the housing estate's matters and soliciting their opinions about the mode of solving problems facing a given residential estate, constitute forms of direct democracy.

In rural self-governments, which are based on hamlets (15—16 hamlets make now one rural community), forms of direct democracy, village meetings, play a still greater role. The rural self-government has only one organ of self-government which is called to represent a given village. It is the head of a hamlet, who is elected during meetings of rural population.

The self-governments in towns and countryside represent a broad form of inclusion of citizens into the management of the affairs of towns and rural

communities. They are closely linked to city and rural people's councils which are the basic organs of social self-government. There are close ties between the self-governments in towns and countryside and people's councils in rural communities and towns. These ties are so advanced that a people's council in a town or a rural community may entrust certain matters to the self-government for examining.

ad. 4. Citizens' teams, as specialized forms of citizen co-participation in the activities of the administration and administration of justice, act in various forms. Insofar as the organs of administration of justice are concerned, these organs are most popular in the form of the people's assessors. Out of other forms in which a social factor is present, mention is also due to misdemeanor colleges, commissions for arbitration and conciliation and, first of all, to social courts in the form of conciliation commissions, workers' courts, etc.

Civic teams act in almost all fields of the administration, economy and culture. For instance the School Administration includes parents' committees, home trade system — shops' committees, cultural institutions — library committees, councils for cultural affairs, an administration dealing with internal affairs — the Auxiliary Militia Corps, etc. Through these councils and committees citizens can exert their influence upon the matters which are of vital importance to them.

The afore mentioned forms of local democracy constitute a system which is self-complementing and which creates broad possibilities for citizens to participate in decision-making with regard to local affairs and solving them.

In discussing the questions related to the model of local democracy, it is necessary to bear in mind two facts:

1. local democracy institutions cannot be treated as a miniature of democracy of a national scope: for instance the *Sejm (Diet)* is the legislative body which passes laws as normative acts of the highest legal validity. This fact makes it that within the framework of a uniform representation system there is a qualitative difference between the *Sejm* and people's councils.

2. There are considerable differences between units of local power at various levels in the model of local democracy; so considerable differences occur between the model of local democracy at the primary level and the level of a voivodship.

Marked differences also take place between the model of local democracy in the units of the administrative division of the country (rural community, town, voivodship) and other units of the territorial division, for instance a village or a social residential estate in a town.

The fact that it is difficult to make a division of tasks into national and local character, that such a division may only be of a relative character, does not mean that it has no significance. Quite contrary, this is the case. The distinction of the tasks in which an aspect of a local character dominates, from

the tasks where an aspect of a national character preponderates, is very important.

The recognition of this distinction substantiates the necessity of basing the functioning of the institution of local power on the principles of relative independence which is important from the point of view of developing social initiative. An underestimation of this relative independence leads to the weakening of these possibilities which are provided by it for developing local initiative, for taking advantage of this peculiar kind of »local patriotism».

V. The process of the socialist states entering the stage of a developed socialist society is closely connected with the further development of socialist democracy. It results, on the one hand, from the up-to-date economic, cultural and social transformations and, on the other hand, the conditions to achieve the further progress in deepening the socialist transformations. The process of deepening local democracy is one of the directions for the further development of socialist democracy.

The reform of the local organs of power and local administration, instituted in Poland in the years 1972—1975, was a telling confirmation of this line of development. One of the primary assumptions of this reform was the adoption of the principle of simultaneous improvement of the administration and strengthening the position of the local representative organs, as well as the deepening of socialist democracy. That was manifested in the following solutions:

1. The definition of people's councils, in keeping with an earlier attitude postulated by the doctrine, as not only local bodies of state authorities but at the same time as basic organs of social self-government. This means that a greater emphasis was put on the self-government in the activities which people's councils pursue, on the organization of their activities at sessions and in the work of commissions, as well as that their peculiar ties with other forms of self-government, particularly with self-government of the urban and rural population, were stressed.

2. The definition of the territorial units directly connected with the society (rural community and town) as basic units in the territorial division of the country, and the bestowing upon people's councils and local organs of administration of these units of wide-ranging powers, both as regards economic management, social and cultural management in a given region and dealing with the individual matters of citizens. That was connected with the new territorial division of the country, which accepted an economic microregion as the economic basis for setting up rural communities, thus deepening the premises for the socio-economic development of local democracy.

3. The closer tying of the socio-political mechanism to the local representation following the adoption of the principle of designating to the post of chairman of the people's council (and at the same time the president of its presidium)

the local party leader and of designating for his deputies the leaders of the political parties. The above solution adds up to the consolidation of the role of the local representation, particularly of its control functions vis a vis the local administration.

The above changes in the system of people's councils have created more favourable conditions for the development of local democracy. The introduction of the new solutions does not naturally mean their automatic implementation in practice. It testifies, however, to the developmental tendency which stands objective chances and is connected with the requirements which are set by the shaping of a developed socialist society.

VI. The functioning and development of the institutions of local democracy is of multi-pronged importance in a socialist state, particularly in the period of shaping up a developed socialist society.

1. The political importance of local democracy should be set in front. The creation of the system of councils which provides the possibility for electing a representative organ in each unit of the administrative division augments considerably the participation of the working masses in the ruling. Owing to the system of councils, the numerical strength of representation is multiplied (for instance more than 100 thousand citizens are elected to people's councils in Poland and more than 1 million citizens participate in the self-government organs and forms of direct participation). So, as the above reasons and facts indicate and owing to the mass-scale character and considerable enlargement of social control over the activities of the state administration, it can be said that the institutions of local democracy play a significant part in the deepening of the ties between the authority and the society. The development of socialist democracy on the national scale considerably hinges on the development of the institutions of local democracy. For many citizens the functioning of the institutions of local democracy is the basic criterion for measuring the degree of the development of socialist democracy.

2. The democratic forms of handling local affairs are also important in terms of economy. The proper functioning of these democratic forms creates grounds for demonstration and consequently for combining the interests of various classes and social strata making up the working masses in towns and countryside. The functioning of local democracy contributes also to the matching of national interests with local ones, to the elaboration of the solutions which most properly reflect both the national and local interests. This is possible thanks to the merging of councils as local representation into a uniform system of representation organs. This aim is also promoted by giving the councils and local organs of administration coordination powers vis a vis organs which are not

subordinated to the local representation and units of the socialized economy, which are centrally managed.

The above solutions ward off both local particularism and a narrow functionalism. The development of local democracy horizontally strengthens all bonds of a society which in the period of the quick scientific-technical progress and fastly developing specialization is to a considerable extent a society which is vertically organized.

Remarkable economic effects are brought on by the development of local initiative which is expressed, among other things, in social voluntary commitments undertaken by the population in order to satisfy the material and cultural needs of the citizens more quickly. The institution of local democracy, contributing to the deepening of the consciousness of citizens of being co-managers of their region, fosters this initiative and speeds up the implementation of the socio-economic development of a given region. The utilization of the local reserves for the purpose of resolving the problems which are important for people and the experience gained from them creates possibilities for solving those which are of national character. So the institutions of local democracy constitute an important factor serving to release social reserves. This is one of the most important premises for a dynamic development of a socialist society.

3. The development of local democracy must be evaluated also from the point of view of the assumptions of the theory of organization and management: decentralization becomes indispensable in step with entering the period of a developed socialist society and with growth of tasks facing the socialist society not only because of the necessity of developing socialist democracy but also because of the effectiveness of the functioning of the central leadership, which calls, among other things, for relieving this leadership of secondary matters in order to enable it to concentrate on basic matters of a complex and national character.

Alongside this extremely important praxiological aspect one should take into consideration that the central leadership is not able to take note of the specific conditions, and very often even entirely different situations, which take place in the individual territorial units. Establishing institutions of local democracy and providing conditions for their proper functioning gives protection from the danger of uniformism, from a routine and consequently bureaucratic approach, and thus create the indispensable conditions for making the leadership more flexible.

Of basic importance from the point of view of organization of leadership is the shaping of the model of local democracy in such a manner that it should make possible to match the social factor with the professional-expert factor.

The development of the scientific-technical revolution and the ensuing deepening of the social division of labour, and the growth of the importance

of specialization, increases the demand for the participation of the professional factors in decision-making. Similarly, as in science, where in step with the deepening specialization in individual branches of knowledge the demand for a comprehensive inter-discipline approach is fastly growing, the demand for experts likewise increases the demand for a comprehensive approach in social life, which is generated by scientific-technical progress. This demand is ensured by the socio-political factor.

The model of local democracy in a socialist state, which provides conditions for co-participation in decision-making of the political factor in the form of the party, of a social factor in the form of a local representation and of other forms of social self-government, and of a professional factor in the form of administration organs, comes half way to meet these requirements. Such a solution creates the conditions for the optimalization of the decision-making at local level, as well as for the optimalization of the execution of decisions.

4. The deliberations over the importance of local democracy cannot bypass its educational aspects. The lack of democracy at a local level, that is, at a level where the most favourable conditions for implementation of this democracy (proximity of authority, direct contacts between the authority and citizens) are, could undermine the conviction about the tangibility of democracy on a national level. The development of local democracy favours shaping the awareness of being a co-manager of the town and rural community and subsequently helps to shape the feeling of being a co-manager of the country, which is an indispensable element of the socialist consciousness.

The institutions of local democracy also constitute a school for social activists preparing them for carrying out their functions at higher levels of power. They create conditions for the gradual promotion of social activists to higher levels of the system of socialist democracy. The development of local democracy comes half way to meet the growing aspirations of citizens, which grow in step with the general level of education, towards co-deciding in public affairs, particularly in those which concern them directly.

The above remarks on the importance of local democracy allow to state that similarly as the development of socialist democracy exerts an influence on the development of local democracy bearing more or less favourably on the course of the development of the former, the development of local democracy is significant for the development of socialist democracy on the scale of a whole nation. Their close inter-relation commands to take a negative attitude towards those conceptions which negate or diminish the significance of local democracy. One can even put forth the thesis that the development of socialist democracy on a national scale is not possible without a simultaneous development and progress in local democracy.⁵

NOTES

¹ The above principle, which plays an essential role in the conception of socialist democracy in general, as well as in local democracy, was expressed in the following formulation of article 3 of the Constitution of the PPR:

»1) The Polish United Workers' Party is the guiding force in the construction of socialism.

2) The cooperation of the Polish United Workers' Party, the United Peasant Party and the Democratic Party provides the foundation for the National Unity Front.

3) The National Unity Front is a common platform for the activities of social organizations of the working people and for patriotic unity of all citizens — party members, political parties, non-party members, irrespective of their attitude towards religion — round the vital interests of the Polish People's Republic.»

² Lenin: *Works*, v. 27 p. 209.

³ Lenin: *Collected Works*, Warsaw 1951, v. II, p. 274.

⁴ See M. Jaroszynski: »Problems of Self-government,» *State and Law* no. 6/1974, p. 8.

⁵ Hence the importance of studies on the development of local democracy in the entire research on socialist democracy, taking into consideration that »... the knowledge of local phenomena and processes is equally important as the knowledge of the regularities of the broad scope of general and typical phenomena». K. Biskupski: *Problems of the Science of Social and Political Systems*, Toruń, 1968, p. 16.