

Paweł Bącał

The Neighbour Almighty: Social Construction of the Village Mayorship*

Abstract

Aim of the work: The article examines how citizens' everyday practices shape the institution of the Village Mayorship in Poland. Its aim is to show that understanding the Village Mayorship requires going beyond its legal definition and studying the practices associated with this institution. The theoretical framework for the analysis is provided by Pierre Bourdieu's practice theory.

Research method: Empirically, the study draws on 23 semi-structured interviews conducted with Village Mayors from different regions of Poland.

Key results: The empirical material reveals that citizens commonly approach the Mayor through informal, neighbourly interactions and frequently address them with problems that exceed the formal scope of the office. Building on these findings, the paper develops an analytical model that conceptualises the Village Mayorship through the practices that constitute it.

Main conclusions: For the interviewed Mayors, these practices generate a dual image of the role: they are positioned as 'neighbour-sovereigns,' combining everyday proximity with expectations of authority. The Mayors respond to this dual image by striving to uphold the 'neighbour' dimension of the role, while legal constraints prevent them from fully embodying the 'sovereign' aspect. The model developed in the paper can also be applied to studying how everyday interactions shape other local and institutional leadership roles.

Keywords: Village Mayor, rural commune, practice theory, social practices, Mayor-citizens interactions.

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1. Introduction

In his memoir, Marian Walny, a Village Mayor (*wójt*) of the first term of the reborn local government in Poland (1990–1994), gives us a list of routine issues he had to handle. Apart from the tasks set by law, citizens approached the Mayor *inter alia* to complain about the local doctor and the bus driver, or to demand the reconstruction of the roads that the regional government was in charge of (Walny, 1997, pp. 51–52). To use the distinction introduced by Kulesza (2009, p. 21), the Mayor was seen as responsible for all these matters, even though, from a legal point of view, he did not have the competencies to address them. Walny's case is by no means the only one in this regard.

This paper aims to unpack this discrepancy between the legal status of the Village Mayorship – an executive office in rural local government (hereinafter also Mayorship) – and the citizens' requests towards the Mayors. The literature has so far explained this puzzle by pointing to the citizens' insufficient knowledge about the Mayors' competence scope. Such a view adopts a formal-legal view on the Mayorship. In contrast, I argue that the Village Mayorship is shaped not only by legal regulations but also by social practices. From this perspective, citizens approaching Mayors with family problems should not be dismissed as a sign of civic illiteracy; rather, it should be studied as co-constituting the environment in which the Mayor has to operate. To that end, the paper asks the following research question: 'How do the social practices shape the Village Mayorship?'

This paper offers a political sociology perspective, drawing on Bourdieu's (1990) practice theory. The latter provides me with the analytical tools to examine social practices empirically and theorise their significance for the role of Village Mayor. Based on Bourdieu's theory, I develop a model of the Village Mayorship, based on two dimensions: (1) the level of the citizens' familiarity with the Mayor, and (2) the power that the citizens ascribe to the Mayor by their practices. Empirically, the research draws on 23 semi-structured interviews with Polish Village Mayors conducted between November 2022 and July 2023.

This paper contributes to local government studies by: (1) examining the practical dimension of the Mayorship, beyond the Mayors' formal role, (2) offering an explanation of Mayorship-related practices in light of the practice theory, and (3) providing an analytical framework applicable to other authorities.

The paper is organised as follows: Section 2 reviews the literature; Section 3 outlines the theory and methodology; Section 4 presents research results; Section 5 analyses these results and develops the analytical model of the Village Mayorship; and Section 6 offers concluding remarks.

2. Literature Review

Quantitative data indicate that Poles generally hold a positive view of local authorities and feel capable of influencing local decision-making (CBOS, 2022, pp. 5–6). The commune level attracts significant attention from citizens (Gendźwiłł, Żerkowska-Balas, 2018, p. 10). Qualitative research by Jasiewicz-Betkiewicz et al. (2017) also supports this, revealing that citizens provide more detailed opinions on commune authorities compared to national ones.

There are other signs of citizens' attachment to the commune government. Firstly, when dealing with administrative issues, the commune office is the one that citizens visit most often (CBOS, 2017, p. 2). Secondly, the commune level is regarded as having the most influence, both on people's lives and on the lives of the local communities (Godlewski, 2023, p. 50). If we consider the commune level alone, citizens regard the Mayor as the most influential (CBOS, 2015, p. 5).

That is also seen in the case of the election. Poles consider the local and regional elections as the most important ones (Gendźwiłł, 2020, p. 14). Of the three levels of local and regional government (commune, county, and voivodeship [*gmina, powiat, województwo*]), approximately 80% of the respondents regard the commune elections as having the most significance (CBOS, 2014, p. 3). Of the two kinds of elections held at the commune level (for the mayor and for the commune council [*rada gminy*]), over 50% see the mayoral elections as the most important (CBOS, 2018, p. 1). To a significant extent, this is a reflection of the commune's institutional setup, which strengthens the Mayor's position vis-à-vis the commune council, creating – as Hausner et al. (2013, p. 32) call it – the 'presidential system'. Mayors have administrative resources at their disposal, which, to a large extent, allows them to set the commune council's agenda (Stępień, 2023, pp. 60–62). This can be further reinforced if the Mayor's party has a majority in the commune council.

A notable trend is that citizens in smaller communes tend to show greater interest in local affairs and hold more positive views about local authorities (Gendźwiłł, Swianiewicz, 2017, p. 4; Swianiewicz et al., 2016, p. 123). Turnout in commune elections is higher in smaller communes, reflecting this engagement (Gendźwiłł, 2020, p. 281). Importantly, in smaller communes, citizens are more likely to know the Mayor personally, leading to a more personalised relationship between the local community and authorities. Swianiewicz (2010, p. 7) notes that in smaller communes, local officials are seen not as abstract figures but as concrete individuals – neighbours or colleagues.

Yet, the consequences of this fact for theorising the interactions between the Mayor and the citizens are still largely unexplored. The formal-legal perspective on the Mayorship is still the dominant one. The Mayorship is thus seen as contained

within the legal provisions. Hence, the explanation for the fact that the citizens seek Mayors' help with issues that are outside their competence scope or that they try to come to their office without an earlier appointment is that this is simply a sign of citizens' poor knowledge (Marks-Krzyszowska, 2017; Sobczyk, 2017). It also presupposes that the situations indicated above are an exception rather than a rule. This is in contrast to more sociologically oriented works on the Mayorship. Studies by Adamowicz (2015) or Nowak (2012) confirm that Mayors are seen as the most influential figures in their communes. Research by Kasiński (2015) shows that citizens seek the Mayor's help for various issues beyond official duties. Additionally, Tuziak (2014) illustrates that smaller communes often foster more informal interactions between Mayors and citizens.

These studies cast a doubt on the explanation offered by the formal-legal perspective. There is thus a need to empirically research the Mayor-citizens interactions in more detail. That is the first contribution that this paper makes. The second contribution concerns the theoretical explanation of these practices. I argue for going beyond the formal-legal perspective and thus conceptualising the Mayor's role as shaped by the social practices of both the Mayors and the citizens. I will thus draw on the practice theory to make sense of the empirical material and build the analytical model of the social practices constituting the Mayorship.

3. Theory and Methodology

Hitherto, the employment of Bourdieu's theory to study the Polish local government has been limited to the concept of social capital. The latter has been used to explain the differences in civic engagement between communes or individuals in these communes (Matysiak, 2014; Trutkowski, Mandes, 2004). Bourdieu's theory has been applied in more detail to other institutional contexts, most notably the Constitutional Tribunal (Dębska, 2015), the District Job Agencies (Sztandar-Sztanderska, 2016) or Social Welfare Centres (Niesporek, Trembaczowski, Warczok, 2013). All these works showed how the studied institutions were constituted through the social practices relating to the legal framework, but also beyond it.

Bourdieu's theory directs our attention to the study of social practices. 'By "practices", Bourdieu understands publicly observable actions, outcomes of habitual dispositions to act, which are responsible for forming social groups' (Lechner, Frost, 2018, p. 69). The practices are not outcomes of any rational calculation. Rather, they reveal the tacit, embodied knowledge of social actors (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 68). Practices are neither spontaneous nor one-time events; they are outcomes of the position of the actors within the social space, marked by the various types of capital that these actors have (Bourdieu, 2021), and the 'practical sense' or 'practical reason'

that adjusts the actions of the individual to that position (Bourdieu, 1998). In turn, practices are a mode of reproduction of the social space and its institutions – the latter being classified and placed within the former.

Bourdieu's theory plays a double role in the study of the Village Mayorship. First, it allows me to conceptualise the Mayorship as a social institution reproduced through social practice. The latter in this case is an outcome of *inter alia* the legal regulations, the position of the Mayor vis-à-vis other institutions, as well as their personal reputation. The focus on practices has a consequence for methodology, as it directs my attention to what practices are associated with the Mayorship. Second, the study of practices allows me to analytically reconstruct the model of the Mayorship that is being reproduced.

Methodologically, I adopted a qualitative approach, aiming to capture their day-to-day dynamics and how the practices might extend beyond the Mayors' formal duties. To achieve a comprehensive view of the communes, I focused on interviewing Mayors. Following the Bourdieusian methodology (Pouliot, 2013), the interviews focused on grasping the practices of both the citizens and the Mayors. The questionnaire for a semi-structured interview comprised three sections: (1) issues for which citizens seek the Mayor's help, including those outside the Mayor's official duties or involving personal matters, (2) the nature of interactions between Mayors and citizens, such as contact outside office hours, attire during visits, and forms of address, and (3) citizens' civic engagement.

I interviewed 23 Village Mayors of the 2018–2024 term. The main criterion of selection was the rural character of the commune – as noted above, in such communes, citizens are more likely to know the Mayor personally. I approached the Mayors first by sending official invitations to their email accounts, and later also through social media and informal contacts. The latter proved the most effective, so the final list of interviewees was to a major extent dependent on access possibilities.¹ For the same reason (and financial limitations), more than half of the interviews took place in the eastern Voivodeships (Lubelskie, Podkarpackie, Świętokrzyskie, Mazowieckie, and Warmińsko-Mazurskie). As the provided answers proved to be alike, the question arose whether the Mayors from the western voivodeships shared a similar experience. Hence, I decided to conduct additional interviews. Using the

¹ The average population size of the communes was 5–10 thousand inhabitants, with only one commune being above 10 thousand. Basic social characteristics of the Mayors: (1) the vast majority of the interviewees were male, with only two female Mayors in the final sample; (2) almost all interviewees had a higher education degree; (3) most interviewees worked in the public sector before being elected; (4) the average age of the interviewees was 45–50 years old; (5) the vast majority served more than one term as a Mayor at the time of the interview; (6) more than a half of the interviewees were elected from the committee of the political party.

same recruitment methods, I interviewed Mayors from the Łódzkie, Śląskie, Opolskie, Dolnośląskie and Lubuskie Voivodeships (thus making 10 voivodeships in total). The imbalance towards the eastern voivodeships is thus to be accounted for in the analysis. The interviews in the eastern voivodeships were mostly conducted in person, in the commune offices; the interviews in the western ones were conducted online.

4. Findings

4.1. Seeking Mayors' Help – Range of Requests

The Mayor's competence scope is set by over 300 legal acts (Piasecki, Al Azzawe, 2019, p. 88). That itself constitutes a broad range of issues that they must take care of. However, are the problems that the citizens seek the Mayor's help with limited only to this formal competence scope? In other words, in what cases do the citizens turn to the Mayor?

In all of them. I always laugh that the nature of the small commune office dictates that our citizens treat us as a place where they can receive information or help in every matter possible (M16).

This was the message repeated by every Mayor I interviewed. The citizens seek the Mayor's help with the problems within their competence scope. This is only a part of the picture, though. They turn to the Mayor also with the matters that lie within the competence scope of other institutions or do not lie within the competence scope of anybody, as the nature of these is not administrative. That is the case for personal or family problems. Moreover, the citizens do not always come to get the solution to their problems. Some of them just want to share their dilemmas with the Mayor.

Let's unpack this picture, starting with the Mayor's competence scope again. As my interviewees stated, a noticeable share of the problems presented by the citizens lay outside of the Mayor's formal tools. This is divided into two groups. The first one is the matters in the competence scope of other institutions.

For them [citizens – P.B.] it is natural that they turn to the commune office, and that we are supposed to carry the matter forward (M1).

And if there is any problem, it will – one way or another – be presented to us (M6).

The interviews corroborate the previous findings that the commune is regarded as the most vital level of government. The citizens consider the commune as the

place where they can receive assistance in any of their queries. A significant factor to account for is the distance, meaning both the physical distance (the commune office is located much closer than e.g. Marshall of the Voivodeship's Office) and the social distance:

Because many people just do not know where to go. So they come here because it is the closest office – the closer the office is, the more friendly it is regarded as. Just take the physical distance. Apart from that, the Mayor is a local, known personally. In contrast, when one goes somewhere else – everything is unknown and strange (M5).

Therefore, even if the issue lies outside the Mayor's competence scope, they are nevertheless expected to help the citizens. For instance, by telling the citizens how they can deal with their issues in a formally correct way or even contacting authorities responsible for these matters on the citizens' behalf.

The second group of problems is those of no administrative nature, like conflicts among neighbours, family matters, or personal problems:

Once, a father came to me to complain that his 16-year-old daughter spent nights at her boyfriend's place (M12).

Sometimes the person may be ashamed to seek a psychologist's help, seek the doctor's help. But somehow they come to talk to me (M15).

There are many such cases. Complaints against the neighbour, the neighbour did something wrong, I disagree with him/her, etc. (M18)

All interviewees confirmed that the citizens also seek their help in matters that are not of an administrative nature. Hence, we can see that the social expectations regarding the Mayor's role go even further. It is not only the administrative issues outside the Mayor's competence scope, but also matters that do not concern any level of government at all. This also contributes to the perception of the commune as a significant level of government.

There is one special type of matter in this group, i.e. job seeking. I include it in matters of no administrative nature because the citizens' intention here is to avoid the official appointment procedure. According to the interviewees, the citizens do not come to the Mayor to get information about potential open positions. They would like the Mayor to give them a job single-handedly, outside any procedures:

This is also a major topic. [...] But the citizens come asking – not even asking if there would be any job for them, but with the demand 'give us a job' (M16).

The last issue to be discussed here is the perception of the relations between the Mayor and other positions in commune government. Since the commune is regarded as the most significant for citizens' lives, it raises a question of whether other officials are approached to the same extent as the Mayors, or whether the latter have a special role within the commune. The interviews point to the latter answer, indicating that the major role is here played by the institutional position of the Mayor. Where the Mayor is visible solely by virtue of holding the position and perceived as able to help through the administrative apparatus at their disposal, the commune councillor (*radny rady gminy*) must establish such a reputation through their activities beyond mere participation in the sessions of the commune council² (and – as Dzieniszewska-Naroska [2004, p. 176] shows – most councillors indeed limit their role to this aspect). We will find a similar conclusion on the citizens' preference to approach the Mayor rather than commune councillors in studies by Nowak (2012, p. 79) or Adamowicz (2015, p. 296). The same holds for (mentioned less frequently) the village administrators (*sołtys*) – they are approached if they make themselves visible. Hence, it depends less on their institutional position and more on their personal activity (which varies – Matysiak, 2014; Ptak, 2016).

It is also worth mentioning the employees of the commune office. The latter are responsible for preparing the Mayor's acts or decisions and are usually the ones who hand these decisions to the citizens. Formally speaking, they are the Mayor's decisions, so the only way to revise them is through appeal to the higher instance. However, the citizens may see it differently:

If the citizen does not get the decision that he/she wants, because the commune office's employee tells him/her that there is nothing to be done there, it is very common that this person will come to the Mayor to seek help (M4).

They always want to confirm if the decision is issued correctly, if there is something to be done here, or if this is final (M14).

The interviews confirm that it is common for the citizens to seek the Mayor's help if they do not get the decision they want. That is so, even though this very decision is issued in the Mayor's name. Therefore, the Mayor is – once again – perceived to be able to go beyond the official procedures.

² This is also where the only substantial difference between the eastern and western voivodeships occurred. Mayors from the western voivodeships (albeit not all) indicated that the citizens might be more eager to approach the commune councillor if their request has already been rejected by the Mayor or when the citizens anticipate such a rejection.

4.2. Interactions

The first thing to be discussed concerning the interactions between the Mayor and the citizens is the timing of these. Formally speaking, the meeting with the Mayor should be preceded by making the appointment through the secretariat. Moreover, it is common to set a special slot in the Mayor's calendar for meetings with the citizens (usually once a week). That is the theory.

Obviously, we have a special slot for such meetings, as we are obliged by the law to do so. But we do not care about it, because the citizens can always come when I am at the office (M6).

I have a special slot, on Monday from 4 pm to 5 pm. But they rarely come at that time, because I meet with the citizens whenever I am at the office (M20).

In practice, the citizens tend to meet with the Mayor whenever they feel the need to do so. Neither the citizens nor the Mayors are committed to sticking to the special slots set for such meetings. It also happens that the citizens want to meet with the Mayor spontaneously, on impulse. As the Mayors stated, if they are at the office and are not busy with other things, they usually meet with the citizens, even if no prior appointment was made.

Above, I have focused on the interactions happening in the Mayor's office and during their office hours. However, it may be only a part of the bigger picture. Hence, it is necessary to consider whether the interactions take place in different settings as well.

Every or almost every time I go shopping or I am at some ceremony; every time I go for a walk, someone will come to me and talk about their issues (M7).

To be honest, more problems are being presented to me outside of the commune office (M12).

Even in the church, after the mass (M22).

The Mayor's role is thus not limited to office hours. They shall always be ready to deal with commune affairs. Hence, the citizens feel entitled to contact the Mayor whenever they see them. Such a conclusion stems from all the interviews. Moreover, it does not have to be limited to the daily hours – some Mayors confirmed that the citizens' calls or text messages can also happen at night. The same goes for the weekend. The striking example of this concerned Christmas Eve: when the Mayor was about to begin the celebration with his family, he received the call that some

part of the commune lost access to tap water. Therefore, he had to make some arrangements to fix that problem. At the same time, this shows that the calls or text messages at 'unusual hours' (i.e. at night or at the weekend) happen mostly when the problem is urgent.

Going back to the meetings in the commune office, citizens' attitudes towards the Mayor can also be manifested by the outfit. For instance, the official outfit would underline the special character of the meeting. In contrast, the daily outfit would indicate that the meeting is no big deal. Hence, it is about what the citizens consider to be appropriate for the meeting with the Mayor.

Sometimes they wear the official outfit, sometimes the work outfit. And I respect that because sometimes the citizens simply do not have time to put on a tie etc. Because the citizen visits the office on his way to the field, he parks his tractor and comes to me to present his problem (M15).

If I do not have any official meetings, I come to work wearing jeans, too. If I dressed more officially, maybe the citizens would do that as well (M17).

The daily outfit is the most common one, according to the interviewees. If there are some citizens paying attention to wearing official outfits, they are mostly from the older generations. On the other hand, it also happens that the citizens wear work clothes, and it is not considered inappropriate. Usually, the outfit is correlated with the citizens' type of work, as they tend to visit the commune office on their way to or from work, hence wearing the same clothes. Thus, it indicates that the meeting with the Mayor is not considered a special occasion that needs to be underlined by the official outfit.

The last issue to be discussed is how the citizens call the Mayor. That is, if they use the official form 'Mr./Ms. Mayor', or if they call the Mayor by their name. This could also show the familiarity level between the citizens and the Mayor.

Usually 'Mr. Mayor', but I was born in this commune, so often they also call me by my name (M20).

The citizens could observe my social activity for many years, I am on a first-name basis with most of them. Hence, I do not feel the need to correct them that they should call me 'Mr. Mayor' (M16).

As the Mayors stated, calling them by their official title is the basic feature. At the same time, they declared that since the commune is so small, they are likely to know many citizens in person. Hence, it is also common for the citizens to call the Mayor by their name. This happens especially during one-on-one meetings.

5. Discussion: Making Sense of the Practices

To discuss how the Village Mayorship is shaped through the social practices, I propose to distinguish two dimensions of the Mayorship, which will also serve as a basis for the analytical model. The first dimension concerns citizens' familiarity with the Mayor, i.e. whether the latter is known only through their official role, or also beyond it (e.g. as the neighbour or colleague). The second dimension focuses on how much power the citizens ascribe to the Mayor through their practices. Depending on the answer, the citizens may seek the Mayor's help only within their competence scope – or go well beyond.

Previous literature suggests that the smaller the commune is, the more likely the Mayor is to be known by the citizens in person. The interviewees also underlined that theme – they stressed that they were born in their communes, many older people have known them as kids, they have friendships there, etc.

At the same time, the interviews show the practical consequences of such a state of affairs. The interactions between the Mayor and the citizens are marked by going away from the official rules of interaction. The citizens contact the Mayor without an earlier appointment, and also when meeting them in more private situations and outside office hours. Moreover, they do not feel obliged to wear an official outfit to the meetings with the Mayor and call the latter by their name. This is not to say that the official rules of interaction are irrelevant – some citizens still follow them. The point is that the citizens' perception of the Mayor allows them to move away from these rules. If this were not the case, the Mayors would talk about such behaviour as an exception, not a rule, as they did. Moreover, it does not mean there are no interaction rules anymore. The official rules that one applies when meeting a person one does not know have been replaced by more personalised rules, specific to the relationship between the Mayor and the citizen.

In addition, such an expectation of familiarity exists at the normative level as well. The interviewees noted that maintaining a distance or flashing the citizens with the knowledge about legal regulations is regarded negatively. The same goes for not being willing to talk to the citizens outside office hours. In other words, the citizens expect the Mayor to behave as 'one of them' – even if they seek their help.

As for the second dimension, we have seen that the citizens' problems presented to the Mayor go far beyond their competence scope. It is also likely that these issues do not have an administrative nature at all – yet, the Mayor is seen as someone able to help in that case as well. Moreover, the citizens also consider the Mayor to be able to change the decisions issued in their name by the commune office's employees. Again, there is a normative dimension, as the citizens expect the Mayor to behave in such a way and express their dissatisfaction when their expectations are not met.

This is a point of crucial significance, as it goes against previous literature that tried to explain such behaviour of the citizens by their poor level of knowledge. In my view, this has not much to do with the knowledge, but rather with the model of the Mayorship reproduced through social practices. As these practices show, the Mayor's power is seen as going beyond any competence scope. Therefore, the Mayor is supposed to act whenever the citizens experience problems. That is why the citizens seek the Mayor's help even in case of personal issues. That is why they consider them to be able to change the previously issued decisions – power does not know any limitations in that regard either. After all, people elect the authorities so they will care for the people.³

Taking the social practices one step up on the 'ladder of abstraction', I propose the analytical model of the Village Mayorship, including two dimensions: familiarity and power. Hence, on the first dimension, we get the Mayor 'Official', known only through their official role, and the Mayor 'Neighbour', widely known in the local community. The second dimension consists of the Mayor 'Administrator', able to help with matters only within their competence scope, and the Mayor 'Sovereign', able to help with any matter whatsoever.

If we put the empirical material into a model, we will see that the Mayorship that arises from the citizens' practices leads us towards the 'Neighbour-Sovereign' Mayor (Figure 1).

Citizens' practices are crucial, but not the only component shaping the Mayorship. Equally important is how the Mayors themselves react to the role inscribed to them by the citizens, since the Mayors are not without agency here and can try to reshape the citizens' practices.

However, the interviews show that this is not the case when it comes to the 'neighbour-official' dimension. Mayors stick to the image of 'neighbour' and even try to reinforce it. They do not stop citizens from coming to their office without a prior appointment or contacting them outside office hours. They do not try to impose official rules of interaction on the citizens. On the contrary: in the example of calling a Mayor by their name, it is the Mayor who often encourages the citizens to do so. Mayors proudly underlined their familiarity with the local community (having been born and raised there).

³ This can also explain the low level of participation in commune affairs. Contrary to viewing it as a sign of the lack of civil society in rural areas (Mazurkiewicz, 2018), I argue that it rather stems from citizens' understanding of the Mayor's role. It is the Mayor who is responsible for running the commune, and that is why they were elected. Hence, citizens' involvement on a daily basis is not necessary. It becomes so, however, if the Mayor goes against citizens' expectations. As the interviewed Mayors declared, the citizens get active if they want to express their opposition to some plans.

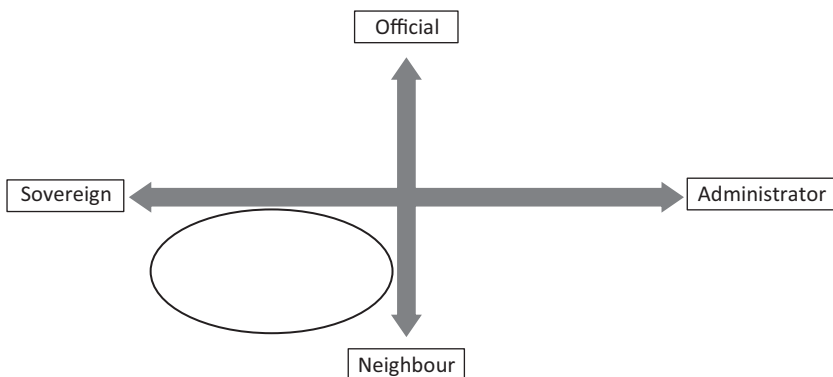


Figure 1. Village Mayorship's Role through the Citizens' Practices

Rysunek 1. Rola urzędu wójta w kontekście praktyk społecznych mieszkańców

Source: own study.

Źródło: opracowanie własne.

The case of the 'sovereign-administrator' dimension looks different, as Figure 2 shows.

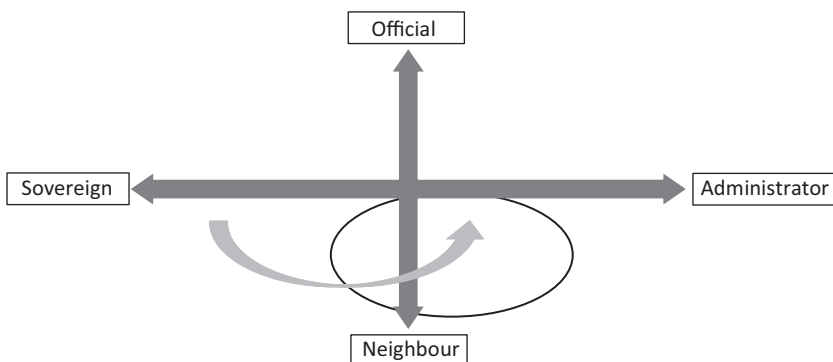


Figure 2. Village Mayors' Practices Shaping their Role

Rysunek 2. Praktyki wójtów kształtujące ich rolę

Source: own study.

Źródło: opracowanie własne.

Mayors try to move citizens' perception slightly towards the 'administrator' pole. That is so since the Mayors are aware of the formal limitations of their power that they should not exceed. If they did, their decisions would be annulled by the higher

instances and (in the worst case) they could lose their office. Therefore, the Mayors cannot behave as ‘sovereigns’. However, they cannot act purely as ‘administrators’, either. If they did (i.e. they would help the citizens only in matters within their competence scope), they would face backlash from the citizens – my interviewees were aware of that. What the Mayors do then is nevertheless try to help the citizens. For instance, they can explain the procedure for relevant institutions or contact them on behalf of citizens and express support for their cause. Hence, Mayors try to live up to the expectations to the extent they are allowed by law.⁴

At last, it is worth distinguishing between the empirical and analytical aspects of the model. The empirical results place the Mayors I interviewed in the ‘neighbour-sovereign’ corner. This does not have to be the case for all the communes (even though there might be some structural factors pointing in this direction). There is no attempt to generalise the empirical results in this sense. Their value lies rather in developing the relevant categories for building an analytical model, which itself remains open. Thus, a different sample of interviews might indicate a slightly different position of the Mayor; yet still within the model. It is precisely the model’s role to accommodate various empirical constellations, including accounting for the regional differences between the communes.

6. Conclusion

The paper concerned social practices shaping the Mayorship in the rural communities. The empirical material showed a relatively informal character of the interactions between the Mayors and the citizens due to the Mayors’ familiarity with the local community. Furthermore, the problems the citizens would like the Mayor to address go well beyond their competence scope. In an analytical model developed in the paper, I thus placed the Village Mayor as a ‘neighbour-sovereign’ type of Mayor. The research also showed that the Mayors aim to maintain the ‘neighbour’ image but face legal constraints that limit their ability to fully embody the ‘sovereign’ role, despite their efforts to assist citizens.

⁴ Another notable aspect in this regard is the Mayors’ definition of their role. When asked if they considered themselves politicians, the Mayors consistently responded with a negative. Instead, they preferred to see themselves as ‘managers’ or ‘leaders of the local community’. They associated politics with the national level, viewing it as divisive and particular. In contrast, they viewed local government as focused on improving residents’ quality of life. This perspective aligns with the findings of Gendźwiłł and Wiszejko-Wierzbicka (2022), who highlight a similar sentiment among Poles regarding the relationship between local government and politics. This also reflects a broader phenomenon noted by the anti-politics scholarship, in which local politicians deny their political status, reinforcing the negative assumptions about the political class (Boswell et al., 2019, pp. 63–65).

Based on these findings, the main potential direction for further exploration concerns examining social practices related to other authorities at local, regional, and national level. Previous research indicates that the size of the community affects perceptions of authority. Larger governmental bodies may be seen more as 'officials' rather than 'neighbours'. Additionally, since communes hold significant importance in people's lives, citizens might view higher-level authorities more as 'administrators' than 'sovereigns'. Understanding how these structural factors shape social practices towards different authorities remains a key area for investigation.

The practical implications of this research concern the institutional framework of the Mayorship. On the one hand, the Mayors are powerless in the case of many problems that are addressed by the citizens, which might create tension with the image of the 'sovereign', thus raising the citizens' frustration. On the other hand, the same image of the 'sovereign' might be used to reinforce – already unequal – relationship between the Mayor and the citizens (Adamowicz, 2015; Bartnicki, 2019). Any future discussion on the status of the Mayorship must take these two problems into account.

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Sąsiad wszechmocny. Społeczne konstituowanie urzędu wójta

Abstrakt

Cel pracy: W artykule podjęto tematykę kształtowania urzędu wójta w Polsce poprzez społeczne praktyki. Jego celem było pokazanie, że zrozumienie tej funkcji wymaga wyjścia poza analizę stanu prawnego i uwzględnienia praktyk związanych z wykonywaniem tego urzędu. Ramę teoretyczną analizy stanowiła teoria praktyk Pierre’a Bourdieu.

Metoda badawcza: Badanie empiryczne oparto na 23 półustrukturyzowanych wywiadach przeprowadzonych z wójtami z różnych regionów Polski.

Kluczowe wyniki: Materiał empiryczny wskazuje, że mieszkańcy często zwracają się do wójta w sposób nieformalny, sąsiedzki, a także kierują do niego problemy dalece wykraczające poza formalny zakres jego kompetencji. Na podstawie tych ustaleń w artykule rozwinięto model analityczny konceptualizujący urząd wójta poprzez praktyki, które go konstytuują.

Główne wnioski: Dla badanych wójtów praktyki te generują podwójny obraz roli: są postrzegani jako „sąsiad-władca”, łączący codzienną bliskość z oczekiwaniami sprawczości i autorytetu. Wójtowie adaptują się do tej roli, starając się podtrzymywać wymiar „sąsiedzki”, podczas gdy ograniczenia prawne uniemożliwiają im pełne wcielenie aspektu „władczego”. Opracowany model może być również zastosowany do analizy tego, w jaki sposób codzienne interakcje kształtują inne lokalne i instytucjonalne role przywódcze.

Słowa kluczowe: wójt, gmina wiejska, teoria praktyki, praktyki społeczne, interakcje wójt–obywatele.