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SENIOR CITIZENS' COUNCILS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF PUBLIC GOVERNANCE IN POLAND

Abstract

The aim of the article is to present senior citizens' councils in Poland in the context of the functions they fulfil in the design and implementation of public policies at the local level. The article presents the results of a pilot study on the activities of municipal senior citizens' councils in Poland. The theoretical background for the conducted research is public governance as a process of making decisions on activities relevant to local communities. In this approach, the governance method was used to extend the catalogue of actors involved in this process. Senior citizens' councils are institutionalised advisory, consultative and initiative bodies involved in the governance process.

KEYWORDS

municipal senior citizens' councils, local governance, senior policy

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE

gminne rady seniorów, współzarządzanie na poziomie lokalnym, polityka senioralna

1. INTRODUCTION

The thesis that in ageing societies the importance and role of seniors take on a new dimension is now becoming a true statement. One of the forms of seniors' activity in public policy is the functioning of senior citizens' councils, which are an important element of the development of civil society. In the assumptions of public governance, senior citizens' councils are an important institutional element of the public policy process and, in particular, of senior policy. This issue has become very important in recent years due to the significance of these bodies in both local and regional architecture, as well as for national public policy. The aim of the article is to present the operation of senior citizens' councils in Poland in the context of functions they fulfil in the design of public policies at the local level. Two research questions were also formulated for the purposes of the research:

1. In what spheres of the activity of senior citizens' councils (according to its members surveyed) is the effectiveness of the council as an advisory and consulting body manifested?
2. In what areas of the functioning of senior citizens' councils (according to its members surveyed) is the effectiveness of the council as an initiative body manifested?

Using the classic approach to the cycle of public policies, the place and role of senior citizens' councils in this process have been presented. In the theoretical layer, the literature query, the institutional and legal method and the analysis of existing data have been used. Surveys conducted in two voivodships: Pomorskie and Opolskie, the choice of which was dictated by methodological premises, provided the empirical material for the analysis. These regions are characterised by the highest percentage of functioning senior citizens' councils in relation to the total number of municipalities located in them. As a result, the survey, which was carried out in December 2022, examined a purposive sample consisting of 70 senior citizens' councils. The survey questionnaires were sent via the Internet to the official e-mail addresses of the senior citizens' councils. In response, 14 questionnaires completed by the chairpersons of the councils were obtained, which became the basis for an analysis of the functions performed by senior citizens' councils in shaping local policies in Poland. The questions contained in the questionnaire were prepared on the account of the literature on the subject, and their construction allowed the respond-

ents to share their experiences and views on the functioning of the senior citizens' council in the municipality. The oldest surveyed senior citizens' council was established in 2012, six of them were formed in 2018-2019 and three were created in 2014, 2015 and 2016 respectively. The youngest senior citizens' council started its operation in 2021. Two of the senior citizens' councils operate in large cities and the others are in small urban or urban-rural municipalities.

2. ESTABLISHMENT AND DEVELOPMENT OF SENIOR CITIZENS' COUNCILS IN POLAND

In the years 2013–2021, a systematic increase in the number of senior citizens' councils in Poland was recorded. While in mid-2017, there were 290 of them (including county senior citizens' councils), at the end of 2019 there were already 380 (a total of 396, including senior citizens' councils in 16 districts of Warsaw). This means an increase by 25% in just two years. Although the number of councils of seniors grew at an impressive pace at that time, it is worth emphasising that in those days they existed only in every sixth municipality (detailed data is presented in Table 1). In the following years – until the end of 2021 – the number of senior citizens' councils in Poland increased by another 43.¹

Table 1. Senior citizens' councils in Poland in 2013–2021

Year	Number of senior citizens' councils	Percentage of municipalities with a senior council
2013	46	1.85
2014	75	3.0
2015	100	4.0
2016	197	8
2017	290	12
2018	338	13.6
2019	380	15.3
2020	381	15.4
2021	423	17.0

Source: A. Ganeczko, *Rady Seniorów w Polsce. Podstawa Prawna i liczba*, "Polityka Senioralna" 2017, No. 4, p. 5; *Informacja o sytuacji osób starszych w Polsce za 2019 r.*, MRiPS, Warszawa 2020, pp. 61–62; *Informacja o sytuacji osób starszych w Polsce za 2020 r.*, MRiPS, Warszawa 2021, p. 47; Pomorskie Forum Rad Seniorów 8 June 2022, <https://rops.pomorskie.eu/2022/06/09/za-nami-ix-spotkanie-pomorskiego-forum-rad-seniorow-relacja/>

¹ When this article was written, there was no official data on the number of senior citizens' councils in 2022.

The Pomeranian Voivodship was at the forefront in terms of the dynamics of the creation of senior citizens' councils, where, according to the data of the Regional Centre for Social Policy of the Marshal's Office of the Pomeranian Voivodship, both in 2020 and 2021, four municipal senior citizens' councils were established. In 2022, one more was created and another one was being formed (Pomorskie Forum Rad Seniorów, 2022). It is worth stressing that the Pomeranian Voivodship took the leading position in terms of both the absolute number of existing senior citizens' councils and the percentage of municipalities (in the voivodship) where they function (almost 35%). A similar quantitative increase in the number of new councils of seniors occurred in the Warmińsko – Mazurskie Voivodship (in 2021, the number increased by 13) and Wielkopolskie (another 16 new councils).

Table 2. Senior citizens' councils in Poland in the years from 2016 (May) to 2021 (December) by voivodships

	Number of senior citizens' councils				Number of municipalities			Percentage of municipalities with senior citizens' councils			
	2016	2019	2020	2021	2016	2019	2020	2016	2019	2020	2021
Poland	257	380	381	423	2478	2477	2477	10.2	15.3	15.2	17.0
Dolnośląskie	16	33	32	32	169	169	169	9.5	19.5	18.9	18.9
Kujawsko-Pomorskie	14	11	13	17	144	144	144	9.7	7.6	9.0	11.8
Lubelskie	17	20	22	25	213	213	213	8.0	9.3	10.3	11.7
Lubuskie	12	20	20	20	83	82	82	14.5	24.0	24.0	24.0
Łódzkie	7	10	13	12	177	177	177	4.0	5.6	7.3	6.7
Małopolskie	19	34	37	35	182	182	182	10.4	18.6	20.3	19.2
Mazowieckie	41	36/+16*	33 /+18*	36	314	314	314	13	11.4/16.5	10.5/16.2	11.4
Opolskie	15	23	23	23	71	71	71	21.1	32.3	32.3	32.3
Podkarpackie	11	23	26	25	160	160	160	6.8	14.3	16.2	15.6
Podlaskie	9	13	14	15	118	118	118	7.6	11.0	11.8	12.7
Pomorskie	18	35	39	43	123	123	123	14.6	28.4	31.7	34.9
Śląskie	27	35	37	37	167	167	167	16.1	20.9	22.1	22.1
Świętokrzyskie	10	13	15	13	102	102	102	9.8	12.7	14.7	12.7
Warmińsko-Mazurskie	8	23	16	29	116	116	116	6.9	19.8	13.7	25.0
Wielkopolskie	20	32	24	40	226	226	226	8.8	14.1	10.6	17.6
Zachodniopomorskie	13	19	23	21	114	114	113	11.4	16.6	20.1	18.4

*+ district senior citizens' councils of the capital city of Warsaw

Compiled and calculated on the basis of: *Informacja o sytuacji osób starszych w Polsce za rok 2015*, MRPiPS, Warszawa 2016; *Informacja o sytuacji osób starszych w Polsce za rok 2016*, MRPiPS, Warszawa 2017; *Informacja o sytuacji osób starszych w Polsce za rok 2019 r.*, MRiPS, Warszawa 2020; *Informacja o sytuacji osób starszych w Polsce za rok 2020 r.*, MRiPS, Warszawa 2021; *Informacja o sytuacji osób starszych w Polsce za rok 2021 r.*, MRiPS, Warszawa 2022; Pomorskie Forum Rad Seniorów 8 June 2022, <https://rops.pomorskie.eu/2022/06/09/za-nami-ix-spotkanie-pomorskiego-forum-rad-seniorow-relacja/>

As for the distribution across the country, in 2021 – apart from the aforementioned Pomorskie and Wielkopolskie voivodships – the largest number of senior citizens' councils in the spatial arrangement operated also in Śląskie, Mazowieckie, Małopolskie and Dolnośląskie voivodships. On the other hand, there were the fewest of them in the following voivodships: Łódzkie (12), Świętokrzyskie (13) and Podlaskie (15).

However, the situation looks a bit different when we approach the analysis of the situation from the perspective of the relative distribution – i.e. the percentage of municipalities in individual voivodships where municipal senior citizens' councils function. Based on the data (presented in Table 2), it can be concluded that, apart from the above-mentioned Pomorskie Voivodship clearly maintaining its leading position also in this dimension compared to the national average, relatively the largest number of councils functioned in 2021 in the following voivodships: Opolskie (in every third municipality), Lubuskie (in every fourth municipality), Śląskie, Dolnośląskie and Warmińsko-Mazurskie (in every fifth municipality). On the other hand, the smallest share of municipalities with operating councils of seniors was in the following voivodships: Łódzkie (6.7%), Mazowieckie, Lubelskie and Kujawsko-Pomorskie, where, on average, a senior citizens' council functioned in every eighth municipality.

3. MUNICIPAL COUNCILS OF SENIORS IN THE PROCESS OF GOVERNANCE IN POLAND

Today's public policy governance is moving towards participatory governance in which citizens are perceived as stakeholders who are in a constant process of co-creating public policies together with the public administration. Participatory policy-making is an approach that facilitates the involvement of individuals or groups in problem definition, formulation, choice of preferred policy solutions, design, pursuance, monitoring and evaluation of policies through consultative and participatory means to achieve accountability, transparency and active citizenship.² Participatory governance is based on a significant remodelling of the relationship between the government and the citizen. The citizen becomes a key subject in the process of shaping public policies. Participation of various social groups in the political decision-making process is the basis of modern, effective

² *Meaningful participation of older persons and civil society in policymaking: Designing a stakeholder engagement and participation process*, UNECE, 2021, p. 5, <https://unece.org/population/news/unece-calls-meaningful-participation-older-persons-and-civil-societypolicymaking>.

governance.³ It is based on the assumption that citizens and other stakeholders play an active role in political processes at all stages of the policy cycle and various levels of public administration. Governance understood as self-organising networks becomes a separate governance structure, and thus a challenge to search for new network functionalities and new forms of cooperation.⁴

The application of the participatory model of governance encourages public administration units to introduce appropriate methods and tools. A significant role is played by various types of social advisory and consulting bodies, including youth councils, senior boards or thematic councils, e.g. sports councils. The task of such bodies is to support the processes of shaping public policies in the form of initiating, advising, consulting or monitoring activities, initiatives or strategies. The institutionalised nature of these entities contributes to the improvement of the public governance process, as thanks to their existence it is possible to create a permanent forum for the exchange of opinions between various groups of residents and representatives of the administration. It should be noted that public administration auxiliary bodies are a relatively new phenomenon in Poland. For example, the creation of this type of bodies at the municipal level dates back to 2001 when the Act on Municipal Self-Government was amended (then it concerned, among others, the formal appointment of youth municipal councils).

The processes taking place in society will translate into participatory processes, appointing new actors, new forms of participation or new participatory tools. Among the actors of the public governance process are seniors,⁵ whom researchers consider to be the groups of growing importance for public governance. Senior citizens' councils, as one of the forms of institutionalised governance, are established in Poland at various administrative, local (municipal senior citizens' councils, county senior citizens' councils) and regional levels (voivodship senior citizens' councils). In Poland, they are most common at the local level in the legal form of municipal councils of seniors⁶ and are an example of local participatory governance. The municipal senior citizens' council is a legal institu-

³ C. Ansell, A. Gash, *Collaborative Governance in Theory and Practice*, "Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory" 2007, No. 18 (4), pp. 543–571; M.E. Warren, *Governance-driven Democratization*, "Critical Policy Studies" 2009, No. 3 (1), pp. 3–13; E. Sørensen, J. Torfing, *The Democratic Anchorage of Governance Networks*, "Scandinavian Political Studies" 2005, No. 28 (3), pp. 195–218; H. Heinelt, 2018. *Handbook on Participatory Governance*, Edward Elgar Publishing, Cheltenham 2018; S. Bussu, A. Bua, R. Dean, G. Smith, *Introduction: Embedding participatory governance*, "Critical Policy Studies" 2022, No. 16 (2), pp. 133–145.

⁴ R.A.W. Rhodes, *The New Governance: governing without government*, "Political Studies" 1996, No. 4 (44), pp. 652–659.

⁵ L. Gratton, A. Scott, *100-letnie życie. Codzienność i praca w erze długowieczności*, Kurhaus Publishing Warszawa 2017, p. 21; K. Noworól, *Wyzwania partycypacji w zarządzaniu publicznym*, Instytut Spraw Publicznych UJ, Kraków 2020, p. 109.

⁶ The Act of 9 March 2023 amending the Act on Municipal Self-Government, the Act on County Self-Government and the Act on Voivodship Self-Government. It is in the legislative procedure and awaits the signature of the President of the Republic of Poland.

tion, it has a formal character and the normative basis for its operation is regulated by the act.⁷ This affects the shape, role and importance of this body in the system of public governance. Municipal councils of seniors are an institution created pursuant to the amendment of 9 March 2023 to the Act on the Municipal Government of 5 March 1990 and they operate on the basis of the added Article 5c sec. 2 and 5. The previously applicable Act of 11 October 2013 regulated the unsanctioned possibility of creating councils of seniors in municipal self-governments – they had been established before but on different terms (originally in several large cities in the country), i.e. most often at the executive body (president, mayor) pursuant to his ordinance, and were composed of representatives of institutions such as social assistance centres, municipal offices, organisations acting for the benefit of the elderly.⁸

Currently, pursuant to Article 5c sec. 2 a-d of the Act on the Municipal Government, the council of seniors is appointed by the municipal council, at its own request or at the request of the residents of the municipality who are 60 years of age or over. The legislator provided that in a municipality with up to 20,000 inhabitants, the application must be signed by at least 50 inhabitants of this municipality who are over 60 years of age, and in the case of municipalities with more than 20,000 inhabitants – at least 100 such residents. The body competent to appoint a municipal council of seniors is (only) the municipal council and the former is established on the basis of a resolution with justification and the statute (formal decision on the appointment: adoption of a resolution of the municipal council).⁹

The main objectives of senior citizens' councils are: representing seniors' communities through cooperation with the municipal authorities, presenting proposals for tasks and activities for the benefit of seniors, expressing opinions and formulating proposals for local government activities for seniors, submitting comments to local law acts, supporting various forms of seniors' activity and initiatives aimed at strengthening intergenerational social ties as well as disseminating knowledge about the needs, rights and opportunities of the elderly. It is worth noting that the legislator provided for the possibility of creating county and voivodship senior citizens' councils. Importantly, these councils can be and are also created for auxiliary units, such as districts or housing estates. One of the examples is district senior citizens' councils established in Warsaw. This is certainly justified by the size of the city in whose districts the

⁷ It is also worth paying attention to the critical analyses of the legitimacy of the existence and functioning of senior citizens' councils, expressed e.g. by Marek I. Mączyński, *Komentarz do art. 5 (c) ustawy o samorządzie gminnym*, (in:) P. Chmielnicki (ed.), *Ustawa o samorządzie gminnym. Komentarz*, Warszawa 2013, Lex/el.

⁸ K. Starzyk, *Co gminom po radach seniorów, co seniorom po radach? Jak się samorządzić?* "Instytut Idei" 2014, pp. 76–77.

⁹ M. Kubiak, *Gminne rady seniorów z perspektywy lokalnej polityki senioralnej*, "Wrocławskie Studia Politologiczne" 2018, No. 25, pp. 104–105.

number of inhabitants is equivalent to (or even exceeds) the population of an average municipality.

Researchers analysing senior citizens' councils as a tool for civic participation distinguish several basic and essential, closely related features that distinguish these bodies from other entities associating elderly people or acting on their behalf.¹⁰ Firstly, the significance of senior citizens' councils in the process of managing public policies is determined by the functions they perform as councils of seniors are consultative, advisory and initiating entities. In the literature on the subject, it is rightly stated that these adjectives describe the functions of municipal senior citizens' councils.¹¹

That is why the tasks that individual senior citizens' councils fulfil are specified in their statutes. In the analysed statutes of councils of seniors, the most common tasks are:

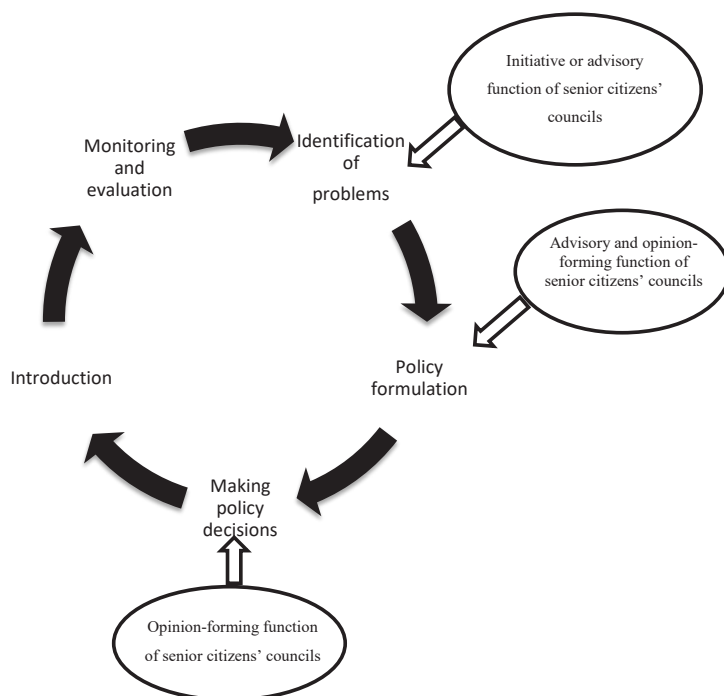
- adopting the bylaw of the council and its amendments;
- cooperation with the municipal authorities in meeting important expectations and needs of the elderly;
- presenting opinions on matters concerning seniors to the authorities by adopting resolutions or positions, including expressing opinions on draft resolutions;
- initiating and promoting social, educational, cultural, sports, recreational, ecological and charitable activities, including applying to municipal councils for undertaking a legislative initiative by authorised entities;
- cooperation with municipal councils for seniors, non-governmental organisations, senior clubs, universities of the third age, municipal senior citizens' councils and entities acting for the benefit of the elderly.

Analysing the tasks of senior citizens' councils in the context of their role in the cycle of public policies, the individual functions performed by them can be located at individual phases of the cycle of public policies.

¹⁰ M. Czech, T. Mróz, A. Wyszowski, D. Wyszowska, *Economic and Legal Instruments of Local Senior Policy in the Level of Municipalities Submitted*, "European Research Studies Journal" 2020, No. 21 (2), pp. 557–576.

¹¹ W. Borczyk, N. Jachimowicz, W. Nalepa, *Rady seniorów w praktyce – wybrane zagadnienia*, Fundacja Europejski Instytut Rozwoju Obywatelskiego, Nowy Sącz 2014, pp. 23–25; R. Mędrzycki, *Funkcje gminnych rad seniorów*, "Ruch Prawniczy, Ekonomiczny i Socjologiczny" 2017, No. 3, 121.

Figure 1. Location of the functions of senior citizens' councils in the cycle of public policies



Source: own study.

Thanks to their institutional basis, councils of seniors play the role of a formal partner in the dialogue between the community and the local authority. As active stakeholders, seniors systematically increase their impact on the public sphere by engaging in the formalised structure of social participation. It is worth noting that senior citizens' councils are relatively new actors in the governance process, but they systematically extend their role in the process of shaping public policies.

It is important that the councils of seniors play an **initiative** role. The initiative function largely concerns the co-organisation of local activities addressed to the elderly. It gives the council an opportunity to submit its own ideas for activities for the elderly, thus broadening the perspective of local authorities by adding the specific needs of this social group. It is performed in various ways and can also be combined with a diagnosis of the needs of the elderly in the municipality. When analysing the initiative function, attention should also be paid to the integration of various organisations and environments supporting the elderly in the municipality.

All entities acting for the benefit of seniors can participate in the process of creating and implementing public policies as part of the social consultation pro-

cess. However, the council of seniors is entitled to submit applications to authorised bodies to take a legislative initiative.¹² This is a function that places the council of seniors in the phase of initiating political activities. The legislative initiative is a political and legal tool that allows the senior council to directly influence the policy of the municipality. As such, the legislative initiative belongs to the catalogue of participatory tools with by far the greatest impact. The successful legislative initiative of the council of seniors leads to a change in the legal order in the municipality. At this stage, the cooperation of communities and organisations supporting the elderly is important. In such a case, the council of seniors can be an effective link between their activities and turn their particular interests into common solutions.¹³

The **consultative** function means the possibility of giving opinions on local law acts, local strategies, development programmes, draft resolutions put forward by municipal authorities and undertakings or investments concerning issues important not only to the elderly but also to all residents. Fulfilment of this function means that the municipal authorities obtain information and acquire knowledge as to the position of local society on the subject covered by the opinion.¹⁴ What is important, however, is that “the results of the consultations carried out by the municipality authorities, apart from the cases clearly indicated in legal provisions, are not binding”.¹⁵ As Radosław Mędrzycki¹⁶ notes, it seems that each municipal local government body as well as the senior council itself can request such consultations. As part of its consultative function, the municipal council of seniors should be a substantive partner for local government authorities, expressing opinions on matters submitted to it that are important from the point of view of the functioning of seniors in the local community. However, the position of the municipal senior council taken in the cases submitted to it is not binding (as

¹² A group of residents can also propose legislation. In January 2018, the amendment to the Act on Municipal Self-Government introduced Art. 41a, which granted a group of residents of the municipality the possibility of bringing forward resolutions (similar solutions were introduced to the systemic acts on the county and the voivodship self-government). The legislator specified that in a municipality having up to 5,000 inhabitants such a group must consist of at least 100 residents eligible to vote in municipal council elections, in a municipality having up to 20,000 inhabitants – at least 200 people and in a municipality having up to 200,000 inhabitants – at least 300 people.

¹³ E. Gulińska, *Communal Seniors Council as an Institution of Social Participation in Local Government*, “*Studia Iuridica Lublinensia*” 2020, vol. XXIX, No. 1, pp. 104–105.

¹⁴ M. Augustyniak, A. Barczewska-Dziobek, J. Czerw, G. Maroń, A. Wójtowicz-Dawid, *Gminne rady seniorów – wykładnia przepisów i efekty ich stosowania. Wzory i schematy działań*, Wolters-Kluwer S.A., 2016, pp. 79–80.

¹⁵ M. Augustyniak, A. Barczewska-Dziobek, J. Czerw, G. Maroń, A. Wójtowicz-Dawid, *Gminne rady seniorów – wykładnia przepisów i efekty ich stosowania. Wzory i schematy działań*, Wolters-Kluwer S.A., 2016, p. 81.

¹⁶ R. Mędrzycki, *Funkcje gminnych rad seniorów*, “*Ruch Prawniczy, Ekonomiczny i Socjologiczny*” 2017, No. 3, p. 125.

emphasised above) – the final decision is always made by the competent authorities of the municipality.

The **advisory** function enables the council of seniors to participate constantly in the political decision-making process. It concerns not only passing comments and suggestions as to the activities of the municipality in matters related to seniors but also advising on all matters that are taken up by the municipal council. The legislator recognised the potential of the group, which is the municipal council of seniors, its expertise, and gave it the right to advise municipal organisational units on handling municipal tasks.¹⁷ Councils of seniors are established to participate in the decision-making process regarding activities strategic for the benefit of the local community. The advisory function they perform consists in giving opinions on draft resolutions concerning, e.g. matters of seniors in the municipality, participation in the municipal council meetings and ongoing work for the municipality. This means, therefore, that senior citizens' councils are placed at the stage of making political decisions regarding the shape of public interventions in the form of strategies or initiatives.

From the perspective of public governance, the inclusion of institutionalised entities seems easier than the involvement of individual actors in the decision-making process. It is worth noting that seniors as a social group play an increasingly important role in the process of governance. As research on various forms of governance shows, organised participation brings much greater effects in the process of creating public policies, which is why the European Union recommends supporting institutionalised forms of civic participation. It is based on the assumption that citizens and other stakeholders play an active role in political processes at all stages of the policy cycle, which may also result in the formalisation or institutionalisation of a process of civic participation in public governance.

4. OPERATION AND ROLE OF SENIOR CITIZENS' COUNCILS IN LOCAL POLICIES

What is the role of senior citizens' councils in local policies in Poland and are they significant in this policy today? Both the role of such councils and their importance in public policy are manifested in the functions they perform. The aim of the conducted research was, among others, to update the state of knowledge on the operation of senior citizens' councils in Poland in the context of the functions assigned to them. The collected empirical material (from the 14 surveyed councils

¹⁷ M. Augustyniak, A. Barczewska-Dziobek, J. Czerw, G. Maroń, A. Wójtowicz-Dawid, *Gminne rady seniorów – wykładnia przepisów i efekty ich stosowania. Wzory i schematy działań*, Wolters-Kluwer S.A., 2016, p. 82.

of seniors) proves that distinguishing the advisory function from the consultative function poses some problems for members of senior citizens' councils, as they often equate the consultative function with the advisory one. Nevertheless, it is worth differentiating the tasks they perform within the respective frameworks.

The specificity of the advisory function of senior citizens' councils is expressed in the constant participation of the representatives of senior citizens' councils in the meetings of the municipal council, as well as in the involvement in the work of working teams. In five of the surveyed municipalities, representatives of senior citizens' councils regularly participate in all sessions of the municipal council. What is more, they pointed out that the council of seniors is invited every time to participate in the work of the municipal council. In three municipalities, the advisory function was performed incidentally, which involved participation in the sessions of the municipal council devoted to strategic activities related to its development. In other cases, representatives of councils of seniors did not take part in the work of the municipal council. Some of the surveyed members of the councils stated that they did not join the work of the municipal council because they were not invited to it.

More than half of the surveyed senior citizens' councils perform consultative functions in their municipality. In turn, only in one of them, the senior council receives all the resolutions of the municipal council for evaluation. In the remaining ones, this function largely consists in giving opinions on initiatives addressed to seniors, such as co-financing various types of activities, classes and workshops (or installation of benches in public space), also relating to all residents (e.g. construction and renovation of public utility infrastructure). The advisory and consulting capacity of senior citizens' councils also encompasses consulting issues strategic for the development of the municipality. Three of the surveyed senior citizens' councils indicated their participation in giving opinions about strategic documents, such as the senior policy programme, the municipal senior card programme, the resolution on the spatial development plan and the budget resolution.

It is worth paying attention to one of the statements of a senior citizens' council representative from the Opolskie Voivodship, who stated that the municipal authorities do not provide the senior council with matters for consultation because the senior citizens' council is too active and comes up with new initiatives that bring specific effects for seniors only. In the context of this statement, it is worth noting that the representative of the senior citizens' council mentioned the implementation of initiatives addressed to seniors, including the creation of a senior club, providing senior organisations with rooms in the town hall and preparing assumptions for a long-term programme for seniors. It may, therefore, seem that the role of the senior citizens' council as an advisory and consultative body is underestimated by its members in this case. Moreover, to obtain a more complete picture of the situation, another statement of a representative of this council should be quoted, according to which *invitations to every session* [of the municipi-

pal council] *are sent to it, but during the 2 terms of office of the Senior Council, senior policy was not mentioned at all.*

Slightly fewer than half of the surveyed senior citizens' councils did not receive any project for consultation, nor were they asked for any opinion on the initiatives undertaken by the municipality. In the statement of one of the members of the senior citizens' council in the Pomeranian Voivodship, bitterness can be heard when he states that *the municipal authorities do not expect any consultations or opinions; the consultative and advisory role is rather dead.* The identical opinion was expressed by a representative of one of the senior citizens' councils in the Opolskie Voivodship who pointed out that *the municipal authorities do not look forward to any consultations and opinions from it* [the senior citizens' council].

Nevertheless, the conducted research showed that the consultative or advisory function is performed by senior citizens' councils in relation to entities other than the municipal council. Senior citizens' councils perform, for example, a consultative function in relation to seniors living in a given town. Most often, it is carried out through direct contact with seniors in the municipality (13), senior councillors' office hours for seniors (9) and cooperation with non-governmental organisations (9).

On the basis of the research, it can also be concluded that the advisory function is performed towards other entities, including, in particular, non-governmental organisations and nursing homes. Most (12) senior citizens' councils constantly cooperate with these entities, sharing information and experience with them. Half (7) collaborate with the police and slightly fewer (6) with schools and parishes. The answers also pointed to permanent participation in the work of municipal libraries or culture houses (7 councils). It seems, therefore, that senior citizens' councils are advisory bodies for many entities at the local level. At this point, it is worth emphasising the potential of senior citizens' councils, which are 'links' between local authorities and other entities, e.g. senior organisations.

Importantly, each of the surveyed councils of seniors showed commitment: it proposed various types of actions that the municipal authorities could take to improve the quality of life of residents – not only seniors. However, there is no dependence indicating that senior citizens' councils are omitted by the municipal council. This is evidenced by the fact that some senior citizens' councils that indicated that they did not perform any consultative and advisory functions, managed to effectively present their proposals of initiatives to the municipal authorities and the expected result was achieved. One of the senior citizens' councils revealed that all the projects initiated by it were implemented by the municipal authorities. This means, therefore, that the lack of the consultative and advisory function does not preclude the effective fulfilment of the initiative function.

Out of 14 surveyed councils of seniors, only one indicated that none of the initiatives suggested by it since its establishment had been implemented by

local authorities. Namely, the senior citizens' council wanted to initiate the creation and financing of senior clubs in several places in the city, the creation of a day-care home, maintaining the operation of the local activity centre (after the previously completed project) and the construction of a columbarium at the cemetery. However, none of these initiatives was supported by the municipal council. Importantly, in the case of this board, no consultation or advisory activities were undertaken either. A representative of the council said that in his opinion *the council was virtually of little importance for seniors, city councillors and municipal authorities. The basic purpose for which the council was established (i.e. consultative and advisory) was not utilised.* Moreover, the representative of this senior citizens' council stated that the members of the council *were not ready to act as organisers of activities such as festivals, feasts, etc. Perhaps a different composition of the council would change that attitude.* Therefore, it is worth pointing out in this context that the effectiveness of activities undertaken by the senior citizens' council depends not only on its importance for the municipal authorities but also on its composition, commitment, willingness and capability to act.

The other surveyed senior citizens' councils can boast of effectiveness in the fulfilment of the initiative function. It turns out that members of senior citizens' councils are people interested in both the development of their municipality and the establishment of schemes aimed at seniors. It is noteworthy that each of the surveyed councils took steps to implement various types of initiatives. Both councils with several dozen members and those consisting of only a few people (functioning in large urban townships as well as in small rural municipalities) are active in this respect. Therefore, the initiative function of senior citizens' councils does not depend on the number of its members or the size of the municipality. At the same time, the results of empirical research showed that all ventures initiated by councils of senior (and carried out by municipal authorities) were considered by them to be their greatest successes. This means that the effectiveness of the fulfilment of the initiating function is perceived by the representatives of the surveyed senior citizens' councils as a certain indicator of success and a measure of the role they play in local policies.

Only one representative of the council of seniors, in which neither the consultative and advisory functions nor the initiative function were performed, considered the organisation of a conference on the situation of seniors in the municipality a success, the only effect of which was the installation of more benches in parks and streets. What is more, he expressed the opinion that *no other actions postulated in the post-conference conclusions had been taken.* A detailed analysis shows that the conference was organised before the COVID-19 pandemic and the senior citizens' council did not return to its previous level of activity after this difficult period. It was pointed out that the reason for this state of affairs was *the psychophysical condition of the members of our council.*

In the context of the performance of the functions assigned to the councils of seniors, it is also worth emphasising the experience and knowledge of its members about the situation of the elderly in particular. The advisory and consultative functions cannot be effectively performed without being familiar with the situation of the elderly. It is therefore important to indicate that in the surveyed municipalities almost all senior citizens' councils (13) monitor the situation of the elderly in various forms, from information meetings with representatives of senior organisations to weekly seniors' office hours, during which conclusions, comments and proposals regarding life in the municipality are recorded. It is also worth pointing out an innovative solution introduced in one of the surveyed municipalities. When asked about the method of monitoring the situation of the elderly by the council of seniors, its chairman replied: [thanks to] *the operating Telephone of Kindness, we receive a lot of important information.*

In the conducted research, representatives of senior citizens' councils highlighted the importance of the functioning of the council of seniors as an advisory, consultative and initiative body for the municipal council, which, however, often remains at the declarative level. The discrepancy between what is expected from councils of seniors and their actual functioning is large in many municipalities. In the opinions of some representatives of senior citizens' councils, doubt about the agency or the possibility of influencing the decisions made by the municipal authorities can be heard. Although there are also opinions indicating the possibility of implementing the proposals by municipal councils in various forms, it seems to be positively correlated with the decisive action and leadership skills of the chairpersons of municipal councils of seniors.

5. CONCLUSION

Participation is now playing an increasingly important role in the formulation of public policies, at the international, national, regional and local levels. The practical implementation of an effective governance process highlights the special role of institutionalised forms of civil society in this case. One of them is senior citizens' councils, which are important actors in the decision-making process in the field of public policies at the local and regional levels. The activity of elderly people in the social, economic and political spheres is likely to increase. Institutionalised forms of political activity will probably develop, becoming (to a greater extent) part of the new institutional architecture of public governance. World examples show the existence of this type of actors also at the national level (e.g. the national councils of seniors in Germany or Canada). In Poland, for over 10 years, we have witnessed the constitution of these bodies, especially at the local level, but more and more senior citizens' councils are also formed at the

regional level. Perhaps in the future, a national senior citizens' council will also be established, although it is likely that due to institutional and organisational conditions, the local level of influence of senior citizens' councils will remain the domain of the Polish model of public governance.

Nevertheless, the empirical research shows that the activities of senior citizens' councils in Polish municipalities encounter many difficulties. There is lack of full understanding of the role that such bodies should play in the political decision-making process. In many cases, the misunderstanding seems to be mutual: both among members of senior citizens' councils and representatives of municipal councils, village mayors or town mayors. Just like in any other case, statutory provisions will remain dead if they do not meet a real need and do not respond to the situation in Polish regions.

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