

Organisation as an arena of political game – Polish perspective

Lilla Młodzik, *University of Zielona Góra (Zielona Góra, Poland)*

E-mail: lillamlodzik@gmail.com

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7845-5329>

Abstract

The article's aim is to indicate the importance of the political aspect of the organisation. Fundamental relations, common fields can be found between politics and organisation. It is impossible to explain politics without taking into account its organisational aspect. It seems reasonable closer integration of the research of the two disciplines, including a model of the organisation as an arena of political game. These issues are the main research problem of the article. The considerations presented here fit into a separate discipline in Poland – political science and administration, which includes the humanistic strand of management sciences. Such a classification is well known in the scientific world (OECD).

Keywords: organisation, political game, organisational political science, politics

Organizacja jako arena gry politycznej – polska perspektywa

Streszczenie

Celem artykułu jest wskazanie znaczenia politycznego aspektu organizacji. Między polityką a organizacją można znaleźć podstawowe relacje, wspólne obszary i przedmioty badań. Nie da się wyjaśnić polityki bez uwzględnienia jej organizacyjnego aspektu. Zasadny wydaje się postulat ściślejszej integracji badań obu dyscyplin, w tym modelu organizacji jako areny gry politycznej. Kwestie te są głównym problemem badawczym artykułu. Przedstawione rozważania doskonale wpisują się w wyodrębnioną w Polsce dyscyplinę – nauki o polityce i administracji, w skład której wchodzi humanistyczny nurt nauk o zarządzaniu. Taka klasyfikacja jest dobrze znana w świecie nauki (OECD).

Słowa kluczowe: organizacja, gra polityczna, politologia organizacji, polityka

Introduction: The interference of political science and management science

The interference of political science and management science has always been known. Politics happens in the world of organisations, it has an organisational dimension. In turn, political phenomena and processes occur in organisations, so it is necessary to see the political sense in them. It is impossible to prudently analyse, describe, and clarify politics without taking into account its organisational aspect. The term *organizatologia* has been known for a long time, and it defines the sum of knowledge containing hypotheses and theorems derived from research conducted in a specific field (Kast, Rosenzweig 1979). It has not caught on the Polish scientific ground. "Organisatological" paradigm, however, enriches the theoretical and methodological instrumentation of both the political scientist and the management science researcher.

The article's aim is to indicate the importance of the political aspect of the organisation. Fundamental relations and common fields can be found between politics and organisation. These issues are the research problems addressed by the author, who proves the thesis of a two-way relationship between organisation and political play, mainly through an analysis of the literature on the subject.

Polish political science examines the issues in question to an incomplete, unsatisfactory degree, despite the fundamental works of such authors as Michels, Ostrogorsky, Simon and March (Kaczmarek 2010, 2017). Meanwhile, contemporary politics is increasingly played out in a seemingly apolitical sphere. It is similar in the case of management sciences – they do not study the issue in question sufficiently, although there is a Polish trend that examines the phenomena of power and politics in organisations (e.g. Krzyżanowski 1992; Bielski 2004; Bolesta-Kukułka 1983).

The demand for the analysis of politics through the lens of the organisation paradigm certainly seems to be growing. The more the mechanisms of politics are located in seemingly extra-political spheres of reality, the more it is necessary to look for the actual mechanisms of politics in other areas – in various kinds of dependencies and informal ties – in the intra-organisational, often scrupulously masked mechanisms of political parties, in their oligarchisation, in the functioning of political processes and entanglements of modern corporations, in the interactions of selected segments of traditional political institutions and those spheres of social reality, in which planes of dissonance and social conflict are defined. The political scientist must not focus exclusively on the formal system of the state or reduce politics to a problem of power. This is far too little today.

The study of political phenomena, taking into account their organisational dimension, is a somewhat ancient direction of political science reflection in Poland today (scientists known in this direction of studies: Lamentowicz, Skrzygły, Dobieszewski, Waclawek, Zand, Sztompka). Similarly, the study of the political nature of organisation and management, practiced by Bolesta-Kukułka (1983), Koźmiński and Zawiaślak (1982), Kostera (1996), has certain deficits. The aforementioned deficits are particularly evident, when the

mechanisms of public and private organisations are juxtaposed. Here are the significant differences found in the literature between these two classifications:

- the dependencies of public organisations are much more multifaceted than those of private organisations;
- the responsibility of managers of public organisations is more complex;
- in the public sector the entanglement with the pressures of various interest groups is greater, public organisations are, according to La Palombara (2009), more “porous” in this regard;
- the public sector is also more strongly influenced by the personal, vested interests of actors.

In the private sector, on the other hand, problems of power and politics tend to be treated marginally and interpreted as a kind of organisational pathology. The open pursuit of power is often considered as a weakness in management, as politicking or a disease. It is hard to like the disease, but it certainly needs to be recognised and understood.

Politics is present in all organisations, all human constructs and systems. An organisation can be dominated by politics, it can undergo different forms and stages of development in this regard.

The arena of political game as one of the models of politics in the organisation

Several models of politics in organisations can be distinguished: treating politics as their pathology, political interpretations of the strategic process, capturing organisations as political systems, as an instrument of domination or precisely as an arena of political game.

The importance of the game (of power) in organisations has received attention for a long time. This issue has been and is intensively addressed in the sociopolitical approach in the study of organisations. In this trend the following concepts are mentioned:

- Cyert and March's (1963) behavioural (behaviouralist) concept of the organisation,
- Pfeffer's (1992) analysis of the relative nature of resource scarcity versus expectations and claims,
- the concepts of Crozier and Friedberg (1982), in which the game is a mechanism, integrating the player into the system, allowing him to pursue his interests,
- the interpretation of Etzioni (1975), who sees organisations as complex social aggregates that are communities of disparate interests formed on the basis of values.

Polish authors have also developed the political arena perspective in the study of organisations. Notably by Koźminski and Zawisłak (1982), as well as Bolesta-Kukułka (1983): a game as a synonym for a conflict. From the point of view of current considerations, I would like to focus on two of the aforementioned concepts related to the category of “uncertainty” in political games, so important from the point of view of contemporary world.

The first concept is related to organisations seen as political coalitions. It was formulated by Cyert and March (1963), as well as representatives of the organisational game school in the Polish literature (Piotrowski 1990; Latusek-Jurczak, Olejniczak 2018). In this view, the primary task of top managers is to construct and maintain dominant political coalitions. The role of political intermediary is central for organisational management. The function of the dominant coalition is to deal with uncertainty. The basis of a coalition is the establishment of the organisation's common interests and the goals that reflect them. The establishment of goals is carried out through coalition negotiations, as a result of which the terms of cooperation, criteria and rules for the operation of the coalition, mutual obligations and burdens, sharing of benefits and costs are determined.

The second important concept, exposing the organisational relationship between politics and uncertainty in the context of the political arena, is contained in the analysis of Crozier and Friedberg (1982). The starting point of their concept is team action, which is a social artefact. In the analysis of team actions, a special place is given to revealing and explaining the unintended or counterproductive effects of actions. Action always includes the problem of necessary trade-offs between results and means. Team action and organisation complement each other; they are variations of the same problem structuring the area, in which the action is carried out. Organisation is the most explicit, formalised and consciously controlled form of structuring the area of action. Therefore, it can be treated as a model of a social system, which is admittedly an artificial construction (Crozier, Friedberg 1982). This makes it possible to study the same problems of cooperation and interdependence of actors pursuing divergent and often even contradictory individual goals. Integration in the process of cooperation can be achieved, either through coercion or the threat of its use in emotional and ideological manipulation, or through overt or covert bargaining and negotiation. Mitigation of the associated risks is possible through social constructions of team actions that ensure cooperation without destroying the freedom of the actors. These constructs create games structured by formalisation and rules determining a set of possible strategies of actors. Uncertainty, therefore, is a fundamental asset in negotiation. Actors, able to control specific sources of uncertainty, use this asset in arrangements with others, who become dependent on them as a result. This is because what constitutes uncertainty from the point of view of the problem, becomes power from the actors' point of view. Team action, after all, is nothing else, according to the creators of the concept under discussion, a constant politics.

Power is a kind of "material" here, being at the same time the core, the nucleus of any team action, around which the processes of negotiation and integration develop. The types of power are closely related to the types of sources of uncertainty. The key mechanism of integration is the game, through which actors structure their power relations and regulate them in a way that makes cooperation possible, combining freedom and coercion. The player is free, but must, in his own interest, accept the rules of the game and associated constraints. The consequence of games is that organisations strive for shared outcomes. These are achieved through the design of games, their nature and rules, through which participants can pursue personal benefits, satisfy their own interests

and implement their own strategies. The structure of the organisation turns out to be nothing more than a set of games.

However, the actions of the organisation cannot be reduced to impersonal rules and orders. In a situation of their excess, a "vicious circle of supervision and control" appears - overformalisation (the number, strictness, and detail of rules), and actors can use rules and regulations to fight for overt or behind-the-scenes power in the organisation.

Types of political arena, types of political games and tactics

Regardless of the adopted concept, the following characteristic features of organisational games can be distinguished (Karcz 2016: p. 173; see also: Koźmiński, Zawiślak 1982: p. 91–93):

- players or coalitions can pursue their own interests,
- the game takes place in a changing environment (social, economic, etc.),
- the game has relatively fixed and known rules for all players,
- the outcome of the game is unpredictable, and the value of possible benefits varies from player to player, and it is subject to constant change,
- players engage in the game with varying intensity,
- game participants must use a mutually understandable language,
- the game can take place as an unwritten psychological contract.

The rules of the game are relatively fixed and unchangeable. Players can be individuals, states, electoral committees or various types of organisations. The choices made by players are arranged in sequences, based on predictions of the potential behaviour of other players, which is made possible by the existence of (recognised) preferences. Predictive power must be ensured by the assumption that each game should have, at least, one equilibrium point, i.e. a position where there are no incentives for players to make further choices.

The analysis of an organisation understood as a political arena should be focused on the relationship between power, interests and conflict (Karcz 2016). Interests should be understood as a complex system of predispositions, including goals, desires, a set of values and expectations that influence a person's choice of course of action. Interests are the guiding motive behind the actions of game participants and functioning coalitions. They are also related to the player's areas of interest that he or she wants to maintain or expand, and the position that he or she wants to defend or gain. Morgan (1986) distinguishes three types of interests, interrelated:

- 1) task-related, linked to the job,
- 2) career-related, a consequence of the aspirations,
- 3) resulting from a person's personality traits, attitudes, values, beliefs and preferences.

The concepts of organisational political game pay attention to the dissimilarities of interests and needs of different organisational actors and the various efforts that they make

to realise interests and satisfy needs. Therefore, organisations are conflict systems, they are not monolithic in nature, they are internally heterogeneous, there is competition for scarce resources. They become stakes in a game, which importance, degree of desirability of resources and values are culturally conditioned. Thus, the political dimension of the organisation manifests itself in differences of interests and fluctuations of organisational power, culturally produced. The goals of organisational actors are individual. In order to achieve them, they must direct them towards what is common. Joint decision-making is possible only through various agreements and mutual compensation, i.e. the alignment of benefits (Piotrowski 1990; Latusek-Jurczak, Olejniczak 2018).

An interesting typology of organisational games was presented by Bugdol (2007), who referred to games in Berne's (1964) psychological view of transactional analysis (child-parent-adult). The author distinguished the following types of games (Bugdol 2007: p. 35–46; see also: Karcz 2016: p. 183):

- 1) *Busy vacation* – is working “for show” in order to generate interest, respect, etc.
- 2) *Personal attack* – consists of a collective attack on an employee, perceived as a threat.
- 3) *Face the puddle* – is based on the use of strong punishments and rewards, leading to dependence of the victim.
- 4) *Prisoner's dilemma* (the most frequently cited example of a non-zero-sum game). *Prisoner's dilemma* in an organisational context occurs, when two employees are accused (e.g. of theft, disloyalty), separated from each other and required to place the blame on the other. Each player can decide to cooperate with the other player or betray the other player. If both players decide to betray, then both players will be punished. On the other hand, if one player decides to betray and the other player decides to cooperate, then the first player can avoid punishment, while the second player will receive a more severe punishment than in first option. The third option is mutual cooperation between the players (they do not admit guilt and do not accuse each other). In this case, the players can avoid punishment together or the punishment will be of little severity. Therefore, it can be seen that the outcome of the game depends on the cooperation between the players, which is conditioned by the level of trust between the players and the available opportunities for the players to communicate.
- 5) *Kissinger* – negative evaluation of work performance in order to raise performance standards.
- 6) *Stowaway* – a person's use of common property even though he does not bear the cost of operating it. Also known as the so-called *tragedy of commons*.
- 7) *What will you do to me if you catch me* – pretense and simulated work (shirking).
- 8) *Cat and mouse* – participants in the organisation work effectively only when they are controlled by their superiors.
- 9) *In competence* – this game consists of breaking up existing power arrangements through restructuring.

The fundamental importance of political games in organisations is also attributed to Mintzberg (1973, 1979, 1985, 1989), who points out that the organisation, seen as a politi-

cal arena, is controlled by conflict, and managers focus on actions within the unit and negotiations to lead to the mitigation of the resulting unrest. Mintzberg¹ distinguishes the following types of games:

- 1) *Insurgency game*. The aim of this game is to resist authority. It can also be undertaken to oppose official ideology or to bring about organisational change. It takes a variety of forms from protest to rebellion, and it is usually undertaken by participants located at lower levels of the hierarchy, feeling the greatest burden of formal authority. It can take the form of a game of independence. It is generally undertaken by weaker organisational actors, and it involves contesting and undermining authority. An asset in the game may turn out to be, for example, access to knowledge and information.
- 2) *Counter-insurgency game*. It can be undertaken by those who have legitimate power. Various means, political and formal, are used in it. An example is ecclesiastical excommunication.
- 3) *Sponsorship game*. It includes building a power base by using superiors as protectors. Participants bind themselves to actors of higher status, ensuring their loyalty in exchange for power.
- 4) *Alliance building game*. Participants of similar status negotiate unofficial contracts to support each other in order to build their power bases and bring about advancement in the organisation's structure;
- 5) *Empire building game*. Expanding the power base primarily through subordinates rather than through cooperation with peers. This game is often played by the management of the organisation.
- 6) *Budgeting game*. The object of the game is not positions, but access to the means, with which it is possible to build a power base. The game is generally open, its rules are clear, and it is often associated with the operation of formalised organisational procedures that result in the distribution and redistribution of scarce resources, such as the planning process.
- 7) *Expertise games*. Their basis is knowledge. They include the use of expertise to strengthen the power base. They may involve flaunting, with simulated also and not only real competence. Real experts participate in the game using technical means and knowledge, emphasise their uniqueness and indispensability, as well as try to prevent trivialisation or over-popularisation of the knowledge they possess. Those persons who are not actually experts, but pretend to be, give the impression that their work is based on expert knowledge, strive to gain control over expert knowledge.
- 8) *Lording game*. It allows power holders to create a base of power by abusing legitimate power against those who have less or no power. It can involve using legitimate power in unauthorised way. This is how power can be used by

¹ According to publications: Mintzberg 1989 and 1985: p.137–139; see also Polish interpretation: Kaczmarek 2010: p. 106–109.

managers and officials in certain situations, both in relations with subordinates and superiors. In mission-driven organisations, the game may involve imposing one's ideology, while in meritocratic contexts, on the other hand, it may involve experts imposing their knowledge and point of view on others.

- 9) *Line vs. staff (managers versus experts)*. It is not only about increasing personal power but also about defeating a rival. Managers equipped with power and experts equipped with knowledge face each other. Each side tends to legitimise its power by unauthorised means.
- 10) *Rival camps game*. This game uses all to destroy the opponent. It usually occurs when a game involving alliance building or empire building leads to the formation of enemy camps. A multiplayer game turns into an interpersonal conflict and a zero-sum game. This game leads to the greatest divisions, takes the form of antagonistic. It can consist, for example, of rivalry between departments in a company, such as between marketing and production. Conflict of this kind can involve competing personalities. It can also include competing missions, such as in prisons, where the aspirations to isolate convicts and to rehabilitate them can prove contradictory.
- 11) *Strategic candidates (the game of change at the top)*. It is undertaken to bring a change in the organisation. Individual and collective actors promote strategic changes favorable to themselves through political means. Many actors can participate in the game – e.g. analysts, staff, lower and higher level management, directors. Actors promote themselves or their candidates politically before following formal procedures. Such a game often combines elements of other games. Empire-building may legitimise the game's goals, alliances are made for victory. This may be accompanied by a division into two camps.
- 12) *Young Turks*. This game is undertaken not to carry out a change or to oppose the government, but to challenge it at all, to overthrow it and bring a change on a huge scale. Small groups of "Young Turks" close to the centre of power try to fundamentally change organisational strategy, the nature and structure of power, access to knowledge and information, organisational ideology, or act to change leadership. This game can mean a kind of *coup d'état* in the organisation, it can involve an "unexpected succession", a radical change of those in power also, while maintaining the existing power system.
- 13) *Whistle blowing game*. It is usually a short and simple game, which goal may also be organisational change. Someone with access to sensitive information, often located at a lower level of the hierarchy, "blows the whistle" – passes information about questionable, pathological or illegal activities of the organisation to someone influential from the outside. This way, "blowing the whistle" fulfills the role of a warning signal.

The cited typologies of games demonstrate how many forms an organisational political game can take. The types listed can be modified and expanded (Kaczmarek 2017). According to the author, in the case of "blowing the whistle," for example, the game

could be about "venting the air" rather than the warning, for which it is known. It is about reducing organisational tensions, both internally and in relations with the environment. The whistle would then not so much serve to signal, but precisely to reduce internal pressure. Such a game would act as a kind of safety valve.

Mintzberg adds games to this list, the meaning of which is the revolutionary transformation of the organisation, the remodelling of its identity, changing the structure of exploitation and domination as the organisational hegemon. An interesting game to analyse could be the colonisation of organisations accompanying, e.g. mergers or hostile takeovers, or the restructuring game, so popular in the organisational world, conducted under pro-efficiency pretexts, but in reality often serving to redistribute power and privileges.

Similarly, we could distinguish the game of delegation of authority. Delegation of power, after all, is often an instrument for delegators to shed responsibility from themselves to the delegated, with inadequate sharing of resources and resources with the delegated. It would probably also be interesting to distinguish organisational games, a game designed to overshadow, to distract participants, to give them e.g. an apparent sense of influence or participation in solving key issues, to focus their interest on problems that are safe from the point of view of the players playing the real game in the shadow of the games. A reflection on the types of organisational games conducted, for example, together with an analysis of the sources and premises of organisational power, could be an interesting topic for a separate research paper.

With respect to the dimensions of conflict (its intensity, extent, and duration), four types of political arena can be distinguished (Mintzberg 1989, 1985: p. 141):

- complete political arena – the conflict is intense and pervasive, but brief (unstable);
- confrontation – the conflict is intense, but confined and manageable, can be brief (unstable);
- shaky alliance – the conflict is moderate and confined, but can be relatively stable;
- politicised organisation – the conflict is moderate but pervasive, and can be relatively stable.

Participants in the organisational game use designated strategies and tactics. Strategy is defined by the choice of goals and means, which are intended to be a specific response to opportunities (offensive strategies) and threats (defensive strategies) that may arise in the future (Koźmiński, Latusek-Jurczak 2017). The dominant influence in this regard is a set of beliefs and values. Tactics, on the other hand, come down to the choice of courses of action to achieve goals, carried out by individual actors or their coalitions. A classification of political tactics used by game players is presented by Hensel (2008: p. 115):

- 1) *Assertiveness*. The components of this tactic are: demanding compliance, giving orders, setting deadlines for tasks, and demonstrating dissatisfaction.
- 2) *Ingratiation*. It is characterised by the use of praise by superiors, polite requests, and building a sense of importance in the person who is the subject of the tactic.
- 3) *Rationalisation*. It is focused on using rational argumentation to convince others of specific solutions.

- 4) *Exchange*. It involves offering a favor while expecting it to be reciprocated in the future.
- 5) *Acquisition and/or omission*. A person using this tactic in the course of getting things done tries to enlist the support of influential actors or bypass the immediate supervisor.
- 6) *Coalition formation*. Its essence is to bring together actors who individually have little influence, but they can more easily achieve their goals in a group.

Researchers on the subject of organisational games point out that the substrate of conflict is the aforementioned, uncertainty, which amplifies the game itself. The greater the uncertainty, the greater the likelihood of a political game (Kapoutsis 2016). The margin of freedom available for players is linked to the discretionary (latent) power of the game participant (Karcz 2016: p. 178–179). The type of organisational power of an actor depends on the source of uncertainty (see: *Table 1*).

Table 1: Sources of uncertainty vs. types of organisational power

Sources of uncertainty	Types of organisational power
Ignorance and lack of skills	the power of the „expert”
Relations of the organisation with the environment	the power of the „liaison”
Lack of information necessary to perform tasks	the power of the „informant”
Ambiguity and multifunctionality of regulations	the power of the „legislature”

Source: own elaboration based on publication by Piotrowski 1990: p. 31–32.

Today, it is increasingly difficult to get players to control the sources of uncertainty. We live in a world of VUCA (Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, Ambiguity), BANI (Brittle, Anxious, Non-linear, Incomprehensible) and RUPT (Rapid, Unpredictable, Paradoxical, Tangled). In addition to the sources of uncertainty, the scale of uncertainty is important. Attention should be paid here to the so-called scarcity effect, which occurs when important resources for players are available in a limited range. The greater the resource constraint, the greater the importance of power and political struggle (Zawadzki 2006; Szczupaczyński 2018). Designing and controlling the game system can be a research problem for another article).

Finally, one more important point. If we look at systems in socio-political terms, we can see their organisational dimension. Such approach makes it possible, according to Crozier and Friedberg (1982: p. 35), to transpose the rules of organisational analysis to other constructs, provided, however, that two modes of reasoning (i.e., strategic reasoning and systems reasoning incorporated into the game model) are consistently applied in parallel. The strategic perspective of analysis in game terms, makes it possible to transfer the achievements and experience of analysis of formal organisations to other, less structured organisations and social situations. In turn, systems analysis in game terms, incorporating the problem of contradictions and conflicts of interest, their structural determinants, mechanisms of their functioning and institutionalisation, traditionally at the centre of political science interests, creates a potentially synergistic coupling of the achievements of political science

and management science. It may be helpful here to be systemic not in the mechanistic but in the socio-cultural sense, treating organisations not only as the results of intentional, conscious activity, but also as – in certain situations – dissipative structures of the emergence of social order from chaos, as self-referential, self-positioning systems, functioning according to the rules of dialectical rather than deterministic logic (Kaczmarek 2017).

Conclusions

Politics, like other spheres of social life, are in a certain perspective a component of the world of organisations. Political phenomena and processes are organisational in nature. Between politics and organisation can be found fundamental relationships, common fields and objects of research (Kaczmarek 2010; Sikorski 2019). Hence, it seems reasonable to postulate a closer integration of the research of the two disciplines, including the model of the organisation as the arena of political play, striving for a synergistic unification of the achievements of both sciences and using the political science of organisation both in research and in university education. The presented considerations fit perfectly into the discipline that has emerged in Poland – political and administrative sciences, which includes the humanistic stream of management sciences. The mentioned category is common in the Western scientific world.

Lilla Młodzik – university professor at the Institute of Political Science and Administration of the University of Zielona Góra, doctorate in management science, habilitation in political science and administration. Civil servant trainer, an expert of the Polish VET team (Vocational Education and Training) in social and civic competences. Interdisciplinary research interests in the field of public management: organisational culture, competences.

Lilla Młodzik – profesor uczelni w Instytucie Nauk o Polityce i Administracji Uniwersytetu Zielonogórskiego, doktorat z nauk o zarządzaniu, habilitacja w zakresie nauk o polityce i administracji. Trenerka urzędników, ekspertka polskiego zespołu ds. kształcenia zawodowego *VET team* (ang. *Vocational Education and Training*) w sferze kompetencji społecznych i obywatelskich. Interdyscyplinarne zainteresowania naukowe w obszarze zarządzania publicznego: kultura organizacyjna, kompetencje.

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