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The regional and local party in light of the definition of a political party¹

Abstract: The regional and local party in light of the definition of a political party

The author proposes a new concept of a political party, one which takes into account modern political groups active in local and regional communities. The stipulated definition is: *a political party is a mass, distinct and formalized social group, which articulates group interests, acts based on a political program cohesive with social ideas, and achieves its aims in the execution of public authority by utilizing vertical central and territorial state institutions or relatively autonomous structures (territorial self-government, territorial autonomy, federal units)*. There is no need to create a separate definition of a regional and local party thanks to the proposed concept. The author does not share the position that a regional party is an ethno-regionalist party. It is submitted, that the political sciences understanding of a political party should differ from the legal view, and should not emphasize its legal status, but its functions and social roles. In this view, even trade unions, associations and even formalized groups of voters can be considered “parties”, if they actively and directly utilize public authority to achieve their group interests in the event of their election.

Keywords: regional party, local party, regional and local political party systems, decentralization

Political sciences is rich in literature on political parties and party systems. There is an abundance of definitions and descriptions of parties available. This also applies, to some extent, to their classification and typology. Despite the differences in their wording, the definitions are often very similar to one

¹ The article is a modified version of the publication entitled *Partia regionalna, partia lokalna, regionalne i lokalne systemy partyjne – aspekty teoretyczne*. W: *Autonomia terytorialna w perspektywie europejskiej*. T. 3: *Regionalne i lokalne partie polityczne i systemy partyjne*. Red. J. Iwanek, W. Wojtasik. Toruń 2014.

another. Some definitions emphasize only certain features of a party, and very often they are incomplete and fragmentary. Other ones, in turn, make the party appear as a fully democratic entity. Therefore, there is no need to create any extra definitions. One may successfully select these features of a party, already referenced in the literature, that seem reasonable, meet the requirements of completeness and demonstrate a universal perspective on the historical and modern forms of these institutions. In this way, a slightly different definition will be created, which, in the opinion of the author, will outline the constitutive characteristics of a party.

1. Above all, however, it is worth pointing out that a political sciences definition of a party should differ from its legal variation, even if the two overlap. Constitutional law (in particular constitutions, the laws on political parties, and electoral laws) often, when defining political parties, specify the criteria for their legalization and the legal conditions of their functioning. It thus delimits a certain boundary and the formal (procedural) rules of its participation in the affairs of the state. This also concerns its naming, allowing it to be distinguished from other social organisations. In this sense, from a legal perspective, a political party is such an organisation, which meets the applicable legal requirements. In other words, if a social organisation does not meet the legal criteria of a political party, then from the point of view of other scientific disciplines, this does not mean that it is not one. A political party is not only a social organisation with a formal (legal) political party status. In my view, the criterion of legality is not a critical feature determining whether an organisation should be considered a political party or not. However, in empirical studies, the dominating trend, unfortunately, is to perceive parties in legal terms. Such an approach considerably narrows down the field of research. The idea does not simply lie in distinguishing between legal and illegal parties, but in drawing attention to the key features of these organisations and the social roles they perform, which, from a political sciences perspective, should in itself qualify them as political parties. Organisations with a different formal status can easily be considered as such. For example, trade unions can successfully qualify as parties (e.g. in Poland of the 90s), including associations or even, under certain conditions, formalised citizen groups, provided that within a certain timeframe they perform such social roles and possess the features which are considered important for such organisations. At a regional and local level², even those entities, which by way of competition strive to win seats at self-government institutions, can be considered as parties, even though they do not possess the legal status of a political party (e.g. associations which support a given candidate in local government elections). After

² The concepts of localism and locality are of course only figurative. Here they mean social, administrative and self-government levels which stand lower than the regional level.

all, it is political power, and its special type, i.e. the state in particular, which lies in the centre of interest of political science. If then a social organisation, regardless of its formal status, is set on winning state power (here understood as self-government power), or directly influencing the politics of a state on various levels, then it meets one of the key criteria qualifying it as a political party. In light of this assumption, it is also important to select a suitable definition of the state. However, it will surely not suffice to accept a definition which puts special emphasis on its institutional and organisational nature. On the other hand, a definition highlighting the functional nature of the state also takes into account the bodies of the territorial self-government as a constituent element of the organisation of the state.

2. A political program is a constitutive feature of a political party and is the theoretical basis for achieving group interests. However, the programs of contemporary political parties are not always derivatives of an ideology or a political doctrine. The theoretical and ideological bases for the operation of parties are often substituted by ideological eclecticism, a superficiality of slogans or a party's electoral program constructed according to the requirements of political marketing. Very often slogans are also entwined with religious values. A party's connections with an ideology need not be of a constitutive nature, even though they are difficult to avoid completely. The degree of formalisation of its internal structure is also differentiated, from clear-cut rules regarding membership through to a partial resignation from such solutions with a membership system based on party supporter categories. Its scope of formalisation, including the way of appointing a party's authorities and becoming a member, is also of lesser importance. Voluntary membership in a party is not an essential feature either. Neither indirect parties nor parties with obligatory membership shared this requirement. What is also important is that political parties do not necessarily have to achieve their aims directly by winning state power. Very often this is achieved also by opposition parties by way of concluding interim agreements with the ruling parties, via social mobilisation embracing an alternative political program, by organising social protests etc., i.e. through such actions, which are capable of modifying the politics of a ruling party. Nor should we consider as political parties only those organisations, which via democratic means strive to achieve state power by way of elections.

3. The concept of *mass*, as understood from a sociological perspective, is a feature I consider crucial, though there are also parties which are ones in a legal sense, but have not garnered mass support or simply do not wish to do so and do not participate in social life with the ultimate goal of winning political power. For this reason, in a political sense, they cannot be considered as such. Some more of the important features also include a party's degree of identity (name, symbols, etc.), the formalisation of its structure (at least to

a minimum degree), connection with social ideals (not necessarily identification with a given ideology), a political program expressing group interests and political objectives, and its approach to performing public functions either directly or indirectly through the central institutions of the state or other local government bodies. Winning state power, which is an essential designator of a party from a political theory point of view, has not only been taken into account in the foregoing description, but has also been enriched by the experiences of the recent decades. Political parties can be found at self-government and autonomous community levels. Therefore, all organisations found therein which exercise power, can, in my view, be considered as political parties. This is regardless of their legal form and whether they have the formal status of a political party or not. It can therefore be ascertained that **a political party is a clearly defined social organisation acting on the basis of a political program, which corresponds to social ideals, that aims to fulfil group interests via a competitive direct or indirect defining of the politics of the state.** The definition contains the constitutive features of a political party considered herein as *differentiae specificaе*, differentiating it from other social organisations (*genus*). The political objective of a party is of course pursuing group interests, which it considers to be its own, by way of shaping the power relations remaining at the disposal of the state. Such an understanding of a party, however, has its drawbacks: It is not precise enough because it makes no clear distinction between the features of regional and local parties.

4. Decentralisation processes in democratic states have, for several decades now, stimulated the development of political parties at regional and local community levels. This is a permanent phenomenon, which is characterised by its own, distinct features, differentiating parties from national-level parties and party systems. Katarzyna Sobolewska-Myślik made the following interesting comment: “[...] together with the rise in the meaning of the region as a plane of political activity, certain, new phenomena begin to appear in the politics of both the regional and state level, which should be taken into consideration and which are difficult to notice if focussing solely on party competition taking place at the centre of the political system.”³ The theoretical proposals concerning these organisations and systems (regional and local party systems), in which they operate, involve, among others, taking into account the territorial space and the space of local and regional communities, as well as, though to a limited extent, the ethnic and national aspects as well. To reiterate, it is for this very reason that it is so important to distinguish between the political theory concept of a political party form its legal (legislative) meaning. This, in particular, concerns the definitions of the

³ K. Sobolewska-Myślik: *Partie i systemy partyjne na poziomie regionu. Przykład Szkocji i Katalonii*. Kraków 2012, p. 10.

regional and local political party. The phenomena taking place within contemporary parties, and, in consequence, also in the party systems of democratic states, are in close correlation with processes of a broader and more complex scale. They are connected with changes in political systems which they are, after all, a constituent and a subsystem of. Regional and local party political subsystems have formed. They also determine the social conditions for the functioning of regional and local political and legal systems. This is a consequence of the social processes we have been observing for the last few decades. Below is a general overview of the said processes and their consequences: 1) Globalisation stimulates the processes of regionalisation in Europe. Regionalisation in the Europe of “old democracies” involved and still involves searching for political system forms for its regions, whereas in the “new democracy or *quasi*-democracy Europe” regionalisation meant striving to achieve statehood; 2) Decentralising transformation took place everywhere. This feature, unlike any other, became a constitutive feature of contemporary democracy. It is important to define a certain minimum level of decentralisation, and to find ways to measure it; 3) Currently it is possible to distinguish between three political system forms found in the political systems of regional bodies of government: the system of a constituent part of a federation, the territorial autonomy system and the territorial self-government system⁴; 4) The presence of regional and local parties as well as regional and local party systems is noted regardless of the form of the political system of the state. This is because regional and local systems are dependent on and the will of political entities (the ruling parties). The parties, either directly or through state authorities, express their will on decentralisation and the political system forms to be used by the regional and local entities. This fact, in the majority of cases, concerns state-wide parties, though it would be unfair to state that regional and local parties have no influence in this respect; 5) the level of state decentralisation depends not only on the political and legal system solutions of local governments, but to an equally significant extent on the presence of regional and local political parties and party systems on these levels.

5. Scientific literature on regional and local parties is much more modest in this respect. This is because research on these issues was undertaken much later.⁵ This is understandable, since decentralisation processes led to a per-

⁴ More in: M. Domagała, J. Iwanek: *Regionalne i lokalne ustroje polityczne*. Cz. 1. W: „Studia Politicae Universitatis Silesiensis”. T. 10. Red. J. Iwanek, M. Stolarczyk, współpr. R. Głajcar. Katowice 2013, p. 15–29, and Cz. 2. W: „Studia Politicae Universitatis Silesiensis”. T. 12. Red. J. Iwanek, R. Głajcar. Katowice 2014, p. 30–31, 34–36.

⁵ In Polish political sciences literature, one of the first publications dealing with the theoretical issues of regional parties is the cited book of K. Sobolewska-Myślik: *Partie i systemy partyjne...* The earlier Polish publications were in fact analyses of particular regional groups.

manent shaping of parties on a regional and local scale. Even though some political parties have a long tradition (e.g. the Basque Nationalist Party dates back to 1895, Sinn Fein to 1905, Plaid Cymru to 1925), it was the development of decentralisation that contributed to the creation of an unprecedented amount of new parties and to the rise of their political importance. An increased interest in this issue dates back to the 1990s.

The literature presents two viewpoints on regional parties. The first, most popular of approaches, treats regional parties⁶ as ethno-regionalist entities. This is not always apparent when reading the titles of different publications, but for their authors it should be clear that we are dealing with synonyms. One of the first people who drew attention to this fact was Derek Urwin “We can perhaps say that in a state that contains more than one ethnolnational group, each with a distinctive sense of identity that has become politicized, there are two broad kinds of citizens’ rights.”⁷ The first type, continues Urwin, are the rights of the individual, while the other concerns the essence (the core) of collective group identity, created in response to the risk of centralisation. It comes as a result of the development of democracy. Furthermore, it is observed that we are dealing with a specific process of blocking. On the one hand we are observing “The inability of governments in contemporary democracies to enjoy totality of control in disputes arising from politics difference, and the nature of the fetters that hamper their freedom of action, relate also to some basic principles of democratic life.”⁸ Daniel L. Seiler, in turn, draws attention to the fact that one of the main aims of regional parties is the creation of a nation state. These include autonomist parties, whose intention is to garner the support of ethnic and regional communities. They intend to achieve this goal by defending their privileges until they reach full independence.⁹ Ferdinand Müller-Rommel also brings the issue of regional parties down to ethno-regionalist groups. Such parties are also referred to as non-state parties.¹⁰ Huri Türsan also sees it this way and pretty much repeats Derek Urwin’s view expressed in 1982, where he claimed that the essence of a regional party and its most distinctive feature is a strong connection to and identification with a part of a state’s territory, as well as garnering support from ethnic groups. This is the *sine qua non* condition of such parties’

⁶ Sometimes one may come across the concept of a non-state party, which should rather be regarded as a non-national party.

⁷ D. Urwin: *Nationalism, Territoriality and Democracy*. In: *Balancing Democracy*. Ed. D. Urwin. London 2001, p. 61

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 72.

⁹ D.L. Seiler: *A Historical Overview on Non-state Wide Parties in Western Europe*. In: *Non-state Wide Parties in Europe*. Ed. L. De Winter. Barcelona 1994, p. 16, 20.

¹⁰ F. Müller-Rommel: *Ethno-regionalist Parties in Western Europe: Empirical Evidence and Theoretical Considerations*. In: *Non-state Wide...*, p. 181 and subsequent articles.

existence. In the case study section of the book, its authors analyse only the ethno-regionalist parties of Great Britain, France, Italy, Hungary, Austria and Belgium.¹¹ Margarita Gomez-Reino, Lieven De Winter and Peter Lynch also use the term autonomist party, and emphasise that such parties are characterised by an ideology that involves balancing between the left and the right and voice slogans promoting self-government, self-determination and federalism. These groups seek leadership and, as they are focussed on achieving prospective objectives, they are very sensitive to internal divisions and dismemberment. Internal conflicts often tend to break out within such parties on the grounds of their participation in governments.¹²

Dawn Brancati views the issue in a wholly different way. She claims that “Regional parties, meanwhile, are defined as parties that compete and win votes in only one region of a country. Regional parties may participate in national or regional elections so long as they only compete in a region of country at either level of government. [...] Regional parties are not necessarily ethnic or religious parties and vice versa. [...] This definition of regional parties begs the questions of definition of the regions. In this article regions refers to the political regions of a country, that is, the level directly below the national level of government. In the United States, the political regions are the states ...”.¹³ This is an important observation, however it appears peculiar that Brancati does not treat the Basque Nationalist Party as an ethno-regionalist party.¹⁴ Nevertheless, she makes a very accurate correlation between regional party issues and the decentralisation of the state. Brancati writes that “Neither can decentralization be completely attributed to regional parties. Although autonomy is often one of principal demands of regional parties.”¹⁵ Regional parties are found in almost every country in the world, at nearly all levels of government and their influence on this process is considered to be very significant. Not only do they improve democracy by representing the regions, but they also contribute to strengthening the ethnic and regional identities. On the other hand, they may contribute to political instability by encouraging ethnic conflicts and secessionism. Brancati combines the electoral issues of regional parties with the decentralisation of the

¹¹ *Regionalist Parties in Western Europe*. Eds. L. De Winter, H. Türsan. London–New York 1998, p. 5.

¹² Compare M. Gómez-Reino, L. De Winter, P. Lynch: *Conclusion: The Future Study Autonomist and Regionalist Parties*. In: *Autonomist Parties in Europe, Identity Politics and the Revival of the Territorial Cleavage*. Ed. L. De Winter, M. Gómez-Reino, P. Lynch. Barcelona 2006, Vol. 2, p. 250–255.

¹³ D. Brancati: *The Origins and Strengths of Regional Parties*. “British Journal of Political Science” 2008, Part 1 (January), Vol. 38, p. 138.

¹⁴ Draws attention to the fact that PNV represents the interests of the entire population inhabiting the region, and not only the interests of the Basques. Compare *ibidem*.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 140.

state, which she understands as the division of power between many levels of democratically elected governments having the power to undertake independent decisions in a given territory. She has also aptly stated what William H. Riker had also claimed, namely that decentralisation sometimes means federalism. She also distinguished between political and fiscal decentralisation.¹⁶ According to Brancati, regional parties constitute groups, which, per their strategy, mobilise regional communities without demonstrating an ethnic or religious nature. Regional parties are generally incapable of exercising national power (apart from situations in which a region spans a considerable part of the state), but have the power to compete with state-wide parties in regional elections. An important advantage for these parties are the lower election expenses they have to bear and their higher effectiveness in defending regional interests, as well as the possibility, in some countries, to win seats in the higher chambers of parliament.¹⁷

The ideas presented above indicate that regional parties function in a decentralised democratic system and are, in most cases, restricted to one region only. They participate in regional and state elections, represent the interests of regional communities, effectively mobilising them to help them pursue their political strategies. The predominant view is that they are mainly ethno-regionalist parties which represent the interests of regional ethnic or national communities. The listed features of regional parties are not enough to constitute a definition of such parties, even though some authors have ventured to do treat them as such. Therefore, the conclusion is that the intention was rather to add a certain set of new features to the already existing concepts of political parties, while not making a clear indication of which of these definitions would be accepted by them. Such an illustration of a regional party is certainly acceptable, though with one important reservation. I share the position of Dawn Brancati that regional parties are not a synonym of ethno-regionalist parties. However, it is difficult to agree with the assertion that as soon as an ethno-regionalist party stops representing the interests of the community of an entire region, it only becomes a regional party.

6. Perceiving regional and local parties as nationalist or ethno-regionalist parties is, in my view, unjustified. Based on various examples of regional parties, it is clear that ethno-regionalist ones are a specific type of the regional party. Such an approach only allows for regional parties to be divided into ethno-regionalist and non-ethno-regionalist parties. Ethno-regionalist par-

¹⁶ Brancati indicates that Spain and India are more centralised politically than fiscally, whereas Norway and Denmark – the other way around. The remark about fiscal decentralisation is also significant when evaluating decentralisation processes in Italy, where the term “fiscal federalisation” is used, a term which may lead to terminological chaos, something already observed in Polish literature.

¹⁷ Compare *ibidem*, p. 135–139.

ties, in my opinion, are only a type of a regional party and not a separate, parallel category. Furthermore, I do not believe that “parties at the regional level” and “regional parties” are synonyms. As demonstrated by the experience of many states, state-wide parties have very successfully functioned and competed with each other on a regional level. In many cases, these parties possess a decentralised structure (Spain has gone so far as to use the term party federalisation), which changes the nature of political competition. Katarzyna Sobolewska-Myślik has very aptly observed that: “A high level of autonomy of the regional branches of a state-wide party in shaping the activity in a region is conducive to them treating a region as the main battleground for competition, which leads to a modification of the competition standards as compared to the standards existing on a national, central level.”¹⁸ Furthermore, thanks to such a state-wide party structure, the way party leaders emerge becomes different, making the success of “leader-driven” centralised parties highly unlikely. This solution enhances the rules of competition, also thanks to the fact that powerful regional parties have their representation at the central authority level (Spain, Great Britain, Italy).

I am also keen on using **the concept of the local party**, a category which is not found in the literature. This concept concerns groups which pursue power by way of electoral competition, in self-government bodies, i.e. mainly at a sub-regional, municipal level. It is these parties, in particular that are characterised by an abundance of organisational forms (municipal associations, local leader committees which have become permanently, to a relative extent, formalised). Apart from a lack of formal political party status, they meet the other requirements of a political party (given of course the uselessness of the institutional and organisational definition of the state at this point).

In this way, three levels of a political party emerge: the national, regional and local level. However, local parties, in contrast to the other types, do not usually take part in elections to the central authorities of the state. The others are involved in the self-government election process at a local level.

A regional or local party is thus such a political party, which is characterised by two distinctive features: 1) its activity is delimited by territory¹⁹, 2) it articulates the interests of regional or local communities, rightly referred to as territorial identity. These two essential, though only additional, features of such party types are a result of their pursuance of achieving direct or indirect

¹⁸ K. Sobolewska-Myślik: *Partie i systemy partyjne...*, p. 25.

¹⁹ What is meant are not legally demarcated regions, lying within administrative boundaries, but regions that have formed naturally. For example: Catalanian is used in Valencia, part of Aragon and in the Balearic Islands. We also tend to forget that Navarre, (a single-province autonomous community) which has maintained its historic self-governance traditions (as expressed in the name of the community) and was supported by the Franco regime, is a Basque Province. There too, in Pamplona, Opus Dei have their headquarters.

influence on the authorities of the territorial unit (self-government bodies, autonomous community bodies, constituents of a federation), and in some cases (i.e. relevant parties) also national authorities (parliament, party alliances, etc.). Decentralisation of contemporary democratic states undoubtedly stimulates the formation and development of such parties. In my view they play an incredibly important role in shaping new trends in the development of democratic systems. They form an important plane for the competition of state-wide parties and, to a certain extent, also restrict their role. They are also an important feature of the vertical concept of the separation of powers of public authorities. Territorial representation – this is how the basic function of a regional or local party can be defined. It is of particular significance in those countries, in which regional parties have their own parliamentary representation. Representing the community of a given territory is after all about being able to articulate its interests, defend its uniqueness, consolidate regional groups around its values and objectives, which allow the territory to survive and develop. It is also about the capacity to search for a consensus with what is general, super-regional, in order to ensure the existence of the territory as a part of a greater whole. This is a very important condition, since a territory, understood under the aforementioned terms as a part of a greater area, will exist as long as the minority status is preserved. In other words, a territorial representation is a representation of a certain level of power. Meeting the requirements of territorial representation is possible only if, first of all, regional parties exist, and secondly, if thanks to the electoral system, they have the capacity to express their political objectives within the regional and national public authority structures. A key feature of a regional party, including its ethno-regionalist type, is the scope and objective of its action. In conclusion, apart from the necessity of meeting the typical political criteria for all the political parties, the distinctive criteria of a regional and local party are the two criteria mentioned above. However, it cannot go unnoticed that the latter can also be met in the case of state-wide parties, whenever in their program they take into account and pursue the interests of the region or regions. Such a situation took place in Spain on many instances. This was the case when the formation of certain autonomous communities was inspired by the central authorities of the state. Articulating regional interests does not have to restrict itself to the regional public authority level. As long as the legal and factual possibilities exist, regional interests can be voiced at a national level as well.

7. However, the question to be answered at this point is if a full definition of the regional and local party is scientifically justified? It is possible to define regional and local parties in at least two ways. The first one involves creating a completely different definition. The second, as represented herein, involves such a modification of a general definition of a political party to

also include regional and local parties. Such a solution sounds more viable as it allows for the unification of scientific categories. This is an important and desirable precondition in the process of explaining social processes and drawing abstract and general scientific assumptions. The more similar sounding categories with different definitions there are, the more difficult it is to provide a scientific explanation. The various existing definitions of political parties and party systems are exhaustive to the extent that creating a new one is difficult and only partly justified. Every new definition will, to some degree, be of a compilatory nature. The only justification for providing a new version of a definition is to extend its scope to include activities within territorial self-governments. Adding the aforementioned, additional features of a political party, should prove sufficient. Hence my proposal is as follows: **A political party is a mass, clearly identified formalised social group, which articulates its group interests and acts on the basis of a political program that corresponds with social ideals, and which in performing its public functions, pursues its objectives via the hierarchical central and local state institutions or its relatively autonomous structures (territorial self-government, local autonomy, federal bodies).** The proposed definition is extensive to the degree that it also includes parties at a regional and local level. The only difference compared to the previous definition is that the levels of the state institutions are mentioned.

8. A natural consequence of the isolation of regional and local parties is the transfer of these concepts to the definition of the party system. If we have qualified these institutions as political parties, then in consequence they should also be considered as part of the party system of the state. This is true even if we associate the party system concept solely with the democratic system, since as determined earlier, the parties we are interested in can only function in a decentralised democracy. These groups can successfully fall under a state-wide party system definition. However, we must remember that a system understood in such terms will also include parties, which formally have no political party status. Issues regarding the conceptual scope will appear only if we attempt to define the regional and local party systems as subsystems of national level party systems. After all, in a vertical (territorial) arrangement, regional and local parties form subsystems with regard to the party system at the national level. Undoubtedly the scope of autonomy of these subsystems is determined by the scope of the decentralisation of the state. In the literature, the dominant approach is to view the functioning of a party on a regional level, or the functioning of political parties on different levels of the state. Three such levels can easily be distinguished: 1) the national level, in which parties compete on at least the bigger part of its territory, and also, what is most important, take part in the competition for power in its central institutions, especially in the parliament; it is worth noting that

state-wide parties are not only those that possess an organisational structure on the larger part of state territory, but ones that in their political strategy articulate group interests concerning the entire population or its part without territorial limitations (i.e. regional or local), which are possible to achieve via the central state authorities; 2) the regional level, in which state-wide and regional parties compete. They articulate the interests of the communities of a given region in their program and strive for power at the regional public authority level; 3) local level, in which state-wide, regional and local parties compete with each other, and which, via the territorial government bodies, articulate their local community interests. The capacity for action and achieving political interests at the second and third level depends on the level of decentralisation of the state, and three political systems are possible in such setups. In the case of the regional level, there will either be a federal system, a territorial autonomy system or a territorial self-government system. However, at the lowest level there will be a certain range of privileges granted under the scope of a territorial self-government.

There is no doubt that a definition of a party system needs to be adopted. The party system, in my view, spans three levels of relations: 1) between parties and the state, remembering however, that we are not only dealing with issues to do with winning power in state institutions, but also with the fact that the state is the source of regulations, including legal ones, concerning political parties; 2) static and dynamic relations between political parties based on standards of competition that are defined for a political system; 3) the relations between parties and society via specific mechanisms of social communication. This, undoubtedly is a broad understanding of a party system, one which goes beyond the configuration and interconnections existing between parties. The use of the concept of the system itself suggests that the connections between the elements of this isolated arrangement are more important than the aggregation of its elements. This issue was already resolved a long time ago. In order to illustrate the situation, let us recall the position of Ryszard Herbut, who claimed that not only static and dynamic relations between parties are included in the party system, but also “a system of interconnections formed at various levels of the political system: i.e. the electoral level, the parliamentary-cabinet level and the organisational level.”²⁰ Konstanty A. Wojtaszczyk also mentions that “[...] the party system encompasses political parties, the entirety of the relationships existing between them as well as the rules and standards regulating both the inter-party

²⁰ R. Herbut: *Systemy partyjne*. W: *Demokracje zachodnioeuropejskie. Analiza porównawcza*. Red. A. Antoszewski, R. Herbut. Wrocław 1997, p. 137. These remarks, have been elaborated more broadly in the work of A. Antoszewski, R. Herbut: *Systemy polityczne współczesnego świata*. Gdańsk 2001, p. 120.

relationships and those existing between parties and the state mechanism.”²¹ However, besides the issues regarding regional and local systems, there is also the problem of whether a single-party system deserves to be referred to as such or not. As mentioned before, regional and local parties possess the conditions to operate in democratic systems, which by nature allows for the freedom of action of political parties. I have also stated that I do not endorse the exclusion of illegal or anti-system parties from this group. Examples of where regional parties were excluded are documented. Regional parties with a clear anti-system nature, are easy to find.²² What distinguishes regional and local party systems is their territorial reach and the objective of the groups forming them to win power in regional institutions. In other words, the definition of these systems should include these additional levels of relations. One possible definition could read as follows: It encompasses the entire spectrum of relationships between the political parties active in the region or the local community, the rules of political competition between the parties, the process of communication with the communities of these territorial governments, as well as the relationships between these parties and the territorial public authority institutions.

9. The proposal presented above can be used only in combination with the previously mentioned remarks about the concept of a party, and especially with the political theory requirements. After all, it is at the local level that we can find organisations which do not possess the status of a political party. It is also worth remembering about the relationships between parties and the regional and local authorities. Quite often, regional authorities are responsible for defining the legal rules²³, whereas local authorities are responsible for many issues relating to the organisation of elections and their execution. The specific rules of political competition are also important, given, e.g., the strong articulation of regional and local interests which frequently stand in contrast to the national viewpoint, or on account of the territorial differentiation of these organisations. In consequence, there is a very broad and complex spectrum of political relations within territorial government bodies which constitutes a very interesting subject of research in the field of political sciences.

²¹ K.A. Wojtaszczyk: *Współczesne systemy partyjne*. Warszawa 1992, p. 8.

²² The Basque group Herri Batasuna was banned in 2003, and the Irish Sinn Fein often, in its history, played an anti-system role. Furthermore, the option to ban parties gives rise to the possibility of the existence of an illegal party.

²³ For example: the role of state legislatures in the USA on the election law or the legislative role of the community parliaments in Spain.