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Local Government as Organiser of Cultural Institutions. Remote Governance with the Example of Public Libraries in the Pomeranian Voivodeship

Abstract

The paper shows how the local government manages its network of local libraries. External circumstances are forcing the local government to seek savings by closing some libraries and putting pressure on the remaining establishments for organisational change. This transformation is to take place in four areas – widening accessibility, functionality, collaboration, audiences. The implementation of the changes is to be enabled by resources acquired from external sources. The method of transformation is to be determined by a normative model inspired by external – usually national – entities of different nature. The local government tries to disseminate this normative pattern to library managers in a variety of ways. The range of interactions to which library facilities are subject can be seen as “governance at a distance” (Miller & Rose 1990, 1992). The paper provides an interpretation of the empirical material collected as part of the research on the library network in the Pomeranian Voivodeship carried out in 2022 and 2023, which included individual in-depth interviews and questionnaire surveys with representatives of local government units.

Keywords: cultural institutions, public governance, cultural policy

Kody klasyfikacji JEL: H70, H72, H76, Z18

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Samorząd jako organizator instytucji kultury. „Rządzenie na odległość” na przykładzie bibliotek publicznych na terenie województwa pomorskiego

Streszczenie

Artykuł ukazuje sposób zarządzania siecią bibliotek lokalnych przez samorząd terytorialny. Uwarunkowania zewnętrzne zmuszają samorząd do poszukiwania oszczędności poprzez likwidację części bibliotek oraz nacisk na pozostałe placówki w celu zmian organizacyjnych. Transformacja ta odbywać się ma w czterech obszarach – poszerzenia dostępności, funkcji, współpracy, odbiorców. Wdrożenie zmian mają umożliwić zasoby pozyskane ze źródeł zewnętrznych. Sposób transformacji ma wyznaczać wzorzec normatywny inspirowany przez zewnętrzne – najczęściej ogólnopolskie – podmioty o różnym charakterze. Samorząd stara się upowszechniać ten wzorzec normatywny wśród kierowników bibliotek w różnorodny sposób. Szereg oddziaływań, którym podlegają placówki biblioteczne, można traktować jako „rządzenie na odległość” (Miller i Rose, 1990, 1992). Artykuł stanowi interpretację materiału empirycznego zebranego w ramach badań nad siecią biblioteczną w województwie pomorskim realizowanych w 2022 i 2023. W ich ramach przeprowadzono indywidualne wywiady pogłębione i badania kwestionariuszowe z przedstawicielami jednostek samorządu terytorialnego.

Słowa kluczowe: instytucje kultury, zarządzanie publiczne, polityka kulturalna

Kody klasyfikacji JEL: H70, H72, H76, Z18

Introduction

The scientific objective of the paper is to understand how public libraries are managed by their organisers in a situation of external conditions that hinder classical public management. To this end, the concept of governance at a distance by Peter Miller and Nikolas Rose (1990, 1992), inspired by the thought of Michel Foucault (2000), will primarily be used. Section I of the paper will describe the framework of the study under way, including the methodological basis of the research project and the theoretical concepts constituting the interpretive basis for the material; Section II will provide a thick description based on the empirical material collected, focusing on the presentation of a coherent normative vision for the operation of libraries and the tools for influencing its implementation by stakeholders, which can be interpreted in terms of “governance at a distance”; and Section III will present conclusions that also include a critical interpretation of the normative vision of libraries adopted by local governments.

Conceptual Framework: Public Policy in the Face of Complexity and Uncertainty in the Social World

The description presented in the paper is based on a diagnosis of the regional network of public libraries in the Pomeranian Voivodeship. The subject of the study was the functioning of public libraries, with a particular focus on the strategy for their activities, the organisational resources they have, but also their relationships with the environment. In this case, relationships with actual and potential recipients of library offers and organisers, i.e. representatives of local government units, were put under a microscope. What was important in this case was both the comprehensive assessment of these institutions by those around them, as well as the perceptions of libraries emerging primarily from the narratives contained in in-depth interviews.

An important premise of the 2022–2023 research project was the comprehensive triangulation of methods and techniques, researchers and data sources. The project itself involved collecting research material through desk research, questionnaire surveys and casual interviews conducted with librarians, local government officials and active participants in cultural life, as well as ethnographic studies of initiatives undertaken in the library sector (institutions, events or projects). Among other things, an important criterion for selecting the initiatives studied or analysed was the consideration of intra-sectoral and spatial divisions. Although the study is not representative, care was taken in the selection to take into account underlying variations in the population that may have had a direct impact on the nature of the material obtained. It was particularly important for the researchers to include diverse communities. It is worth mentioning that in selecting a purposive sample of local government representatives, efforts were made to ensure that there was as much diversity as possible among the respondents. Thus, both diverse types of local government (municipal, district, voivodeship) were represented, as well as spatial variations (representatives of each of the five Pomeranian subregions) and specific socio-economic conditions of local governments with different profiles (peripheral and metropolitan, but also rural, urban-rural, and urban municipalities as well as cities with county rights).

The research work was conducted in two stages. In the first stage, desk research was conducted and a questionnaire survey was implemented, with the analysis of the results being used to generate the research questions and research tools used at the second stage of the work. It was important from the perspective of the research conducted to construct the conceptual assumptions in such a way as to provide a “context of discovery” (Konecki, 2019). On the one hand, it will allow for efficient implementation of field work, but on the other hand, it will not close the research

process to new conclusions that escape preconceived hypotheses. Thus, it will serve to reconstruct the perception of public libraries from the perspective of local government representatives. Thus, as can be seen, the project fits into the broad paradigmatic trend of social constructivism, thereby assuming to some extent the voluntarism of acting social actors (Luckmann & Berger, 1983). This trend naturally finds its essential representation in research methods and techniques that allow the perspective of the social actors under study to be reproduced as faithfully as possible (Denzin & Lincoln, 2009; Flick, 2010). In order to most accurately reflect this perception, the project used an ethnographic method, with an emphasis on the technique of individual in-depth interviews (Konecki, 2000), for the second stage of the research work under way.

The breadth of the studies completed as part of the project is also evidenced by the size of the research material collected. The survey, carried out using the CAWI technique, covered 82 representatives of local government, 328 core employees working in libraries and 569 culturally active residents of the Pomeranian Voivodeship. At the same time, a total of 48 individual in-depth interviews were conducted (20 with active participants in cultural life, 15 with librarians and 13 with local government officials). It is primarily the narrative emerging from the interviews with local government officials that forms the core of the picture analysed in Section II, but this does not mean that they are the only factor included in the analysis presented. It is worth noting that individual interviews were conducted with a medium level of standardization using a list of pre-generated themes (Konecki, 2000). The main areas of interest were: the perception of public libraries and their role from a public policy perspective, their relationship with local government and the broader social environment, and the transformations taking place in the library sector. Nevertheless, the interviews were free-form in nature, which usually led to the discovery of narrative elements regarding these areas. The research tools were tailored to individual sub-populations (librarians, local government officials and cultural participants); however, an important assumption was that there was some alignment of subject areas that allowed for subsequent comparative analysis of the collected materials.

The research work led – as intended – to a wide range of empirical material, primarily transcribed individual interviews and the results of desk research involving collected documents. The material was then organised according to the rules of the inductive analytical model, including the coding of all research material (Charmaz, 2009a, 2009b; Gibbs, 2011). This research strategy ultimately made it possible to obtain a “thick description” (Geertz, 2005) of public libraries from the perspective of local government officials, with the description containing reference to the material and illustrated with examples or quotes from statements.

This also serves to make the empirical picture that emerges from the data more relevant (Angrosino, 2010).

The starting point of the empirical studies carried out was a diagnosis of the growing complexity and uncertainty of the social world. The results of these transformations in the socio-cultural area are presented synthetically by Marek Krajewski (2017). According to the picture he paints, the social order dominated by organised social practices is being replaced by unorganised incidents. Thus, social life is becoming less predictable. This has a direct bearing on the world of institutions, which is becoming more pluralistic and the relationships between diverse social actors are becoming less formalized and hierarchical. The activities of actors in the networks are becoming increasingly important. Such changes in the social world challenge political centres (Jessop, 2002b, 2008). How are public authorities responding to these challenges? The range of action strategies inherent in the way the modern liberal state is governed is relatively broad. As Peter Miller and Nikolas Rose (2008) note, it consists of three core issues. Firstly, knowledge to a greater extent forms the basis for governance processes. Secondly, there is an – at least apparent – autonomization of the agencies subject to the authority. Thirdly, the freedom of the social actors themselves who are in an authority relationship is being used to a larger and larger extent. They undergo empowerment, often determining the situations of the subjects with whom they interact. On the one hand, political structures themselves are changing, often ceding ground to managed actors and their networks. At the same time, when acquiring new competencies on their own, they are trying to combine diverse action strategies which can be implemented by the public sector. These transformations are well described by the concept of metagovernance (Jessop, 2002, 2008) indicating activities that combine the traditional hierarchical bureaucratic model with market-based solutions, but also meet the need for governance through bottom-up networks of social actors. On the other hand, the state is often portrayed as a centre operating, as it were, from the “back seat,” whose ability to act is made possible by taking advantage of the – often apparent – autonomy of actors (Rose & Miller, 1990). Such an approach is part of a broader perspective on the study of so-called governmentality (*gouvernementalité*). This is the direction that Anglo-Saxon thought (Jessop, 2010), among others, is taking by exploring differentiated governance techniques. The research perspective on social life, inspired by the metaphorical thought of Michel Foucault (2020), incorporates precisely three interrelated components: knowledge, power and subject (Ostrowicka, 2019). Governmentality – in which power is understood precisely in terms of the creation of knowledge structures – is most often used in the context of power relations at the micro-social level, but it is worth remembering that it represents a certain interpretive direction for the whole social reality. The

concept can also be profitably applied to the analysis of the functioning of the state and its various agencies, as Rose and Miller (1990, 1992) prove by introducing the concept of “governance at a distance,” which is useful for interpretation.

The tools that fall under the umbrella of “governance at a distance” (Miller & Rose, 1990) can thus be viewed as one of the many attempts to find instruments of public management that adapt to the growing complexity of the social world. A common element of these tools is the use of self-regulation of social actors, whose actions are taken on the basis of norms “prompted” by centres supported by public agencies. As such, this is a certain guideline for the action of individual social actors (both individuals and groups or institutions), whose subjectivity is often emphasized (Rose, 1990). Such a policy is understood as not so much “imposing” as “nudging” or “pushing” actors to pursue politically desirable actions. This type of action appears to be a particularly attractive strategy – from the perspective of the political system – in a situation of limited resources and the need for the public sector to seek savings. Where resources are scarce, a frequent direction is precisely the self-regulation of social actors, thus the shifting of liability to the managed entities and their ability to adapt to changing operating conditions.

What does “governance at a distance” mean in practice? It comprises, as Rose and Miller (1992: 175) note: “local tactics of education, persuasion, inducement, management, incitement, motivation and encouragement,” which are translated into the practical way of exercising power, i.e. the realm of “programmes, calculations, techniques, apparatuses, documents and procedures through which authorities seek to embody and give effect to governmental ambitions.” It seems that the way of framing libraries presented in the paper is one of many diverse impacts, which should be relatively “transparent” in concept. It is worth mentioning, for example, grant programs intended to finance the implementation of desirable activities. Governance is understood, in other words, as a diagnosis of social problems and an attempt to formulate answers to them within the framework of proposed political programs. In all of this, of course, expertise, which translates into both the stated goals of political action and listed measures, is crucial.

The concept also incorporates two ideas relating to the transformation of the social world as previously outlined. Firstly, the fact that we are not dealing with a single, core centre with a monopoly on political power, but rather with a multiplicity, even a network of such centres (including non-political ones) that have a genuine influence on the functioning of the managed social actors. Related to this is the fact that the impacts created by them are not always completely consistent. At the same time, political power may seek to try to coordinate the activities of many disparate centres. Secondly, a soft tool for implementing policies, the manner of governance

is often discursive in nature. It is through communication that the creation of social reality occurs. As Rose and Miller point out elsewhere in the cited work (1992: 201): “through this loose assemblage of agents, calculations, techniques, images and commodities, individuals can be governed through their freedom to choose.” Thus, in this case, power has a very “soft” and as such “discrete” form. It certainly does not consist in disciplining the subject, but rather in inducing him/her to adopt, to identify with a certain vision of reality, which is ultimately supposed to lead to the realization of given actions. This, moreover, is part of a broader transformation of management tools, which is moving from “hard” tools, i.e. disciplining, to “soft” tools, i.e. a kind of directing. It is also the discourse that gives rise to – more tangible – tools of governing at a distance, such as benchmarks, standards or audits (Rose & Miller, 1990; Rose, O’Malley & Valverde, 2006). Such broader transformations of power relations in society are highlighted by Mitchell Dean (2010), among others. The evolution of the tools of power, which is quite well described in lectures by Michel Foucault (2000), is highlighted by Marek Czyżewski (2009) and Magdalena Archacka (2015). The old discipline mechanisms are not so much disappearing as being supplemented by new ones. There are numerous examples of such concepts that find their way into the discourse and, through it, into the way autonomy is used by acting entities. These include not only the terms creativity and innovation, as discussed by Tomasz Zarycki (2014) and Karol Franczak (2018), but also, for example, resilience, as described by Jose Gaztel (2023).

Analysis of Research Material: Libraries as Self-Controlled Institutions for Special Tasks

Network in Restructuring: Liquidation, Merger and Cuts

The context for the research project and understanding how public libraries are managed is the restructuring of the library network in the Pomeranian Voivodeship. As analysis of public data from 1999 to 2021 shows, we have seen a rapid restructuring of the public library network in the voivodeship. The network of outlets and libraries in rural areas has decreased significantly (by 20 and 75%, respectively), and some have been merged with other cultural institutions (approx. 20%). At the same time, the size of the book collection has also declined, and public funds allocated to libraries are growing more slowly than overall local government spending (including expenditures in culture itself). This leads to a situation in which there is an overload of library infrastructure: the numbers of facilities, staff and book collections

significantly deviate from the norm for developing countries adopted by the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions and commonly used to manage the network of libraries (IFLA, 2007; Głowacka, 2015). The poor state of the network is also confirmed by the significant distance from the pan-European and national average. To provide a complete picture: compared to other regions, the Pomeranian Voivodeship also negatively stands out. Currently, there are about 6,500 residents per institution in the Pomeranian Voivodeship (the IFLA norm is 3–4 thousand), and per capita there are 2 volumes in library resources (the norm is 3.5). Other measures, too – such as issues of restoring the collection through the purchase of new publications – point to the dire state of the library network.

All of this is connected, as one might assume, with a decline in the number of registered readers (by 26% voivodeship-wide from 2004 to 2021), but also with a declining active use of the collection by those who remain in the network (by 46%). While the COVID-19 pandemic was significant in this regard, it only reinforced a trend that has been noticeable for years. At the same time, the Pomeranian Voivodeship is characterized by a particularly high level of network overload, which is due, on the one hand, to an inferior initial situation, i.e. an underdeveloped library network at the time of its takeover by the local government after 1989, and, on the other hand, to the rapidly progressing process of restructuring the network of institutions taken over by the local government.

It is worth noting, however, that this crisis is occurring throughout the country. As Statistics Poland data show, in recent decades there has been a nationwide trend toward a decline in the percentage of residents using public libraries: from 19.7% of registered users in 2004 down to as low as 12.6% in 2021. It is worth noting that the percentage of respondents in the national library survey who say they have read a book borrowed from the library in the past 12 months is gradually declining. (Michalak, Koryś & Koryś, 2016; Koryś et al., 2018; Zasacka & Chymkowski, 2022). This declining position of libraries as a source of books may also be due to the perception of the library as an institution unsuited to the needs of the reader, where books have to be waited for (56%), the offer duplicates what can be found online (52%), and outdated collections are often found (45%). This makes it an institution that is needed, but by other people more than by ourselves (73%) (Michalak, Koryś & Koryś, 2016). This all the more suggests the need to find a new model of library activity, its “reinventing” of sorts.

Libraries in Transformation, or the Quest to Increase Accessibility, Functions, Collaboration, Audiences

At the same time, in the face of these challenges of increasingly scarce resources, but also needs relating to their traditional offers, the library facilities that still exist are being transformed. In order to maintain the effectiveness of their operations, institutions are trying to change simultaneously on four levels: through deepening accessibility, expanding functions, strengthening networking, and expanding the audience for their offers. Such a vision of transformation emerges from, as perceived by local government officials, the description of the positively assessed transformation of libraries, the strengths of the sector, but above all, the identification of those areas that are crucial for libraries to adapt effectively to changing business circumstances. The picture of libraries as institutions in transition is in line with the narrative of library representatives themselves, who emphasize the slow transformation of libraries precisely in the direction of increasing the “efficiency” of traditional activities, but also expanding their scope to include animation activities or redefining libraries as the “third place.” As such, this is the vision that local government officials expect libraries to implement. Thus, it seems that the vision of how libraries function that emerges from the statements in this case is not only descriptive in nature, but, first and foremost, represents a normative model disseminated in the library sector by diverse actors, including organisers. And it constitutes, so to speak, the basic strategy of “governance at a distance”. It is worth noting that it takes a largely discursive form. The fact that discourse is an essential tool for the exercise of power in modern society is, moreover, evidenced by the underlying concept of governmentality, as already mentioned at the outset (Foucault, 2000; Czyżewski, 2009; Archacka, 2015).

In the narrative of local governments, the strongest side of libraries, i.e. their accessibility, is reinforced above all. This is strongly supported by the full integration of the institutions in the local area. That is because, in the opinion of local government officials, these are institutions of first contact with culture, with a “low threshold of entry” for potential and actual audiences. It is the library staff who are well-known people in the local community, readers often have informal relationships with them, and the facilities are also located very close to where users live (within walking distance).

However, the drive to deepen the accessibility of libraries is forcing multifaceted changes in their work. These are taking place both in terms of modernizing infrastructure (e.g., creating ramps for people with reduced mobility or setting up book machines and drop-boxes that allow people to use the library outside opening hours, friendly furnishing of the institutions themselves with places to browse

the collection), expanding the nature of resources (e.g. with e-books, audiobooks or books in Braille for the blind and visually impaired), as well as appropriate preparation of staff or changes in the nature of services provided by libraries (e.g., working in the afternoons and on weekends, the possibility of remote access to catalogues or the use of such facilities as home delivery of books). All these elements are recognized and emphasized by representatives of the organisers.

The fact that accessibility should be understood as broadly as possible through the prism of contacts with the environment is well demonstrated by the project analysed in the ethnographic study, implemented by the local government association Metropolitan Area of Gdańsk-Gdynia-Sopot (in consultation with the Provincial and Municipal Public Library in Gdańsk [Wojewódzka i Miejska Biblioteka Publiczna w Gdańsku – WiMBP]), “Culture Incorporates” [“Kultura włącza”] targeted at, among others, employees of local libraries. As part of it, librarians had the opportunity not only to improve their competence in user relationships, but also strategies for building partnerships and reaching out to resources from the environment.

A very important dimension of the new model is the expansion of libraries’ functions. What we are dealing with is not so much an abandonment of its previous formula, but a significant expansion of it. As one respondent points out: “Libraries could be compared somewhat to fire brigades. Fire brigades used to put out fires, and that’s what they were called to do. As such, they were driving around and putting out fires. In contrast, extinguishing fires currently constitutes only a few percent of the cases that fire brigades deal with. Most of the cases, of course, are accidents and emergencies, something that goes beyond the former function, so it is as though the primary function has changed.”

This process occurs simultaneously on two levels: the formulas for action and its objectives. On the one hand, a solid offer based on providing access to collections is supplemented with activities of a different nature. It is an offer of undertakings which take the form of events: meetings, discussions, workshops, conferences, sometimes also events taking place in the urban space, such as walks or city games. Often the first step is, in any case, activities related to book culture. The fact that we are dealing with processes taking place throughout the country is evidenced, for example, by studies analysing events that promote reading which are organised by libraries. Such events include, for example, Library Nights. The scale and range of initiatives undertaken by local establishments is impressive and can realistically contribute to readers’ interest in books and the library as a space not only for providing access to collections, but also for filling the numerous needs of the local community (Wojciechowska & Orzoł, 2021). On the other hand, this expanded formula of operation allows libraries to enter the field of socio-cultural development. Two directions

in particular are key in this case: cultural education and identity work with the local community. Both of these dimensions, moreover, are inextricably linked to civic activity and a sense of being part of the local community. As one local government official points out: “The whole education-to-culture program is this social role of culture. I think we become a little better by participating in or creating culture. This program is geared exactly towards such creative engagement in culture, acquiring certain competencies in action.”

Thus, among other things, in the case studied points to a strong emphasis on the expanded role of culture going well beyond the function of providing access to collections. There are also repeated references to, among other things, the idea of the third place (Oldenburg, 1989). It seems that the presented perception of libraries should be placed in the broader context of the perception of the cultural sphere as a tool for development, not only individual and social, but also economic. The key to understanding the link between culture and economy in this case is the development of individual employee creativity as a source of innovation for the organisation. This, moreover, is located in the discourse of the innovative economy indicated earlier (Zarycki, 2014; Franczak, 2015, 2018).

At the same time, the library serves the needs of the local community and thereby enhances its quality of life. The availability of the broadest and most diverse cultural offers is essential in this process. As one local government official points out: “The idea is to keep our residents happy, to keep their time filled, so that young people also have the opportunity to pursue their various talents.”

And it is in achieving this accessibility that libraries play a key role. They are also the ones who take action to not only make the collections accessible, but also create animation and integration ventures that shape the local identity of residents. Their role is irreplaceable due to strong relationships in the local environment as well. An example of this narrative about libraries can be found in a statement by one of the local government officials interviewed: “To a huge extent, in my opinion, it’s a question of both integration and identity building, and increasingly strengthening citizenship because this culture very much concerns this area. Culture stimulates civic activity to a very large extent because it integrates residents engaging in different types of activities.”

Facilitating the implementation of change is the fact that this social impact of libraries has been quite widely researched and it has been scientifically proven that these institutions affect the social fabric (Paul, 2018). It is noticeable in both large urban centres (Gądecki, 2018) and smaller towns. However, as it seems – thanks, among other things, to the long-standing evaluation efforts of the Information Society Development Foundation (Borowski, 2014) – it is particularly relevant in the

latter, where the catalogue of impacts is broader and the power significantly greater in view of the limited scope of public institutions with the ability to implement development activities.

Thirdly, networks are being strengthened. The cooperation of libraries with other – local or supralocal – cultural institutions is a matter of course. However, cooperation also occurs in the implementation of projects that require cross-sector partnerships with institutions in the field of education or social welfare. These are largely subordinate entities of the local government concerned. Although, the catalogue of cooperating institutions is broad enough to also include the NGOs listed below or various structures rooted in the local community. As one of the local government officials interviewed notes: “These networks have become so dense, there are so many joint ventures, activities, cooperation on a daily basis, it’s such a huge development compared to what it was those few decades ago. And this is a very big positive. In fact, it would be difficult for me to say with whom the library does not cooperate.” Of course, this does not mean that the library did not cooperate with the environment before. As indicated by a survey conducted back in 2012 on behalf of the Polish Book Institute, a significant portion of public libraries (68%) cooperate with local NGOs, including 56% in cultural activities, 47% in promoting reading, and 47% in other activities (Ministry of Culture and National Heritage [Ministerstwo Kultury i Dziedzictwa Narodowego], 2013).

Fourthly, most often, cooperation also involves expanding the audience for library offers. Particularly noteworthy in this regard is the care taken to create a dedicated offer for the main audiences: seniors, children and young people, but also those who are particularly active in social and cultural aspects. They often form various informal groups or are affiliated with various types of NGOs. In rural areas, it is worth noting the particularly important role of structures such as Volunteer Fire Brigades, Country Housewives’ Associations, and Village Councils. It is for them that special activities outside the traditional framework of library activities are most often created. Libraries then become spaces for the realization of so-called broad culture, i.e. amateur creative activity (Pietrasiewicz and Skrzypek, 2011) in a self-service model. In such a model, it is the cultural participants themselves – using the resources of the institution – who create spaces for themselves and others to participate in culture. A statement by one of the local government officials interviewed from a smaller locality says a lot about the mechanism of this culture: “It’s most often the case that there is an idea, and the library serves such a service function for these communities. The various entities in the community need publicity or a place where they can do something, and it’s a little bit up to the mayor: if they come with an interesting idea, he will approve it and do it, or they will do it together.”

It would seem that the normative vision presented here, indicating the positively assessed transformations taking place in the library network, is, in the perspective adopted in this paper, a tool for “governing at a distance” (Rose, 1990, 1992). This vision serves to formulate and effectively articulate a set of guidelines to “help” librarians exercise their autonomy. Of course, this vision is not disseminated only by representatives of the local government, and informal contacts are not the only ones used for this. It is just one of many centres and one of many tools for promoting such a vision of library activities. In such a context, this reflects one of the assumptions of the concept, which is that not only is there a greater role for autonomous actors, but also the number of political centres is increased (Rose, 1990, 1992). At the same time – to a much greater extent – subsidy, education or training programs are having an impact, providing diverse incentives for change that are the source of the normative pattern described based the research. Simultaneously, the projects implemented provide a practical tool for promoting the model among autonomous entities (Rose & Miller, 1990; Rose, O’Malley & Valverde, 2006).

The Transformation Triangle: “Transparent” Organiser, Entity-Manager, External Source of Inspiration

Local government officials perceive themselves, in most cases, in terms of organisers of libraries acting in accordance with what the 1997 Act on Libraries [Ustawa o bibliotekach] (Journal of Laws of 2019, item 1479) stipulates, which is limited primarily to fulfilling – formal, legal and financial – obligations to libraries. Significant in the statements of local government officials is the fact that they perceive that they are responsible primarily for the framework conditions of the operation of libraries, including, first and foremost, the provision of funds through earmarked subsidies that allow entities to cover the base running costs of institutions.

Also, an analysis of the situation of libraries on the basis of public statistics in the Pomeranian Voivodeship shows that almost all local governments meet the formal and legal obligations imposed on them by the cited Act. In many cases, however, these obligations – as is the case with almost all district libraries implemented under agreements with municipal libraries or libraries combined with community centres – are carried out to a minimum extent.

It is worth noting that many local government officials not only recognize the crisis in which the library network finds itself, but also realize the challenge of the necessary transformation of existing establishments. At the same time, according to an analysis of data obtained by the diagnostic survey method, the vast majority of local government officials surveyed are aware that the funds provided to libraries

are not sufficient. They agree in most cases (84.1%) that funding should be increased, although they rarely indicate that this is likely (13%). Recommendations for possible spending of additional funds point significantly to the weaker points of libraries, also emerging from sector statistics: weaknesses in infrastructure, shortages in book collections or insufficient digitization of offers. The respondents emphasize that restructuring was necessary due to the lack of financial resources in the local government budget to maintain the existing network of branches. There is often a reference to the pyramid of needs of the local community. The following statement is a good illustration of the repeating narrative: "When it comes to roads, there are much more needs, and we have 300 km of roads that are largely neglected. This is a poor district and also very neglected, so there are many needs and, in turn, little money, so one has to choose."

Decisions regarding libraries were certainly also influenced by the fact that libraries are not treated as spaces of political significance. This is often emphasized in the statements of local government officials, as well: "During council meetings or culture committee meetings, a well-functioning library is more often taken for granted and is often misunderstood by councillors."

As it was noted at the beginning, the earmarked subsidy does not allow for the effective operation of library facilities, which local government officials are aware of. The organiser does not provide sufficient public resources to directly support the necessary transformation, but tries to manage the field of culture in such a way as to encourage subordinate entities to adopt a strategy of searching for alternative sources of resources. Therefore, in this narrative, it is the managed institution that becomes responsible for using various tools to better adapt to the changing environment, including acquiring additional resources.

There are two basic ways to achieve this. On the one hand, acquiring resources – often in grant competitions – from external partners. These funds are targeted and serve the implementation of specific projects that are mainly part of the outlined modernization processes. In the narrative, they often cease to be additional activities and become an obligation for libraries, which also allows them to reduce the financial involvement of local governments without the need to lower expectations towards the institutions. This approach is well illustrated by one of many statements by local government officials: "Libraries very often finance part of their activities from external grants, especially reading development programs, and the task of the local government is actually to maintain the staff of the library and the headquarters."

On the other hand, emphasis is placed on cooperation – often as part of non-standard projects – with various institutions from the environment. It is cooperation with

other entities (both local and supra-local, both from the cultural sector and outside it), but also the ability to use external funds that makes it possible in practice to implement the transformation of these institutions in the intended direction. Sometimes this cooperation is inspired by local government officials themselves. Most often, it includes activities related to broadly understood book culture, e.g. of a supra-local nature, but also initiating networking of various local or supra-local institutions on the occasion of joint ventures.

The area in which the local government recognizes its responsibility is primarily related to the issue of providing libraries with appropriate technical conditions. Hence its most active role in investing in modern infrastructure, often allowing for a step-by-step transformation of the local library network. In this case, we are dealing with both an investment in new headquarters, as well as providing comprehensive equipment for existing headquarters. These are most often measures that are part of local revitalization strategies, in which libraries headquarters are one of many different elements of implemented projects. As one respondent points out: "The local government had quite an important role in applying for funds for this investment. The municipality created a revitalization project for this facility and the municipality took it upon itself to make it happen and it is a really great place." Another respondent notes in relation to his municipality: "Even the revitalization included spaces next to the library that would be used specifically for the library. This is what is happening, the library and its stands are practically outside all summer long, reaching out to the residents, and not only inside the building."

Due to the specificity of these investments, libraries are often located in central places of given localities, a good example of which are railway stations, whether still operating or not. Investments of this type have been implemented in many Pomeranian localities, including Rumia, Kwidzyn, Straszyn and Kartuzy. A good example of this transformation trend is the studied Integration Railway Station in Kartuzy, which is the registered office of the District and Municipal Public Library. The construction of a new library headquarters as part of revitalization activities required a special-purpose grant for equipment acquired from the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage. This project forced the institution to declare and implement extended activities aimed at the library's audience. The implementation of such multi-faceted projects is also a tool for enforcing cross-sectoral partnerships and implementing non-standard projects. The above-mentioned library became involved in, alongside revitalization activities, a social policy project implemented in cooperation with the Municipal Social Welfare Centre and the "Pasja" Social Cooperative. This project included, among other things, running a Social Integration Club using part of the library's resources, including involving its employees in the activities.

It is important to emphasize that in the case of these investments, the active role of the local government is particularly noticeable, as it initiates projects, provides own contribution, professional support, and often also coordinates interinstitutional cooperation. As one of the interviewed local government representatives notes: “The ruler is the source of inspiration for change. The mayor’s initiative to expand, modernize the library, move it into a new, fully modern building and, on the other hand, the mayor forcing others to take action so that there is no doubt that this institution works and he can boast about it.”

Local governments also try to shape appropriate personnel policies so that managerial positions are filled by people with a proactive attitude. It is also worth noting that in contacts with management staff, they insist on taking actions to supplement the traditional range of activities with resources obtained from external sources. One of the local government officials talks about this role of a kind of “source of inspiration”: “Of course, the governing body can inspire if it deems it necessary, but if there is a good director, they obviously inspire and see to things depending on what the director or what the institution plans to do.” Another local government official interviewed also adds the dimension of the effectiveness of subordinate institutions in advocacy activities: “If the director of the library doesn’t come to me, doesn’t shower me with ideas, doesn’t badger me constantly saying we have to do this or that, then it’s simply a case of not remembering the institution. This coming to me is only effective when I simply see in the public space the library’s action, the fact that it brings the city to life.”

Local government officials primarily let it be known in informal communication that they look favourably on those activities that are in line with the described modernization vision for library facilities. The nature of contacts varies from community to community, but the patterns of the crucial importance of direct relations with management and parallel, intertwined, as it were, formal and informal communication recur in all narratives. Most synthetically, such a – relatively universal – array of communication instruments was discussed by one respondent: “As municipal administrators, we privately know all municipal employees, and this of course facilitates this contact, and, in addition to this kind of purely official contact through the session, through the committee, through the contacts of the library management with our treasurer, with the administrators, through the participation of library representatives in committees, reporting of their own, we, of course, also meet maybe less formally, that is, if there is a problem to be solved, the director comes to the office, we discuss it, we talk, we are all more or less on first name terms with each other. This certainly makes this cooperation much easier. We also, as administrators, very often participate, well not in all, but in a large part of the events organised at the libraries. So I can confidently say that the contact is very good, and there is no situation where,

in order to solve the problem, we wait until the committee meets or we drown in the red tape. We get things done right away.”

What is important in this communication is, first of all, treating the normative vision as a standard that provides a benchmark for evaluating the institution's performance. This is indicated not only by a number of administrative procedures for this, but also by the fact that the activities of libraries are noted by local government officials. Particularly symptomatic in this case is the fact that, according to both local government officials and library representatives, the undertaking of non-standard projects by libraries, or more broadly, the developmental role of libraries, is the key to convincing the environment (including policy-makers) that it is worth raising funding for these institutions. It is in these initiatives that politicians participate, they are the ones that receive a particularly positive reception from the community. This was synthesized by one local government respondent, indicating that: “As much library involvement as possible, as much building of these cultural development networks, what I mentioned, that is, interinstitutional cooperation, so that as many people as possible can see the benefits of libraries, from cooperation with schools, NGOs, other cultural institutions; the benefits of joint projects of these networks for people at risk of social exclusion.”

The fact that it is the staff, in the opinion of the respondents, that is essential from the perspective of the transformation of these institutions, is evidenced by initiatives aimed at building the competence of library representatives. One of them is the implementation of the project (financed from the Norwegian funds) “Culture Incorporates” by the Gdańsk-Gdynia-Sopot Metropolitan Area Association. It was within its framework that librarians gained competencies for, among other things, acquiring resources using these two strategies: both raising funds from sponsors and building partnerships with various institutions.

Local governments are willing to support the application process in what they perceive to be their areas of expertise, that is, mainly in allocating their own contribution to grants from external funds, or in subsidizing, with special targeted grants, their own projects that have a broader impact. In this context local government officials mention primarily initiatives with a background of individual development, access to knowledge, but also social capital. It doesn't quite have to be about building relationships around book culture, but, for example, about strengthening local identity. This, moreover, is in line with the perception of libraries by users themselves, but also with the broader view of the cultural sphere by politicians responsible for the cultural field. Such a narrative, moreover, is not only a tool for discursive shaping, profiling the activities of these institutions, but also – reciprocally – an advocacy tool designed to lead to an increase in the public resources provided for their activities

from local government budgets. One respondent talks about this relationship this way: “It is important to have such a connection, to feel connected to a particular branch, to a particular institution, to know Ms. Krysia from this or that library, to feel part of it. If local government officials or their children are not users, do not feel part of it, they will not lobby for it.”

This attitude of local governments determines the reinforcement of the direction of the transformation of libraries, which is already set by the *de facto* depositories of external funds. This makes the impact of the organiser relatively “transparent” to a large extent. As it seems, this is a type of governance at a distance (Miller & Rose, 1990, 1992) implemented in the event of difficult external conditions. The abdication of local government from its role as an active player in shaping the activities of libraries is leading to this place being filled by other entities operating primarily at the national level. It is their long-standing discourse that inspires the vision disseminated by local government officials to librarians. The entities responsible for creating this discourse were primarily other centres of public power, mainly the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage and its subordinate institutions, including but not limited to: the National Library of Poland, the Polish Book Institute or the National Centre for Culture. Civil society was a parallel actor, independent of public authority, affecting the library sector. First of all, the Information Society Development Foundation [Fundacja Rozwoju Społeczeństwa Informacyjnego] (operator of the Library Development Program) should be singled out in this case, not forgetting the influence of institutions such as the Orange Foundation

To show the congruence of the direction of change supported by local government officials with the direction suggested in expert materials describing the potential that libraries have, one can refer, for example, to the framing of libraries as the centre of the local community. They are described as a meeting space with COFFEE, a centre that combines Culture, Animation, Knowledge, Information and Education [Polish: KAWIE (Kultura, Animacja, Wiedza, Informacja, Edukacja)] (Borowska, Branka & Wcisło, 2012). The fact that the centres of public authority have also been moving in an analogous direction is evidenced by such initiatives – falling within the framework of the still ongoing National Reading Development Program 2.0 [Narodowy Program Rozwoju Czytelnictwa 2.0] – as CLOSE – Library, Local, Initiative, Community, Cooperation, Bottom-up [Polish: BLISKO – Biblioteka, Lokalność, Inicjatywy, Społeczność, Kooperacja, Oddolność]. In a similar way, the other elements formed part of a broader package of changes. Also frequently cited is the Polish Book Institute’s model library infrastructure modernization program “Library +.” This program, in addition to investments in infrastructure, included information on the need for organisational changes in library operations. They were intended to make it more

accessible to residents (e.g., opening the facility on Saturday or in the afternoons). Besides, the development of such a vision in various dimensions has been supported by numerous grant programs. The extent of the dispersion of these modernization incentives is evidenced by a report by the Supreme Audit Office [Najwyższa Izba Kontroli], which points to 20 programs implemented by central institutions in 2015 (Supreme Audit Office 2015). Successive iterations of the National Reading Development Program (Ministry of Culture and National Heritage 2013, Chancellery of the Prime Minister [Kancelaria Prezesa Rady Ministrów] 2021) are dedicated to book culture. Over the past few years, moreover, the modernization of libraries and their pursuit of diverse objectives have been part of successive attempts to include culture more or less comprehensively in the strategic process, as manifested, for example, in the “Culture +” multi-year program or the Social Capital Development Strategy 2020 (Chancellery of the Prime Minister 2010, 2013). Indeed, political and non-public centres often worked in parallel at the same time in support of specific modernization objectives. Such was the case, for example, with the digitization of library facilities. This is where many government programs were complemented by the activities of the Information Society Development Foundation or Orange Poland.

The multifaceted nature of these programs should be borne in mind. These are often not just schemes involving the transfer of funds, but coordinated training, networking or mentoring programs. At the same time, their reliance on the project method leads to a number of administrative practices that library institutions and representatives must carry out, including the creation of a project in accordance with specific guidelines (such as working with the community to create a plan for joint activities), its implementation, and subsequent reporting, which further solidify the impact of the normative vision on librarians.

It is also worth noting that this normative vision of library functioning also translates into activities implemented by various institutions at the regional level. They are the direct context for the operation of local libraries, also influencing the dissemination of this pattern. An example of this is the activities, but also the strategic documents of the Provincial and Municipal Public Library in Gdańsk (WiMBP, 2021). This is the entity responsible for supporting local libraries, in modernization processes, among other things. First, they often serve the purpose of digitization. In practice, these activities focus, among others, on the dissemination of practical tools that can be used by local libraries and, through them, also by their readers. This is served, i.e., by initiatives such as the Pomeranian consortium providing readers with the opportunity to access the Legimi platform. Secondly, they serve at the same time – using diverse instruments – to spread reading throughout the voivodeship. We are talking about both regional literary competitions (see Pomeranian Literary Award “Wind

from the Sea”), as well as – funded by the Polish Book Institute – projects stimulating interest in book culture (see Book Discussion Clubs). It works both through a special unit responsible for supporting the regional library network, as well as in consultation with sectoral entities bringing together, for example, library organisers (cf. the Gdańsk-Gdynia-Sopot Metropolitan Area Association) or library sector practitioners (cf. the LABiB Association). On a smaller scale, district libraries are also impacting the sector in a similar way, with special positions within their structures for people who provide knowledge and skills to enable support. At the same time, it is also worth mentioning that libraries in cities with district rights have a particular impact on the network as a whole, including through projects of a broader nature. A good example is the activity of the Baltic Digital Library initiated by, among others, the Municipal Public Library in Słupsk. Another interesting exemplification of the situation in which they are a source of good practices that are a reference point for other institutions is the Strategy of the Gdynia Library for 2018–2024. It appears to be one of the few voivodeship-level documents constructed in accordance with the strategic process, while at the same time fitting into the “new normative vision” by, among other things, emphasizing the importance of the expanded function of library facilities (MBP Gdynia, 2017).

At the same time, it is worth noting that the expanded reporting of national institutions to which Pomeranian public libraries are subject is in line with this normative vision. One may mention, among other things, the Analysis of the Functioning of Public Libraries (Analiza Funkcjonowania Bibliotek Publicznych – AFBP) project carried out by the Polish Librarians Association in cooperation with the Conference of Directors of Provincial Public Libraries which makes extensive use of data collected annually for the Statistics Poland through dedicated K-03 reporting forms, but does not stop there.

It is thanks to all these – cumulative – impacts that the described pattern is increasingly not only normative, but also descriptive. Indeed, it reflects some transformational processes that are actually taking place, as other data sources also confirm. This is primarily because many entities are making real attempts to raise grant funds or enter into cooperation with external institutions. As desk research of data from 2017–2021 shows, 40% of libraries implemented a project from the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage, and there was a similar range of libraries that supplemented their budgets with income from external partners in the last year. However, it should be noted right away that only a small percentage of them have implemented these activities on a scale that could allow them to carry out the multidimensional transformation of the facility. Overwhelmingly, these tended to be relatively limited activities, as other analyses of available public statistics also confirm. They show that

while changes are taking place in most of the establishments that align with the normative vision described, they are in the vast majority partial or piecemeal, as a result of operating under a kind of “scarcity economy.” As one respondent points out: “All these institutions are making great efforts to get external funds, to organise things in a low-cost way. So as not to cloud the situation either: I get the impression that it’s getting more and more difficult for cultural institutions of all kinds.”

In Search of the “Philosopher’s Stone” of Local Development, or Critical Interpretation

The paper presents and discusses the results of the research, the material collected in the empirical study of local libraries. In the course of the argument made by the representatives of local governments, i.e. library organisers, these institutions are described with particular attention to the organisational problems facing them. In the opinion of local government representatives, existing library facilities should be transformed in the direction set by the normative vision, assuming activities on the levels of greater accessibility, additional functions, outreach and cooperation with the community. This is because all of this falls under the category of adaptation activities, enabling libraries to successfully transform and adapt to the changing environment. The transformation is made possible by external resources acquired by libraries. For the most part, these resources are provided by specific nationwide entities, under grant programs dedicated to libraries. It is the assumptions of these programs that inspire the vision disseminated by local government officials. Often, moreover, other impacts are built into the framework of grant programs: training, networking, analytical and research or mentoring activities. All of this paves the way for external entities to exert direct influence on library facilities. Under dedicated programs, such entities force a series of administrative actions on the facilities, related to the implementation of projects financed by them.

Local governments as organisers are not passive in terms of managing the network. First and foremost, they are trying to get facilities to obtain resources from third parties. In the first place, this is to be supported by a proper personnel policy. The most important thing in this case is the right selection of proactive executives, but also direct – formal and informal – contacts which are to motivate management to take action in line with the normative vision. It is not insignificant for this communication to clearly signal the vision as a certain standard for evaluating the facility itself and its management. In some cases, local governments also provide organisational support in submitting applications, building partnerships for projects, or securing

own contribution. Local government officials also take other steps to support the dissemination of the normative model. The spectrum of instruments employed includes the use of projects to build critical competencies in the sector, the coordination of cross-sector partnership projects involving libraries, as well as the implementation of multi-faceted infrastructure projects, such as those comprising revitalization strategies.

All of the aforementioned impacts that are exerted – by a variety of local and nationwide actors – on libraries can be thought of as “governance at a distance” (Miller & Rose, 1990, 1992). It seems that working to spread the normative vision of libraries makes multifaceted sense in the case of organisers. First of all, it provides answers to the challenges that library facilities face. At the same time, it allows the statutory autonomy of the facilities to be respected, largely shifting the exertion of pressure on the facilities to third parties. It is these pressures that take the form of rather grueling administrative requirements resulting from the implementation of projects with external funds. Most importantly, however, these impacts make it possible to implement modernization measures based on external resources, with minimal burden on local governments themselves. As a result, it becomes the responsibility of the facilities to deal with a particularly difficult situation. This situation, that is emphasizing the subjectivity of subordinate actors in order to shift away the blame from the shortcomings of the political system, is well described by Jessica Schmidt (2015) who used the concept of resilience as an example. Moreover, libraries are at the same time an instrument for implementing public policy in areas of particular difficulty for local government. They are the ones to take a more “humanistic” approach to local public policy. Their actions emphasize the policy’s increased focus on quality of life and social development of residents. This becomes especially important in the face of new demands on public policies (Joseph & McGregor, 2020).

Is it realistic to adapt library facilities to changing conditions and significantly expand their activities without a parallel increase in the earmarked subsidy? Are they a “philosopher’s stone” in local communities? This seems questionable, to say the least. The overwhelmingly positive assessment of the libraries’ activities, while at the same time the small scale of the expanded activities they undertake, clearly indicate that the adoption of the modernization vision by local government officials is utilitarian in nature. This allows the local government – declaratively – to adapt to changing conditions, including the expectations that are placed on public policies by the environment. Indeed, without an increase in the resources under the responsibility of the local government, the actual implementation of activities in this area is not possible. Instead, local governments take advantage of the fact that library facilities are subordinate and prescribe the indicated activities to them without securing resources to achieve additional goals.

It seems, moreover, that the situation presented is aided by the broader conditions of library operations. First of all, there is an already well-established vision of the library in the public sphere that local governments can appeal to. At the same time, this is also fostered by the diverse sources of dedicated grant programs for libraries aimed at giving effect to this vision. Especially since the processes of transformation – thanks to programs that have been in operation for decades – are noticeable in many territorial spaces. This is the case, for example, with changes in infrastructure or the digitization of facilities. These programs do not so much allow for widespread implementation of transformations, but provide a good reference point for spreading the view that the facility's own activity is the key to its adaptation. Finally, legal considerations are also not insignificant. Indeed, the Act on Libraries (Journal of Laws of 2019, item 1479) implies not only the necessity of libraries in every municipality, but also their organisational autonomy. Libraries, as public cultural institutions, independently shape the strategy of their activities. This provides a good starting point for shifting the responsibility for adaptation and expansion of activities to the library facilities themselves, which is served by “governance at a distance” techniques that appeal to a socially popularized vision of the library.

Author Contributions

The author confirms being the sole contributor of this work and has approved it for publication.

Conflict of Interest

The author declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Ethics Statement

The author certifies that the research published in the text was carried out in accordance with the research ethics of the affiliated university.

Research Data Availability Statement

The original data presented in the study are found in the article. Further inquiries may be made to the author.

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