

## **Referendum in the Media Discourse in Poland in 2013 (As Exemplified by “Gazeta Wyborcza”)<sup>1</sup>**

**Maria Marczevska\***

*The aim of the article is to analyze the discourse participants published in the “Gazeta Wyborcza” newspaper in 2013. These were scholars, politicians, columnists and journalists. The year 2013 was not chosen at random. In connection with two questions: the lowering of school age and attempts to dismiss the Mayor of Warsaw, the grounds for, essence, range and consequences of the use of a referendum in the process of political decision-making were again discussed. The article consists of several parts: introduction; the institution of a referendum in “Gazeta Wyborcza” in 2013; pros and cons of using a referendum; conclusions.*

Key word: Poland, citizen participation, referendum, media discourse, “Gazeta Wyborcza”

### **Introduction**

The goal of the article is to reconstruct the debate devoted to the issues of referendum, the justified use of this instrument, its determinants and limitations. The analysis covered the arguments and opinions presented by the discourse participants published in the “Gazeta Wyborcza” newspaper in 2013. These were scholars (first of all constitutionalist lawyers, historians of ideas, philosophers, and sociologists), politicians, columnists and journalists. The year 2013 was not chosen at random. In connection with two questions (the lowering of school age and attempts to dismiss the Mayor of Warsaw), the grounds for, essence, range and consequences of the use of a referendum in the process of political decision-making were again discussed. The broad discussion on referenda results from a decline, as Piotr Winczorek rightly emphasizes, of “social trust in the institutions of indirect democracy – the parliament and elected authorities of local government. It is not impossible that if the law permitted it, there would also appear measures intended to dismiss members of parliament, senators, or ministers; and even to remove the whole body of State authorities in a given composition,

---

<sup>1</sup> The article is the result of research project No. 2014/15/B/HS5/01866 funded by the National Science Centre

following the pattern of what is admissible in the case of local government authorities” [Winczorek 2013: 8].

### **The institution of a referendum in “Gazeta Wyborcza” in 2013**

In 2013, in “Gazeta Wyborcza”, the institution of a referendum was referred to many times as a form of direct democracy utilized in the USA, Switzerland, Germany, Croatia, and in Poland both at the national and local levels. The United States is a country that has used a broad range of solutions characteristic of direct democracy, including, obviously, the institution of a referendum, which is widely used at the state level (Marczewska-Rytko 2001). The article published in the daily in question advanced a thesis that California, “once a land of milk and honey, was almost bankrupted by arch-democratic initiatives” (Lubowski 2013: 17).

The idea of citizens’ participation - in the form of direct democracy – in the process of political decision-making is a significant part of Switzerland’s history (Marczewska-Rytko 2011: 323-345; Marczewska-Rytko 2012: 272-283). The institution of a referendum is applied at all levels of the structure of this country. The debate in “Gazeta Wyborcza” recalled a proposal for limiting the salaries of higher-echelon employees: these solutions were meant to link the size of salaries of company presidents with the wages of the lowest-paid employees in those firms (Filipiak 2013: 7). The proposal stipulated that the presidents would be allowed to earn no more than twelve times the lowest salary of the employees in the company they managed (Zawadzki 2013: 12). A hundred thousand people signed this initiative, which resulted in calling a referendum.

With regard to Germany, the newspaper presented the discussion and actions by some politicians in order to introduce the institution of a referendum on a larger scale in this country (Wielński 2013: 14). Croatia became the subject of an article concerning homosexual marriages (Kokot 2013: 13). The Croatians voted in a referendum on the provision in the constitution stipulating that marriage is a union between a man and a woman only.

In Poland two referendum debates provoked a considerable response in society and an animated discussion in “Gazeta Wyborcza”: the petition for a referendum on six-year-olds and the petition for a referendum on the removal of the Warsaw Mayor from office. Regarding the first referendum petition, it was launched in June 2013 by parents in the Save Childhood (Ratuj Maluchy) movement, who opposed the government reform meant to lower the school age from seven to six years (Pezda, Nowakowska 2013: 3). The petition also contained other demands: abolish the preschool duty for five-year-olds; restore the full course

of history and other subjects in high schools; return to the previous system of eight-year primary school and four-year high school; stop the process of closing down public schools and kindergartens. Journalists presented the arguments of both the Movement's activists and the government (Nowakowska 2013: 4; Pawlicki 2013: 10; Nowakowska 2013a: 2; Suchecka 2013: 3; Wielowieyska 2013: 2). Proponents of a referendum pointed to two main arguments: the six year-olds were not mature enough to go to school, and to the insufficient preparation of schools to receive them. Completely different arguments were advanced by the supporters of the reform. For example, the Prime Minister pointed out that the matter of school duty was an arbitrary decision in every country. He also rejected the arguments about the schools not being prepared enough (Pezda, Nowakowska 2013: 3).

The petition for the referendum was supported by all the deputies from the parties: Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość), Your Movement (Twój Ruch), Democratic Left Alliance (Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej), Solidary Poland (Solidarna Polska), and by three ousted members of Civic Platform (Platforma Obywatelska). The petition was opposed by the ruling coalition of the Civic Platform and Polish People's Party (Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe). As a result of voting in the Sejm [Parliament], the petition was rejected (with 222 votes for the referendum and 232 against) (Nowakowska 2013b: 2).

Just as many emotions were stirred up by the petition for the referendum, the referendum campaign and the referendum itself on the removal Warsaw's Mayor Hanna Gronkiewicz-Waltz from office. The motion was initiated by the Ursynów (Warsaw's district) Mayor Piotr Guział (over 166 thousand valid signatures were placed on the referendum petition) (*Referendum w Warszawie...* 2013: 2013: 5). Among the most often voiced arguments against Warsaw's Mayor was a series of "her mistakes and arrogant behaviors, which showed that she knows Warsaw only through the windows of her office and her official car" (Wroński 2013: 3; Wojtczuk, Zubik 2013: 2). These arguments were apparently soon pushed into the background, and the campaign actually turned into a struggle between the ruling Civic Platform (PO) and the opposition Law and Justice (PiS). In this context, it was symptomatic that the Democratic Left Alliance (SLD) leader Leszek Miller declared: "We did not get involved in the referendum because our electorate is rational – they do not want the return of the Law and Justice party's government" (*Miller: SLD...* 2013: 8). In the referendum campaign two positions emerged: one advocated by the Civic Platform - boycott the voting and stay at home, and the other advocated by Law and Justice – take part in the referendum and vote for the dismissal of Warsaw's Mayor. In the public space the campaign was therefore centered around the dilemma: go to vote or not? (Mazowiecki 2013: 1;

Nowakowska 2013c: 1; Szpala, Urzykowski 2013: 4; Pieńkos, Wojtczuk 2013: 5) The result of the referendum was unfavorable to its initiators and all political forces involved in the attempt to remove Warsaw's Mayor from her post: the decisive factor was a too low voter turnout (Kondzińska 2013: 4; Czech 2013: 8; Wroński 2013b: 2; Szpala, Tymowski 2013: 1).

The point of the main theme of discussion on the referendum institution in "Gazeta Wyborcza" could be the following statement by Jerzy Jarzębski: "An extensive discussion on referenda is recently held all over Poland, with the opposition parties (PiS and SLD at the lead) taking every opportunity to present the system of referenda as the core of democracy. This is easy to prove because it is seemingly obvious that if hundreds of thousands or even millions of citizens express their opinion, the politicians and members of parliament (always suspected of advancing narrow party interest) should yield to them. A referendum is thus presented as a higher form of democracy than parliamentarianism that is not applied every day only for economic reasons or because it requires the involvement of a huge administrative apparatus. The statements that criticize settling more and more matters by way of referenda are denounced as the gagging of the society" (Jarzębski 2013: 9).

### **Pros and cons using a referendum**

The referendum campaigns held in Poland, petitions put forward for referenda and the cited examples of the use of the institution in different parts of the world gave rise to a broad debate in "Gazeta Wyborcza". The debate covered both fundamental issues constituting, in a way, the essence of democracy and detailed solutions adopted in the procedural provisions of individual states. The participants in the debate were scholars, columnists and journalists. The opinions of practitioners-politicians and local government activists were also cited.

Among the scholars, especially significant were the voices of jurists/constitutionalists. For example, according to Piotr Winczorek the most essential question was to establish which matters were of particular importance to the State (Winczorek 2013a: 8; Winczorek 2013b: 8). He rightly pointed out the ambiguity of the phrase 'particular importance' adopted in the Constitution: "What some assess to be of such importance, does not have to be so important to others. [...] The point would be less controversial if we developed clear criteria for establishing which matters are of particular importance and which of them concern the State as the common good" (Winczorek 2013a: 8). Winczorek's view is that the support of citizens for a petition to hold a referendum does not determine its particular importance to the State. Winczorek did not support the opinion of all those who accused the government of

contravening the Constitution in the referendum to remove Warsaw's Mayor from office. According to Winczorek, "The Constitution does not know the citizen's duty to take part in the act of universal voting. Therefore, every behavior of voters: both abstention from voting, and going to vote, and support for a person or refusal to do so, is within the law" Winczorek 2013c: 8]. Similarly, Winczorek rejected the accusation of violations of voting secrecy as a result of the low turnout in the referendum. He pointed out that "secrecy can be violated by learning the content of the votes in such a way as to be able to connect them with specific persons" (Winczorek 2013c: 8).

Janusz A. Majcherek, a sociologist and philosopher, treats the referendum as a kind of plague. He writes: "nationwide referendum initiatives started by groups of enthusiasts and fanatics obsessed with all kinds of usually destructive ideas" (Majcherek 2013: 11). In his view, referenda are in fact used to promote their initiators with their ideas. He states that "a referendum is a dangerous instrument. To present it as the quintessence and supreme outburst of democracy makes as much sense as to recommend first-past-the-post voting as a remedy to all the maladies of democracy" (Majcherek 2013: 11; Majcherek 2013a: 7). An equally negative position on referenda is expressed by Andrzej Lubowski, an economist and columnist, who lives permanently in the USA, "California's experience lays bare the pitfalls of referenda as an instrument of direct democracy, which, more than representative democracy, is prone to demagoguery, delectable but not entirely well-thought-out arguments, temptations to have something for nothing, to illusions and sandcastles. They show that wishful thinking in the name of noble ideas, devoid of imagination and reflection, or an action calculated by political hustlers can destroy more than anyone might expect. Referenda are usually a manifestation of frustrations and disillusionments" (Lubowski 2013: 3). To Marcin Król, a historian of ideas, motions to call referenda are an expression of boredom. Król is convinced that advocates of a referendum do not intend to make social or political changes but to feed radical sentiments. In fact, he maintains, "we live in the world, in which the public sphere remains completely beyond our knowledge and does not arouse our interest" [Król 2013: 22]. Sociologist Ireneusz Krzemiński shares his reflection: "the outcry and lament spreading in the media as a reaction to Prime Minister Tusk's words that he personally encourages the Warsaw residents to not take part in the referendum, made me angry" (Krzemiński 2013: 10).

Magdalena Środa, a philosopher and ethicist, expressed her opinion in "Gazeta Wyborcza" in the context of taking part in the referendum on the removal of Warsaw's Mayor from office. Środa explained the reasons for her refusal to take part in the referendum (Środa

2013: 2). Janusz Czapiński, a social psychologist, justified his stand: “This referendum has nothing to do with democracy. It is not a judgment on whether the Mayor governs well or badly. It is a dismissal referendum. I’m not going ...” (Karpieszuk, Szpala 2013: 1). A similar theme in the discussion on a referendum was pointed out by political scientist Rafał Matyja. However, according to him “Its result will be important not only to the actors in the political arena but also to the public because the public may treat the referendum not as a political plebiscite but as a manifestation of their will to be taken into consideration. As a test of their own empowerment when other forms of opposition may be ignored” (Matyja 2013: 11). Jerzy Jarzębski, a critic and literary historian, asks an explicit question: “Why has the form of direct democracy, in which citizens decide en masse about important State matters, not become widespread almost anywhere in the world?” (Jarzębski 2013: 9). This form of democracy appears in his statement as a politically dishonest institution. He says that a referendum is “an extraordinary political means utilized in the atmosphere of aroused and stirred-up emotions that are not conducive to a calm and sober assessment of a situation. Sometimes (rarely) this is justified but the State whose condition is decided by the excessive number of referenda becomes ‘one of the state of emergency’, and this has the worst associations possible” (Jarzębski 2013: 9).

Columnists, journalists, and commentators generally speak in negative terms about referenda in “Gazeta Wyborcza”. For example, Jacek Żakowski suggests that we see man “in his whole incompetence, ineptitude, ignorance, and uncertainty. We should remember about how many affairs we learn for the first time when a scandal erupts. We should accept the unpleasant truth that man generally cannot, does not know, or does not have the faintest idea” (Żakowski 2013: 2; Żakowski 2013a: 2). He seeks the empowerment of citizens in deliberative panels and participatory budgeting rather than in the institution of a referendum. In Dominika Wielowiejska’s view, “our democracy will not gain in quality just because it will be citizens themselves who will replace the Sejm with the referenda in decision-making on particular issues” (Wielowiejska 2013a: 2; Wielowiejska 2013b: 2). Others pose questions about the expenses connected with holding referenda (Szpala, Wojtczuk 2013a: 4). Still others reject the opinion that “urging people to not take part in the Warsaw referendum or in any removal-from-office referendum in general, is an offense to democracy” (Ptasiński 2013: 10). This approach includes the conviction that “this referendum is a political manipulation and abuse of democratic mechanisms” (Maziarski 2013: 2). Seweryn Blumsztajn speaks in a similar spirit: “a referendum is ‘a blunt instrument’. [...] We should use it when the one in power [i.e. the Mayor] violates, embezzles, or ruins the city’s finances. Nothing like that has

happened now” (Karpieszuk, Szpala 2013: 1) Kinga Dunin is of a different opinion: “She deserves it. And now we are told: don’t go because someone even worse may win the next [mayoral] election. It is blackmail. I shouldn’t go because Hanna Gronkiewicz-Waltz is a lesser evil?” (Karpieszuk, Szpala 2013: 1).

Doubts about the effects of referenda also appeared. For example, Ernest Skalski formulates this view in the following way: “In democracy, are the elections and referenda held for the citizen to fulfill his duty, to perform an act of self-fulfillment, to express his opinion, or to satisfy his ego? Indeed, they also are, but this is a side effect and is not the main objective of these acts. The elections and referenda are not symbolic acts, or sacraments, or magic actions. It is a highly concrete act or desistance from it and it produces tangible effects” (Skalski 2013: 9). Some of the debaters proposed regulations connected with holding referenda: abolish electoral silence (Kolenda-Zaleska 2013: 2); change the question (e.g. should Warsaw’s Mayor remain in office) and abolish the turnout threshold (Wojtczuk 2013: 2); raise the threshold in referenda (Wroński 2013a: 5; Maziarski 2013a: 14). Interestingly enough, there was a dual opinion by social activists and local-government members - “The social activists: it’s about the real influence of the people on what is going on in the city. At present, it is regrettably limited to the election once in four years. It happens that afterwards people are ignored and no-one will listen to them (...). The local-government members: I am afraid that it will be easier for the residents to get together against rather than for something. There is a risk that many important matters will be decided by a small but well-organized group” (*Pieniacz też człowiek...* 2013: 3; *Dlaczego samorząd...* 2013: 4).

## **Conclusions**

On the basis of the reconstructed media debate in “Gazeta Wyborcza”, devoted to the institution of a referendum and its utilization in political decision-making, several conclusions can be formulated. Firstly, in 2013, two main problems concerning the lowering of school age and the removal of Warsaw’s Mayor from office gave rise to broad public discussion both in the public sphere and in the narrower sphere of the media. In the media discourse, the opinions were presented by scholars, columnists, commentators, journalists, politicians, activists, and local government members. Secondly, different opinions on the use of referenda were discussed in the media debate: proposals to establish the catalog of matters of particular importance to the State, the ambivalent attitude of debaters to the number of people signing the motion to hold a referendum (the number of citizens signing the petition for a referendum

does not determine the particular importance of matters from the standpoint of *raison d'état*), participation in a referendum is seen as a right rather than a duty (invoking the letter of the law), abolishment of electoral silence because of the development of the Internet, changes in the formula of referendum questions (from negative to positive, e.g. should Warsaw's Mayor remain in office), and abolishment of the turnout threshold. Thirdly, a generally negative picture of a referendum emerges from the analysis of the media discourse. It is presented as a plague, a dangerous instrument, a tool for fueling radical sentiments, an instrument having little to do with the essence of democracy, a politically dishonest institution, one that is not conducive to a calm and substantive assessment of a situation, an obstacle to enhancing the quality of democratic systems, and a political manipulation. The opinions emphasize the destructive character of referenda and the abuse of democratic mechanisms, and they show the pitfalls of the use of a referendum as well as the unpredictable effects of voting. In the context of a rather negative picture of referenda, the incompetency of citizens to decide on many public matters is also pointed out. In this context it would be advisable to compare the opinions and assessments expressed by specialists who investigate the problems of direct democracy, including the institution of a referendum (*Stan i perspektywy...* 2010).

## References:

- Czech M., 2013, *Duda prawdziwym liderem prawicy*, „Gazeta Wyborcza”, No. 242.
- Dlaczego samorząd woli rządzić sam, z prof. Jerzym Regulskim rozmawia P. Jedlecki*, 2013, „Gazeta Wyborcza”, No. 59.
- Filipiak A., 2013, *Szwajcaria zabierze bogatym*, „Gazeta Wyborcza”, No. 273.
- Jarzębski J., 2013, *Referendum przeciw demokracji*, „Gazeta Wyborcza”, No. 193.
- Karpieszuk W., Szpala I., 2013, *Demokracja czy manewry*, „Gazeta Wyborcza”, No. 235.
- Kokot, M., 2013, *Chorwaci spierają się o małżeństwa homoseksualne*, „Gazeta Wyborcza”, No. 283.
- Kolenda-Zaleska K., 2013, *Do kosza z ciszą wyborczą!*, „Gazeta Wyborcza”, No. 241.
- Kondzińska A., 2013, *Polowanie na Adama Hofmana*, „Gazeta Wyborcza”, No. 242.
- Król M., 2013, *Nuda jako śmiertelna choroba demokracji*, „Gazeta Wyborcza”, No. 19
- Krzemiński I., 2013, *Histeria mediów*, „Gazeta Wyborcza”, No. 171.
- Lubowski A., 2013, *Czy referendum to droga do rajy*, „Gazeta Wyborcza”, No. 197.
- Majcherek J.A., 2013, *Referendalna zaraza*, „Gazeta Wyborcza”, No. 259.

- Majcherek J.A., 2013a, *Nagonka referendalna*, „Gazeta Wyborcza”, No. 182.
- Marczewska-Rytko M., 2001, *Demokracja bezpośrednia w teorii i praktyce politycznej*, Lublin: UMCS Press.
- Marczewska-Rytko M., 2012, *Inicjatywa ludowa i referendum w Szwajcarii w latach 2000-2010*, „Polityka i Społeczeństwo”, No. 9.
- Marczewska-Rytko, M., 2011, *Szwajcarski model demokracji bezpośredniej*, [in:] *Stan i perspektywy demokracji bezpośredniej we współczesnym świecie*, (ed.) M. Marczewska-Rytko, Lublin: UMCS Press.
- Matyja R., 2013, *Rząd mobilizuje wrogów*, „Gazeta Wyborcza”, No. 224.
- Maziarski W., 2013, *PiS, wódka, ogórek i referendum*, „Gazeta Wyborcza”, No. 237.
- Maziarski W., 2013a, *Referenda zaszkodzą Polsce*, „Gazeta Wyborcza”, No. 190.
- Mazowiecki W., 2013, *Iść czy nie iść na referendum. Prosty wybór*, „Gazeta Wyborcza”, No. 239.
- Miller: SLD to nie są egzaltowane pensjonarki*, rozmawiała A. Nowakowska, 2013, „Gazeta Wyborcza”, No. 242.
- Nie straszmy dzieci szkołą*, rozmawiała J. Suchecka, 2013, „Gazeta Wyborcza”, No. 262.
- Nowakowska A., 2013, *Lewica zakręcona na sześciolatkach*, „Gazeta Wyborcza”, No. 260.
- Nowakowska A., 2013b, *Koalicja odetchnęła*, „Gazeta Wyborcza”, No. 262.
- Nowakowska A., 2013c, *Lewicowy dylemat referendalny*, „Gazeta Wyborcza”, No. 238.
- Nowakowska, A. 2013a, *Lekcja sześciolatków*, „Gazeta Wyborcza”, No. 261.
- Pawlicki A., 2013, *Dzieci i trąby*, „Gazeta Wyborcza”, No. 261.
- Pezda A., Nowakowska A., 2013, *Sześciolatki bez referendum*, „Gazeta Wyborcza”, No. 262.
- Pieniacz też człowiek*, rozmawiał P. Jedlecki, 2013, „Gazeta Wyborcza”, No. 72.
- Pieńkos M., Wojtczuk M., 2013, *Warszawskie referendum ponad progiem*, „Gazeta Wyborcza”, No. 194.
- Referendum w Warszawie 13 października*, 2013, „Gazeta Wyborcza”, No. 194.
- Skalski E., 2013, *Wybory i referenda to nie sakramenty*, „Gazeta Wyborcza”, No. 235.
- Stan i perspektywy demokracji bezpośredniej w Polsce*, 2010, (ed.) M. Marczewska-Rytko, Lublin: UMCS Press.
- Stasiński P., 2013, *Idę albo nie idę na referendum, bo mam wolność wyboru*, „Gazeta Wyborcza”, No. 242.
- Szpała I., Tymowski W., 2013, *Prezydent wygrała*, „Gazeta Wyborcza”, No. 240.
- Szpała I., Urzykowski T., 2013, *Litera W jak w Godzinę W*, „Gazeta Wyborcza”, No. 224.
- Szpała I., Wojtczuk M., 2013a, *Ile kosztowało referendum?*, „Gazeta Wyborcza”, No. 242.

- Środa M., 2013, *Nie idę na referendum*, „Gazeta Wyborcza”, No. 236.
- Wielński, B.T., 2013, *Niemcy jak Szwajcaria? Politycy mają ochotę wprowadzić referenda*, „Gazeta Wyborcza”, No. 264.
- Wielowieyska D., 2013, *Referendum w sprawie chaosu*, „Gazeta Wyborcza”, No. 248.
- Wielowieyska D., 2013a, *PiS chce wzmocnić referendum*, „Gazeta Wyborcza”, No. 249.
- Wielowieyska D., 2013b, *Referendalna obłuda*, „Gazeta Wyborcza”, No. 235.
- Winczorek P., 2013b, *Bezpośrednia kontra pośrednia*, „Gazeta Wyborcza”, No. 149.
- Winczorek P., 2013c, *Gwałt na wolności i tajności głosowania?*, „Gazeta Wyborcza”, No. 247.
- Winczorek P., 2013, *Referendum do przemyslenia*, „Gazeta Wyborcza”, No. 277.
- Winczorek P., 2013a, *Referendum do przemyslenia*, „Gazeta Wyborcza”, No. 277.
- Wojtczuk M., 2013, *Ale mam pomysł na lepsze referendum*, „Gazeta Wyborcza”, No. 232.
- Wojtczuk M., Zubik M., 2013, *Węże morskie Piotra Guziąła*, „Gazeta Wyborcza”, No. 196.
- Wroński P., 2013, *Nie bijcie w dzwony zwycięstwa*, „Gazeta Wyborcza”, No. 240.
- Wroński P., 2013b, *Powtórzyc referendum i mecz z Anglią*, „Gazeta Wyborcza”, No. 245.
- Wroński P., 2013a, *Sejmowy próg referendum*, „Gazeta Wyborcza”, No. 226.
- Zawadzki M., 2013, *Pokój i sprawiedliwość ze Szwajcarii*, „Gazeta Wyborcza”, No. 274.
- Żakowski J., 2013, *Inna demokracja*, „Gazeta Wyborcza”, No. 240.
- Żakowski J., 2013a, *Boska jednostka*, „Gazeta Wyborcza”, No. 263.

---

\* Maria Marczevska-Rytko, full professor of political science and religious studies, a head of Political Movements Department at the Faculty of Political Science, Maria Curie Skłodowska University in Lublin, Poland. She is a chair of the Research Committee on Political Socialization and Education (RC21) of the International Political Science Association (IPSA). Her academic work involves problems of contemporary social and religious thought and political movements (especially direct democracy and populism).