

## The voice of ethnic minorities on issues of education in interpellations of the members of the Parliament of the Second Republic of Poland (1919–1939)

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*In the Second Polish Republic the interpellations were one of main instruments of the political contention, with lever on the government, moreover showed with eyes of Members of Parliament fundamental gaps, weaknesses, deformations in the national life, social relations and economic. It depicted conditions, in which it revived the contemporary Polish state, reflected postures of individual social groups and professional and of national minorities. The outlined problems concerning the education and educations brought up in interpellations by Members of Parliament belonging to national minorities (Jewish, German, Ukrainian and Belarusian minority) stayed in the article interpellations concerned the reconstruction and the repair of schools in different towns, of salaries of teachers incessantly becoming poor with effect of inflation, problems of discrimination against minority rights in the issue of teaching in the one's mother tongue, the culture and the religion.*

Key words: *Second Republic of Poland; the Parliament; interpellations; ethnic minorities*

Interpellation is an inquiry of a number of members of parliament to the government pertaining to issues of its interior and international politics, the functioning of government administration, and all the other problems that the members of parliament believe require explanation or government intervention. It is an element of the parliamentary control over the state and the method that draws the public attention to negative phenomena that often result from mistakes in lawmaking.

It is an intervention of a repressive character, because the interpellants demand that those responsible for the losses be punished, or of a preventive character, when its aim is to prevent breaching someone's rights. The procedure of submitting an interpellation was defined by the statutes of the Sejm in its subsequent terms. Generally

speaking, an interpellation included in the agenda of the daily proceedings of the Sejm was sent to an appropriate department, or to a number of departments, where the issue was investigated.

According to a constitution expert Andrzej Ajnenkiel, starting with the first sittings of the legislative Parliament [Sejm Ustawodawczy – SU] (1919–1922) interpellations were one of the main instruments of political contention, they placed pressure on the government, and, what is more, allowed the members of the parliament to present substantial shortcomings, weaknesses, and deformations in the life of the state, as well as social and economic relationships in the Second Republic of Poland. Interpellations illustrated the conditions in which the contemporary Polish state was reborn, reflected the attitudes of the particular social and professional groups and ethnic minorities, informed about the living conditions of the population, and sometimes of individual tragedies. Frequently interpellations constituted attempts to prompt the government to make favourable decisions in individual cases that could not be addressed in any other official way, or they were a method of precipitating the proceedings of some cases that were already being considered. Occasionally a single interpellation would be submitted a number of times under different headings, and it would sometimes exaggerate the issue in question, and bend reality to the aims that the interpellant wanted to achieve. This brings to mind the limited opportunities to achieve the goals set by the members of the parliament, their cunningness and consistency, as well as the lack of good will of the state administration officials. Interpellations would also become an element in contention between political groups or members of parliament competing for influence.

In the archives of the parliaments of the Second Republic of Poland interpellations constituted the greatest collection of documents. It consists of about 10,169 documents. On the basis of queries in a number of archives it is being meticulously recreated after the destruction that World War II wreaked in the Parliament Archive.

The following numbers of interpellations were submitted in the subsequent Parliament terms:

- Legislative Parliament (Sejm Ustawodawczy – SU) 1919–1922 – 3730,
- Parliament of the 1<sup>st</sup> term 1922–1927 – 4493
- Parliament of the 2<sup>nd</sup> term 1928–1930 – 997,
- Parliament of the 3<sup>rd</sup> term 1930–1935 – 350,
- Parliament of the 4<sup>th</sup> term 1935–1938 – 336,
- Parliament of the 5<sup>th</sup> term 1938–1939 ca. 83<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://bib.sejm.gov.pl/>

It is easy to notice how the number of interpellations rose rapidly in the first decade – after 1930 their number is stabilised at the level of ca. 350. As early as the second sitting of SU on February 25, 1919 Speaker of the Sejm Wojciech Trąpczyński appealed to the MPs: “I must draw the attention of the respectable MPs to one particular problem. You have been flooding the Parliament with interpellations and immediate motions, so that it would require two years of honest work to address them all. You must limit yourself if you wish the motions to be taken seriously. I hereby appeal to the parliamentary clubs to submit motions in a number that the Parliament is capable of coping with<sup>2</sup>”. Although the appeal was repeated a number of times, it did not help. It was only with the introduction of Sejm procedures and constitutional regulations that the number of interpellations was significantly limited. These regulations also defined the duties of the addressees of the interpellations<sup>3</sup>. The decrease in the number of interpellations was also influenced by political factors such as the shortened term of the parliament, limiting its role in the life of the state, and the rise of the number of the signatures required to submit an interpellation to 30 (formerly 15), which, first and foremost, made it impossible for the representatives of ethnic minorities to issue interpellations. From now on, ethnic minorities had to ask other parliamentary clubs for support<sup>4</sup>. While it is true that the Parliament of the 4<sup>th</sup> term changed the conditions again, allowing for interpellations issued by single MPs, but it was the decision of the Speaker of the Parliament to accept them or not, which greatly limited the independence of the MPs. What is more, the clubs of the ethnic minorities were weakly represented in the Parliament and it was difficult for them to make their voice heard. It needs to be emphasised, however, that in none of the terms of the Parliament were interpellations censored.

In SU, among the 3730 interpellations nearly 160 pertained generally to the subject of education, e.g., the necessity for the Treasury to grant organisational funds to the newly established higher schools, provide schools with fuel for heating, schooling for ethnic minorities, tailoring the train schedule to school hours and granting teachers train ticket price

<sup>2</sup> Stenographic record of the 6<sup>th</sup> sitting of Feb 25, 1925, column 202.

<sup>3</sup> Art. 33 of the Constitution of Mar 17, 1921 and art. 45, 72 and 73 of the Constitution of 1935 mentioned the duty of the government to reply to an interpellation within a defined period, or to issue a plea (explanation) of the lack thereof, and the opportunity to make it a subject of debate and resolution of the Sejm.

<sup>4</sup> In the Parliament of the 3<sup>rd</sup> term BBWR [Bezpartyjny Blok Współpracy z Rządem – Non-Party Bloc of Cooperation with the Government] changed the conditions of submitting interpellations by increasing the number of required signatures.

reduction, and stabilising teachers' incomes. The MPs of different political groups would speak about help for students from poor peasants' and workers' families. In the immediate motions and interpellations appeals were made to grant scholarships to poor students of secondary schools, to establish dormitories for them, to allow them to purchase course books and notebooks at reduced prices, to grant them train ticket price reduction. There was a substantial number of interpellations pertaining to construction or renovation of school buildings in various villages and towns, and they were full of indignation about how the financial situation of teachers and schools constantly deteriorating because of inflation was being ignored.

The population of the multiethnic Republic of Poland consisted of national minorities in one third. These were represented in the Parliament by members of the lower house of the parliament and senators of Ukrainian, Jewish, and German nationality – Russians and Belarusians were fewer. The manifested lack of trust in the Polish state resulted in the lack of representation of the Lithuanian minority in the Parliaments of the Second Republic of Poland<sup>5</sup>. In SU and in the Parliament of the 1<sup>st</sup> term, when the National Minorities Bloc [Blok Mniejszości Narodowych] was established, only Ukrainian, Belarusian, German, and Jewish educational and cultural organisations such as "Proswita", "Mizrasz", or "Haskala" were represented. To the group of these representatives belonged the people's school teacher Sergiusz Kozicki (1883–1941) and the gymnasium teacher Maksym Czuczma (1887–?), chairman of the Cultural and Educational Association "Proswita". In the years 1918–1919 Sergiusz Kozicki was a poviato education commissar of the Ukrainian People's Republic in Kamieniec Podolski. When with the Treaty of Riga the Eastern Borderlands were returned to the Republic of Poland he became a strong advocate of teaching Ukrainian in Polish schools and establishing Ukrainian schools. As a member of the Sejm of the 1<sup>st</sup> term (1922–1927), a member of the Commission of Education and a senator of the Senate of the 2<sup>nd</sup> term (1928–1930) he was a co-author of the act on the official inclusion of the Ukrainian university and university of technology in the state system. Both of the higher schools had been functioning in secret in Lwów. For this purpose he submitted 190 interpellations, which was a record number in the history of the Parliament, but these failed to produce expected results. The reason for the interpellations that included complaints about failures to respect

<sup>5</sup> The situation of Lithuanians was somewhat improved, because their schools and socio-cultural organisations would receive financial help from the Republic of Lithuania (1918–1939).

children's rights to education in their "mother tongue" was the so-called "act on languages" (*ustawa językowa*)<sup>6</sup> of Władysław Grabski, which theoretically provided opportunity of such education, but made it dependent on the number of children in the area where parents would demand it. In the regions where people's ethnic identities were weak and people would simply declare themselves "locals" speaking a "local" language an identity struggle began between Ukrainian and Polish officials, the latter of whom would frequently be accused of producing difficulties for those willing to submit declarations about the need for education in a minority language<sup>7</sup>.

German Club [Klub Niemiecki], that is, the German People's Party [Niemieckie Stronnictwo Ludowe] included two MPs. They were Karol Daczko (1860–1928), a secondary school teacher and, subsequently, inspector of German schools in Pomerania, the founder of numerous German cultural and educational organisations, and Józef Spickeman (1870–1947), who endeavoured after German minority rights. Their situation was much better due to the rules of the *Edict* that granted the German-speaking population the right to schools with German, and due to the Upper Silesian Geneva Convention<sup>8</sup>. In SU and the Sejm of the 1<sup>st</sup> term Karol Daczko was a speaker of the German Unity Club [Klub Zjednoczenie Niemieckie] on issues pertaining to education and farming. In 1923 together with the MP Robert Gustaw Piesch they submitted an interpellation on respecting the rights of parents to decide about the upbringing of their children<sup>9</sup>. Unlike MP Daczka, MP Piesch (1871–1954), a journalist and a teacher in the German Teachers' Seminar in Cieszyn, as an advocate of German interests was much more radical in demanding cultural autonomy for Silesia, with a clear inclination towards

<sup>6</sup> Dz. U. RP, of July 31, 1924, Issue 49, pos. 766.

<sup>7</sup> E.g. interpellation on failing to accept declarations from Ukrainian population in the Wołyń region, submitted on the 190<sup>th</sup> sitting of the Parliament of the 1<sup>st</sup> term on 27. 03. 1925, Interpellation of the Belarusian Club on sabotaging the minority languages schooling act, Interpellation on the unlawful change of Ukrainian language to Polish in Uhnów and Żupania, Interpellation on the closing of two private Ukrainian schools in Lwów, Interpellation of the Member of the lower house of parliament Czuczmań on failure to meet the legal term to issue schooling declaration by the Ukrainian population of Bielszowa village because of unlawful actions of the village-mayor, etc.

<sup>8</sup> *Edict on German language in schools* issued on Feb 7, 1919 by the Head of State, Dz. Praw R. P. 1919, Issue 14, pos. 192.

<sup>9</sup> Interpellation submitted at the 34<sup>th</sup> sitting of the Parliament of the 1<sup>st</sup> term. See: Hausner, P. (1981). *Mniejszość niemiecka w województwie pomorskim w latach 1920–1939* [German minority in the Pomeranian voivodship in the years 1920–1939]. Wrocław: Towarzystwo Naukowe, and Hausner, P. (1998). *Mniejszość niemiecka na Pomorzu w okresie międzywojennym*. Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM.

German culture. During the War he became a member of the NSDAP. It were also Jewish publicists Samuel Hirszhorn (1876–1942) and Izaak Grünbaum (1878–1970) as well as lawyers Ignacy Schipper (1884–1943) and Feliks Perl (1871–1927) who, although they represented different political options of the Jewish minority in the Parliament<sup>10</sup>, in fighting for the rights of their minority were of a single mind and devoted their undivided attention to making certain that the passed education and schooling laws do not breach the minority regulations of the Treaty of Versailles. After the passing of the March Constitution they would concentrate on its regulations, for which they had fought a veritable battle. In the interpellations addressed to Minister of Religious Confessions and Public Enlightenment (MRCPE) they mentioned questions pertaining to the persecution of Jewish schooling with Jewish language<sup>11</sup>, the lack of agreement of the authorities to establish a pedagogue training centre at the Jewish minority district in Warsaw (Izaak Grünbaum)<sup>12</sup> and, a number of times, to the persecution of the Jewish language.

In the Sejm of the 2<sup>nd</sup> term among the 961 interpellations 308 were submitted by the Ukrainian Club, and 191 by the remaining clubs of Slavic minorities (Russians, Belarusians). However, only 6 of these concerned educational and school issues and were addressed to the MRCPE. Half of these were submitted by the Ukrainian Club and pertained to the discrimination of Ukrainian language and youth. The number of interpellations submitted by the Jewish Club was relatively low<sup>13</sup>.

In the 4<sup>th</sup> term of the Parliament the number of interpellations dropped significantly, but out of the 276 interpellations 53 were addressed to the MRCPE, as they pertained to educational and schooling questions. The majority of their authors belonged to the Jewish Club, who filed complaints about persecution of Jewish youth, and the Ukrainian Club, who informed about cases of violence against Ukrainian children, about

<sup>10</sup> The Free Association of the Jewish Members of the Sejm consisted of 4 Jewish fractions: the national-Jewish club, people's party supporters, the Orthodox, the Zionists, with 10 representatives altogether.

<sup>11</sup> Interpellation on the failure to execute the duties accepted in the Treaty of Versailles and guarantees of the March Constitution, Interpellation on public schooling for national and religious minorities, etc.

<sup>12</sup> Interpellation on the school authorities preventing the establishment of pedagogue training centre at the Jewish minority district in Warsaw.

<sup>13</sup> Ajnenkiel, A. (1989). *Historia sejmu polskiego* [History of the Polish Sejm]. Warszawa: PWN. Vol. II, pt. 2, p. 151.

being forced to use Polish language exclusively, even in prayers, about discrimination of Ukrainian teachers, difficulties in submitting declarations of education in Ukrainian in state schools when the number of students exceeds that required by the Act.

In the last term of the Parliament that was interrupted by the outbreak of the War there were only 2 interpellations addressed to the MRCPE. One of them concerned the burning of the library and the reading room of "Proswita", and the other was submitted by Emil Sommerstein (and others)<sup>14</sup>, pertaining to the lack of security for Jews studying in higher schools. In relation to the persecutions and the acts of brutal violence taking place at universities interpellations were addressed to the Ministry of the Interior. Since schools with Russian and Czech language were few, there were no interpellations concerning their problems.

In most of the cases the Parliament would favourably address the issues mentioned in the interpellations and pass acts that met the expectations of the authors of the interpellations and that obliged the government to address the problems. The appropriate ministers could not always fulfil the obligations, especially those pertaining to financial issues in the period of rising inflation and economic crisis. The lack of statutory legal regulations concerning minorities was yet another obstacle. The failure of Polish legislature to develop statutory regulations protecting the rights of minorities and appropriate executive acts had a negative impact on the history of Poland. Subsequent cabinets executed assimilation policies aimed at minorities which were not very efficacious and that was not accepted by Belarusians and Ukrainians who were seeking their identity, and who, influenced by the USSR, included nationalist slogans in their communist political programmes. After 1935 the failure to introduce solutions asked for in the interpellations and the failure of the changes in the policy concerning the Belarusian minority lead to the Belarusian boycott of parliamentary elections, which is why they had no representation in the Parliament of the 4<sup>th</sup> and the 5<sup>th</sup> term.

The confrontation of the interpellations with the answers of the appropriate ministers allowed for the comparison of different stances. Unfortunately, few of the answers have survived until today. In spite of the obligations the government often failed to answer interpellations. If it did so it would always defend the criticised low government officials, replying that no mistakes were made. Unfortunately, the government also provided such answers in the cases when the law was evidently broken.

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<sup>14</sup> Interpellation on the lack of security in higher schools and the vicious crimes committed on their premises.