

Citizen Participation and Engagement in Participatory Governance – the Perspective of Polish Local Officials in Selected Municipalities of the Lubelskie Region.

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Abstract:

The last few decades have witnessed a transformation of local representative democracy from government to governance. The governance-type reforms mean that many European countries, and local governments as well, have found a new solution to improve the governing process and its institutions. In this context, it has become very popular to involve citizens in the decision-making process – hence the emergence of new civic engagement tools that offer citizens a real impact on the decision-making process. As a result, participatory governance has received renewed attention and become a trend. This aspect of governance focuses in particular on the active participation of citizens in the decision-making process. Poland is one country where the above-mentioned processes – implementing participative democracy tools – are clearly visible. The aim of this article is to present the perspective of councillors and city mayors regarding the ideas and forms of civic participation and determine the degree to which this may influence the decision making process. Based on quantitative and qualitative research, the article examines the role of the local representative bodies (mayors and councillors) in the governing process. The article is based on empirical data gathered in selected municipalities of one region. The outcome of the research confirms that Polish local officials have a positive approach towards increasing citizen involvement in the decision-making process. However, voting in local elections is still considered to be a key instrument of civic engagement in Poland. Most Polish local officials claimed that the forms of civic participation in their towns and cities are sufficient, while at the same time they feel that these processes could run more smoothly.

Points for practitioners: This article provides information about the impact of different participatory tools on the decision-making process and assesses their effectiveness in solving social problems. Therefore, it may prove useful for those who design, implement and then monitor the operation of participative instruments. It also contains information about the impact of particular persons/bodies/stakeholders on the governing process as well.

Key words: citizen participation, engagement, participatory governance, democracy, local government

INTRODUCTION

During the twentieth century, the expansion of citizen participation and engagement in the decision-making process has become increasingly relevant and visible. Various transformational reforms and processes of broadening participative instruments can be observed in many European countries, especially at the municipal level (Hambelton, 2002), where this practice has strengthened and developed in particular along with decentralisation and democratisation in order to ensure the wider participation of citizens in the execution of power. In this context, unquestionably, the process of governing has been shifting from government to governance (Rhodes 1997). As a result, we can distinguish crucial stages of socio-political participation of citizens whereby they play a different role in the governing process and in relationships with representatives bodies. The first stage reflects the roots of citizen participation during the period of ancient Greek city-states and the Republic of Rome, where power was concentrated in the hands of the citizens, yet the number of people who had a real voice was limited. In later times, the major act of citizen participation related to elections, meaning that the sovereign acted through his representatives. For citizens the possibility to elect their own representatives who, on their behalf, for a specific period of time, would make public decisions was often the only way to influence issues that affected their local environment. Although elections are still the cornerstone of the modern model of democracy, this mode of participation is today considered to be highly insufficient and is often criticised in the public discussion (Arnstein, 1969; Pateman 1970; Urbinati, Warren 2008). Another shift in the relationship between authorities and citizens already became visible in the 1970s with the popularisation of the

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idea of New Public Management. The implementation of this paradigm at the local level involved, *inter alia*, focusing on the citizen as a client of public administration, limiting the role of councils and citizens in the governance process in favour of substantive officials, introducing changes in participatory methods including the use of increasingly innovative tools of engagement (e.g. complaints and suggestions schemes, service satisfaction surveys, public opinion polls or interactive web-sites) (Radzik 2012, p. 221-228). A further transformation was evident in the 1990s with the transition from a traditional form of government to governance focused on boosting the involvement of citizens in the decision-making process. As Robert Dahl notices, this period is characterised by a decline in the importance of central state institutions in favour of local communities closer to the citizens (Dahl, 1994). Thus, in local governments, apart from traditional forms of civic participation, such as participation in elections or referenda, new engagement tools are increasingly used, including local initiatives, participatory budgeting or citizens' panels, which give local people a wider voice and allow them to participate more actively in the decision making-process. Many of these forms are rooted in participatory and deliberative democracy (Mutz 2006).

The main goal of the article is to analyse the issue of representative and participative mechanisms at the local level, as well as new forms of citizen participation in terms of impact on decision-making process. Thus, this paper encompasses the size, scale and capacity of citizen participation and engagement in selected municipalities. It will also focus on the role of different stakeholders inside the municipality and their influence on the process of governing, in particular representative bodies – mayors and councillors and citizens.

The article is organised as follows. In the first section, I present the basic theoretical framework related to representation and participation and the relationships between them. Then, the changes in the governing process in Poland is examined in reference to participatory governance trends. Next, I provide a brief description about cases chosen for research analysis as well as hypotheses, research questions, research methods and techniques. In the following sections, the empirical research is presented. Conclusions based on the research findings bring the article to an end.

REPRESENTATIVE AND PARTICIPATIVE FRAMEWORK AND RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN THEM

As mentioned in the introduction, since the beginning of the 21st century, the trend towards developing participatory democracy based on the direct participation of citizens in the process of governing has undoubtedly intensified and received renewed attention. Although the first steps to implement the model focusing on participatory themes were taken at the turn of the 1990s, the idea and reference points of participation at that time disappeared from both practice and public discourse, becoming blurred (Greven, 2007). At this stage, the only steps initiated were those aimed at improving local democracy and increasing its effectiveness, especially at a local government level, whose role had been previously marginalised (Wojnicki, 2016). The theme returned at the turn of the century thanks to an innovative approach to local decision making, in particular the use of new tools for engaging residents that allow them a greater say in local affairs. It should be emphasised at this point that the emergence of these approach also appeared as an answer to the problems faced by modern states, the hierarchical and top-down process of governing, the ineffectiveness of conventional methods of governing and the emergence of new participatory instruments treated as important policy making tools that offer citizens a real impact on the decision-making process (Chhotray, Stoker 2009).

The above-mentioned tendencies are also a part of the wider context of reforms carried out in public administration understood as a transition from traditional government to governance, with increasing involvement of local stakeholders, including citizens, in decision making process. All of these factors have meant that the context of participation has changed. It is important that we have various ways of understanding what participation, as well as the forms that express it, really means. Nowadays, we understand citizen participation and engagement in a wider way than in the past. There is no doubt that the theory of governance had a huge impact in this regard, in particular one aspect referred to as participatory governance, which has completely revolutionised how the idea of participation is understood and also, as a consequence, the relationship between representative bodies and citizens (Bevir, 2011a); (Bevir 2011b). Since then, participation has been a key driver for a well-functioning and inclusive governance.

At this point, it should be noted that for decades representation had been understood mainly as acting and making decisions on behalf and in the interest of the inhabitants (Pitkin, 1967), which underlines that the

core of local representative democracy is the decision-maker, and therefore the local representative bodies. Nevertheless, the context of representation has undergone a fundamental change – it does not consist merely in the formal empowerment expressed by the act of election (Urbinati and Warren, 2008, pp. 387-407). At present, the notion of representation should be broadened and bestowed with a democratic, that is participatory, character. As a result, the traditional role of the public authorities, mainly the representation of interest, is changing and tends towards more direct involvement of citizens in the governing process. At this point, it should be noted that for decades representation was understood mainly as acting and making decisions on behalf and in the interest of the inhabitants (Pitkin, 1967). As a result, the core of local representative democracy is the decision-maker, so the local representative bodies.

In the context of the above-described consideration, one aspect of governance plays a significant role, namely participatory governance (PG). This approach focuses on the participatory management of local community affairs, in which special attention is devoted to citizen participation and engagement in political process. This current is recognised as one that intends to supplement representation while also responding to or even remedying the difficulties and problems faced by traditional form of governing (Sørensen and Torfing, 2019, pp. 27-32). It based on strengthening and developing democracy in order to ensure broader participation of citizens in the execution of power than otherwise possible within the frames of representative democracy. As Fisher describes, PG is a transition from representation towards citizen participation (Fisher, 2012, p. 458). The changes introduced by the idea of PG are described by Rhodes as “governing without government”, in which the role of the public authorities is limited in favour of citizens who are treated as equal partners in the public decision-making process (Rhodes, 1996). This does not mean a complete replacement of the local authority in the governing process, but only the demonopolisation of its decisions. Local authorities and administration remain an important entity in exercising public authority, but not the only one. A similar interpretation of the relationship between public administration and the citizen was presented by Klijin and Koppenjan, pointing out that public administration is losing its role as the superior regulator of social relations, becoming a coordinator of the efforts of many entities or a mediator in the relations between them (Klijin, Koppenjan, 2006, pp. 136). The administration should communicate with the citizens, involve them in public matters and participate in civil dialogue. Therefore, local authorities lose their dominant position as decision-makers and become one of many participants in the governing process. As a result, public authorities are transforming their position from sovereign political decision-makers to those who create, monitor and steer the decision-making process. Hence, citizens should take responsibility for the results of the governing process, which at the same time entails a shift from being mere voters and consumers to co-decision makers. Under the influence of participatory governance, the participants of the governing process not only assume the traditional roles that have been imposed on them, but also create new ones (Torfing, 2012, p. 148). In this way, the individual and charismatic leadership of leaders plays a special role (in terms of the policy conducted by the leader and the method of achieving goals), as well as the role of local communities (forms of citizen participation in decision-making process and execution of adopted policy). Thus, governance requires both an open and positive attitude from the authorities as well as an active approach from the citizens. Giovanni Sartori claims that it is a democracy based on the personal and active participation and inclusion of willing citizens in the decision-making process (Sartori 1998).

THE PROCESS OF GOVERNING IN POLAND IN REFERENCE TO PARTICIPATORY GOVERNANCE TRENDS

In order to understand the practical side of citizen participation and engagement in Poland and the selected case study as well, it is important to refer briefly to the past. Poland is a country where a process of transformation from traditional local government to the one based on new forms of governing has taken place. It is important to highlight that local government in Poland belongs to the Central-Eastern European model, which is also referred to as “New Democracies” (Loughlin, Hendriks and Lindström, 2012). The modernisation of public administration started after 1989. At that time there was a very strong tendency to initiate citizen activity and develop non-government organisations. Additionally, public administration reform was carried out. Its first stage took place in 1990, when the Act on Municipal Local Governments was introduced (formerly the Act on Local Government). The following stage of public administration modernisation took place in the years 1998-1999 and concerned the introduction of two additional levels into the system of local government: counties (powiat) and regions (województwo) (Izdebski 2009). One more additional and very specific unit was also created - cities with county status, which emerged along with the second stage of the decentralisation reform (Dolnicki, 2012) and which are the subject of interest of this study.

As P. Swianiewicz aptly puts it, the direction of these changes was, in a way, characterised by a “jump into the deep end”, which means deep changes in the internal organisation of public administration, political decentralisation, contracting and delegation of tasks simultaneously associated with the reorganisation of the structures of local government (Swianiewicz, 2002, p. 52). This period was characterised by dynamics of changes and implementation of reforms on a large scale – concerning the rule of law and New Public Management which were implemented in tandem (Radzik-Maruszak, 2019; Swianiewicz), and then the governance-type reform.

Furthermore, in the process of public administration modernisation, an important role was played by the political reforms involving, among others, election rules, the strengthening of executive power or the implementation of direct elections for mayors. Together with general changes in the system, the leadership model and the roles played by the local government also evolved. Following the solutions used in other European countries, Poland also redefined the roles played by representative bodies – strengthening the political position and importance of the executive body (mayors) in relation to the councils (Michałowski, 2013); (Piasecki, 2006). From the perspective of participation, it is important that from that moment citizens had the right to choose the above-mentioned.

Another element which played a significant role in changing the model of governing are the reforms aimed at improving the functioning of local government, also including those related to the adaptation and implementation of EU regulations within the national legal system. As a consequence, actions were taken aimed at improving the financing of local administration and the inclusion of public procurement procedures, which changed the perception of local government units as the only provider of public services. Increasingly, local governments began to open up to cooperation with other stakeholders, including non-governmental organisations. There is no doubt that a significant role in this case was played by the act on public benefit and volunteer work, described by many experts as “a constitution of the third sector”. Specialists use this description because this act structures the status of non-governmental organisations and is the first one in Poland to introduce a legal definition of non-governmental organisation (Arczewska 2010).

However, the most notable changes have taken place in recent years, when new mechanisms of direct and semi-direct democracy have been implemented. The process of expanding the catalogue of instruments oriented towards dialogue with citizens was particularly visible in the local governments of large cities. In addition to traditional forms of civic participation, i.e. in elections, new tools for engaging citizens in public life have started to appear, including local initiatives, the civic budget and citizens' assemblies. There is more willing to use not only new instruments to socialise the decision-making process, but also to engage new actors and introduce new legal regulations that involve citizens in decision-making (Szulc-Wałęcka 2016).

METHODOLOGY

The article draws attention to citizen participation, in particular investigating the model of citizen's involvement by taking into account changes that have taken place in European countries, and in Poland as well that stem from “traditional” citizen engagement based on representative democracy and numerous innovative tools originating from participative and deliberative democracy (Bovaird, 2007; Benington, 2011; Lund, 2018). These process of transformation shows that the role of citizens in governing has changed from passive to active, and they now have a real impact on public decisions through participatory tools (Bonsón, Torres, Royo, and Flores, 2012; Pratchett, 1999; Stoker, 2006). Based on this information, it is noticeable that a new participatory framework has been applied locally. Nowadays as Loughlin, Hendriks and Lidström indicate, it is increasingly visible that awareness among citizens has grown alongside their engagement in public life and inclusion in the process of decision-making (Loughlin, Hendriks and Lidström, 2012). In this context, we encounter approaches that place a strong emphasis on greater citizen engagement in public policies. All the above tendencies indicate that policy-making is moving from “governing for the public” towards “co-governing with society”. All of these trends depend on many factors including political culture, local government tradition, the characteristics of a given region as well as the socio-economic situation (John, 2001; Bokszczanin, 2014). These changes are also visible in Poland, especially in the local governments of large cities.

Considering the above statements, this article explores participatory tools in selected case-studies and their impact on the decision making process. Thus, the article also investigates whether citizen participation in a given local government fulfils the criteria of participatory governance or if it is merely a supplement to a traditional form of governing. At the same time, the article focuses on if (and how) enhanced civic engagement influences the local representative bodies. For this purpose, the article investigates the attitude of councillors and mayors from the Lubelskie region towards citizen participation and engagement in decision-making processes. The following hypotheses were also verified in the study:

H1: Traditional instruments of citizens participation are supplemented by new participatory tools that give citizens a wider voice and more direct participation in the decision-making process.

H2: Participatory governance influences the role and status of the local representative bodies in the governing process.

Two main sources of data were examined for this paper: 1) documents from various officials (e.g. strategy, reports) and official web pages 2) a quantitative and qualitative data collection was performed to map local officials' perspective on citizen engagement. Firstly, a paper questionnaire was distributed among councillors from selected municipalities located in the Lubelskie region (N=70). The councillors that took part in the research came from the 7th term of local government - i.e., 2014-2018. Secondly, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the chairmen of city councils from 7th term of local government (N=4) and city mayors (N=9), who held this position from the 4th to 7th term of local government. In each of the given cases the mayors were re-elected. The empirical data was gathered in selected municipalities of the Lubelskie region. The case-study was chosen for a few reasons. On the one hand, it is significant that these local governments are cities with county status and are the largest urban centres in the Lubelskie region as well. As the research shows, the size of a local government influences the level of citizen participation (Olech, 2012). On the one hand, belonging to this category means that cities implement a wider catalogue of tasks (municipalities as well as counties), have greater financial clout than other local governments and have a much more extensive catalogue of instruments related to citizen involvement than smaller local governments. All of these regions are situated in Eastern Poland, so that they are located in the area referred to as so-called Poland B, i.e. less developed and poorer. One ought to add here that this division is a result of historical experiences – the division of Poland into regions with a higher (A) and lower (B) level of development. Against this background, the Lubelskie region is referred to as the “eastern wall” – connoting negatively in relation to Western Poland in terms of backwardness and peripherality, resulting from the belief that Poland is divided into better and worse regions. Notwithstanding, this is only a colloquial description of regions resulting from historical experiences, although it has become entrenched both in individual attitudes and in public life, and even in scientific publications. Despite the fact that the phrase “eastern wall” indicates connections with the East, Borderlands and the Orient rather than specific features of the region, the eastern character of the area makes it considered as worse than other parts of Poland (Sadowski, 2013). In fact, the geographic location is a factor which influences civic participation. According to research conducted by the Polish Academy of Sciences, civic activity is one of the elements that creates an opportunity to boost the development of poorer and agricultural regions (Polska Akademia Nauk, 2021). This was also confirmed in other researches, which proves that regional traditions, including past experiences like those mentioned before, may affect the scope and level of civic participation (Bartkowski, 2003).

CASE STUDIES ADOPTED IN THE RESEARCH

To begin with, attention should be paid to the most important characteristics features of the surveyed local governments. The largest and, at the same time, the most important urban centre in the Lubelskie region is Lublin, with around 339,784 inhabitants. It is also the capital city of the region. The other towns are classified as medium-sized. Their number of inhabitants is similar and amounts to around 61,932 inhabitants in Chełm, and 63,437 in Zamość. The smallest city is Biała Podlaska with 57,170 inhabitants. Here we should add that the number of inhabitants affects the composition of the legislative body of local government units - in terms of size, to be precise. The power is held by a 23-member council in Biała Podlaska, Chełm and Zamość, while in the city council of Lublin there are 31 seats in the local city council. As a result, the local government power in a city with county status belongs to the legislative body called the city council, and the executive authority is the city mayor.

As mentioned previously, the potential for participation depends on the broadly understood local context. Among certain specific features, geographic location was singled out in particular as one that determines the roots of the individuals within a local community (Olech, 2012). Research shows that these features are the source of ties, social needs and the identity of an individual. Therefore, the stronger the ties and the greater the attachment to the place of residence and local social networks, the greater is the participation (Lewicka, 2005). The results of our own research confirm this state of affairs. For a long time, city dwellers struggled with the “past history” associated with the division of Poland into so-called A and B. As a result, living

in the eastern part of the country, they identified themselves *de facto* with being located in a region perceived as less developed and poorer. As it turned out in the course of empirical research, this issue had a long-standing significant impact on the attitude of residents towards the city where they live. This contributed not only to the low level of citizen involvement, but also their interest in common matters. For this reason, building a participatory strategy for these local governments turned out to be more difficult from the very beginning but, as the research shows, not impossible. At the beginning of 2002 and in the next term of the local government authorities 2006–2010, the inhabitants were not only ashamed of their place of living, but also did not believe in the success of the actions taken by the city and the organisations functioning therein. One of the interviewees, describing the social behaviour of the inhabitants, said directly that they had “hang-ups”. This was associated with the “very small sense of identity of the inhabitants with their place of residence”. As a consequence, residents were reluctant to get involved. Positive changes in the city's development began to be noticed by the local community only before the third direct elections to the executive body of local government, which took place in 2010. This happened as a result of actions taken by cities, *inter alia* in the area of investments, cultural activities, policy, and access to a larger pool of funds from the European Union. It was also caused by the fact that the transformation of cities was much more visible and tangible. According to another speaker, this is what made “residents want to be here, they persuade young people to stay here, look for various solutions, optimise their activities, but with a view that we are here and we will continue to be. This pride leads, practically speaking, to a good image of the city and drives civic activity.

Despite some differences between local governments, all use similar institutions of civic engagement, dominated by relatively traditional tools. Based on the documents and officials web pages it is possible to list different tools that cities use to engage citizens. So, citizens take part in local elections and referenda, have access to public information, also have the right to submit local initiatives and to get involved with non-governmental organisations. They also have an opportunity to create and be active in some social groups called social councils, which have an advisory voice for representative bodies and support them in daily work. The most, i.e., 23, were created in Lublin. All cities are obliged to conduct consultations as well as and participatory budgeting which is also the most frequently used, democratic innovation. However, in Lublin it can be noticed that the forms of participatory tools were more extensive and supplemented with new methods of governing, e.g. green civic budget or residents’ panels (Szulc-Wałęcka, 2021).

In practice, the residents interest in using participatory instruments is rather low. Nonetheless, in the last years a growing turnout has been observed during local elections; in particular, the last elections in 2018 reached a turnout rate unobserved since 1989 of almost 50%, while previously it had hovered around or slightly above 40% (Table 1). I draw attention to this because electoral participation is considered to be a fundamental way of engaging citizens in public life, including the affairs of the local community.

Table 1 Turnout in local elections in selected cities

Cities	Voter turnout (%)									
	2002		2006		2010		2014		2018	
	1st round	2nd round	1st round	2nd round	1st round	2nd round	1st round	2nd round	1st round	2nd round
Biała Podlaska	41,42	27,17	42,8	37,83	44,57	35,57	48,35	43,08	52,34	55,4
Chełm	40,83	37,96	41,86	40,76	35,79	n/a	41,26	31,44	48,53	50,17
Lublin	33,69	28,57	41,53	36,11	39,85	32,01	41,03	n/a	54,74	n/a
Zamość	40,61	31,52	37,84	n/a	38,3	n/a	39,22	35,59	46,86	n/a

Source: own preparation.

When comparing the political involvement of Lublin residents in 2002 and 2018, it should be noted the largest increase was 21.05%. There were large disproportions in this respect between Lublin and other cities - in Biała Podlaska the involvement increased by 10.92%, in Chełm by 7.7% and in Zamość by 6.25%. Based on this

description, it is visible that the residents of the cities studied in the research are the most willing to vote in local elections.

Among the new participatory tools the most important would appear to be participatory budgeting (PB), which has become a permanent, distinguishing feature of the city. PB has operated since 2014 in Lublin, Chełm and Zamość and 2016 in Biała Podlaska.

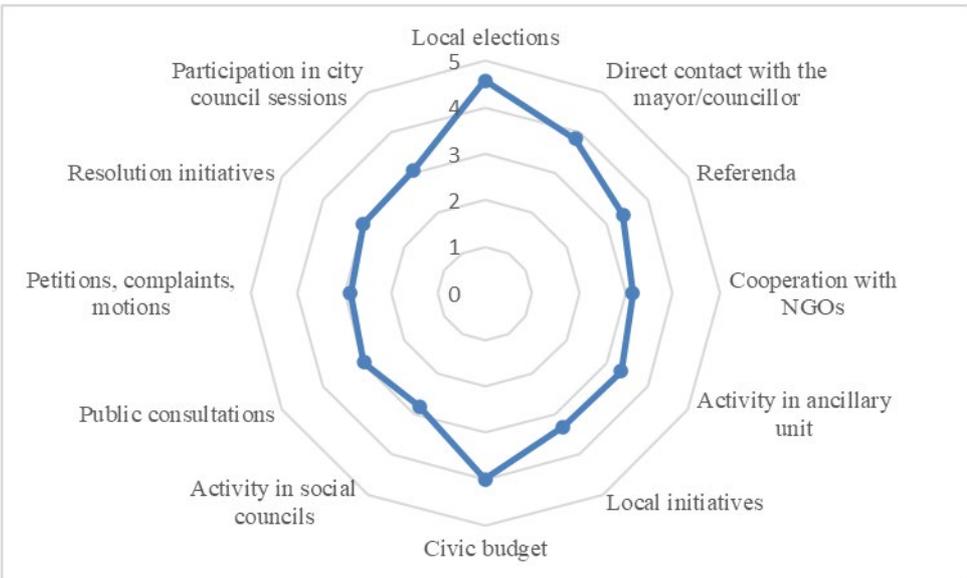
In three cities, a special office was established in order to monitor the level of citizen participation. In Biała Podlaska this was the Centre for Entrepreneurship and Civic Activity (Centrum Przedsiębiorczości i Aktywności Obywatelskiej) that focused on the civic budget, conducting consultations and advising non-governmental organisations. In other cities, Lublin established the Civic Participation Office (Biuro ds. Partycypacji Społecznej) aimed at fostering residents’ engagement, and Zamość created the Forum of Non-Governmental Initiatives (Zamojskie Forum Inicjatyw Pozarządowych) responsible for cooperation with civic organisations.

Increasingly, the “programming” of activities related to the activity of residents played a significant role - including participation as one of the elements in the city's development strategy (Lublin) or creating a separate document in the form of a participatory strategy for the city (Zamość), as well as using the support of experienced experts and practitioners supporting the implementation of new tools or boldly seeking external sources of financing to assist participatory processes (Lublin).

THE PERSPECTIVE OF REPRESENTATIVE BODIES REGARDING PARTICIPATORY GOVERNANCE – ANALYSIS OF RESEARCH RESULTS

The results of the research show that both city mayors and councillors appreciate the role that participation plays in the decision-making process. Representatives of local authorities raised the issue of the positive impact of civic participation on the quality of decisions made by them – optimal, more tailored to the needs of citizens, much more effective. Thus, the quality dimension of the participatory tools is more important than their quantity. The respondents pointed out that the essence of civic activity does not boil down merely to formalised solutions expressed through institutionalised forms of engagement. Participation also depends on the openness of a local leader to cooperate with other actors, on a foundation of partnership. However, mayors also appreciated those instruments whose existence has been regulated by law. This is conducive to their creation in individual local governments, although it often requires local governments to specify in detail how a specific tool should function in local law. Therefore, in order to answer the research question related to citizen involvement, participatory tools and methods, the respondents were asked about the impact of various forms of participation on decisions made by local authorities. The participatory tools mentioned in the questionnaire and the scope of their impact are presented in the form of a weighted average in the chart below (Chart 1).

Chart 1 Impact of forms of participation on decisions made by local authorities – weighted average



Source: own preparation.

The weighted average calculated on the basis of the obtained answers allows the mentioned forms of participation to be ranked from those of greatest importance to those of little importance. As shown in the chart above, local government elections and participatory budgeting have had the greatest influence on the city's affairs. Therefore, the respondents chose two forms of civic engagement, involving voting in elections. Importantly, in the case of both participatory instruments, voting is the *sine qua non* condition. However, the difference is that in local government elections, residents elect a representative who stands and acts for them (Pitkin 1997). On the other hand, in the civic budget, citizens become the decision-maker who make decisions about spending funds on specific projects. In the civic budget, the accountability for actions taken shifts from authorities to citizens. It is an important element of the transformation that has taken place in recent years in the way of governance, which was undoubtedly influenced by the participatory governance concept.

According to the local councillor's statements other participatory tools are less important than the two previously mentioned and can be grouped and divided into two categories: 1) medium and 2) low relevance in the decision making-process. To the first category belong direct contact with the mayor/councillor, referenda, activity in ancillary unit, local initiatives and cooperation with NGOs. It is interesting that although local referenda (with the exception of a nationwide one) did not apply in any of the examined cities in the years 2002–2018, they were assessed as having a fairly large impact on the local environment. According to the respondents, the second category of instruments includes city council sessions, public consultations, petitions, complaints, motions and resolution initiatives. Social councils scored the lowest. Here, it should be pointed that the role of social councils in Poland are still underestimated in practice of local governments, despite their potential. Undoubtedly, this is mainly due to the consultative and advisory role that the legislator has envisaged for these entities in law. The extent to which these entities participate in decision-making processes depends on the local representatives bodies. Nevertheless, in Poland, especially in recent years, the cooperation of the local government with these bodies has increased (Pawłowska 2020). Additionally, the councillors mentioned another tool: e-consultations. It is worth noting that the importance of the ancillary units was emphasized twice in the research. For the first time councillors indicated it as a fairly important tool with an average impact on the decision-making process (the average value of the assessment was 3.34 on a five-point scale), while its role was strengthened for the second time when councillors referred to it as one of the most important forms of consultation – 23% of responses.

In the context of the consideration described above, it is also worth referring to the fact that both mayors and councillors supported the use of participatory instruments and the inclusion of citizens in the decision-making process. The basis for such a statement was their response to the question whether, in their opinion, the instruments of citizen engagement facilitated solving social problems. This tendency was noticed by the majority - 57% of the respondents. Therefore, on the one hand, most of the councillors claimed that the forms of citizen participation in their cities are sufficient, while on the other, 41% of respondents stated that citizens should have a greater influence than before on decisions made by local authorities. This suggests the need to improve the already functioning instruments or to extend the existing form of participatory tools. This issue was developed in the answers to the next (open) question, in which the respondents could indicate their desired changes to the practiced forms of participation. For example, they might share proposals for action to promote the participatory tools used so far, the inclusion of citizens in the evaluation process, an increase in budget funds for activities carried out by non-governmental organisations and the civic budget.

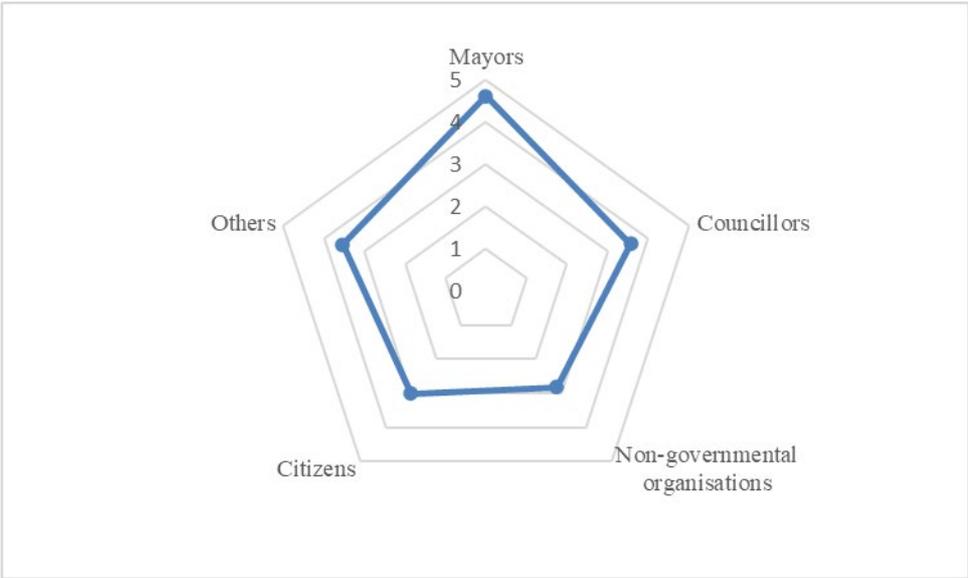
Another important issue is the relationship between the classic instruments of participation, which are elections, and the emergence of new, modern tools often referred as democratic innovations. On the one hand, the statements made by the mayors show that the use of participatory forms of government is important, and the participation of citizens should not be limited merely to voting in elections. The data analysis indicates that the engagement should be visible in various areas of public life, expressed not only in the form of instrumentalised tools, because this involvement “determines how much we identify with the local government community that we co-create”. On the other hand, the city mayors notice that the increasing use of instruments related to the socialisation of the decision-making process causes a departure from the model of governance based on representative democracy in favour of direct democracy. Therefore, in order to be able to think about participation and satisfactory social involvement at all, according to the city mayors, one must first improve the basic mechanism of citizen participation because it “works” but does not bring the expected results. All participants in the research pointed out that involvement in classical instruments, such as local elections, is rather low in Poland. Therefore, in their opinion, priority should be given to the representative nature of governance, supplemented by new, participatory methods. The condition for the development of participatory democracy depends on the proper functioning of the traditional representation.

Although, the increase of knowledge and practical activities will be conducive to, or according to some city mayors may even “force”, further instrumentalisation of participation, as representatives of local authorities claimed, a balance should be maintained between two models of governing, which include representation and

governing through participation. Taking into account the tradition and development of democracy in Poland, in the opinion of both councillors and city mayors, it is not possible to completely exclude or “displace” the representative character of governing. In their opinion, this would require a change in the structure of local government, in particular the legislative body.

The material gathered during research also shows that participation influences the role and status of the local representative bodies. As the respondents note, participation activities divest local government bodies, mainly city councils, of competences. The councillors were usually more sceptical and distanced towards launching specific participatory instruments. This was due to the fear of transferring too much decision-making power to citizens, which, in the opinion of councillors, weakens the position of the council, reduces its jurisdiction, and consequently erodes its dominance. Thus, local authorities have to cooperate with other stakeholders and become one of many participants in the governing process. As a result, on the one hand, where there is participatory democracy, representation loses its importance. On the other hand, the role of the executive in the governance process is increasing. This is mainly due to changes in the organisation of this body and this is also connected with action that strengthens the position of the executive body (the idea of leadership and a strong mayor).

Chart 2 Weighted average of the influence of various actors on the governing process



Source: own preparation.

The above chart clearly shows that the most important role in governing is played by city mayors in all the local governments investigated. According to the respondents, this significant position and role are demonstrated in several ways. First of all, the strength and scope of the city mayor’s influence depend on the function assigned to him by law that is, to act as an executive body for the decisions and resolutions of the city council. Therefore, the function of the mayor as an institution is important, as well as his definition as one who has a vision, concept and shapes the action taken in the city, while at the same time being the executor of all such operations. As a result, he is also the main decision-maker upon whom the solutions designed and adopted in local government depend, including participatory ones (Szulc-Wałęcka, 2021). The conducted research has confirmed that it was the local government leader who put participatory instruments in motion e.g. the civic budget in Biała Podlaska, Lublin and Zamość. The argument which, according to the councillors, additionally strengthens the position of the executive body, is also the fact that the mayor has the main influence on the budget and is the one who decides about how the money will be spent. As one of the councillors noted, “mayor spends the money and must see the purposefulness of these expenses,” which consequently also affects the council, which has a limited influence on shaping the budget and thus guaranteeing the general public good.

Another aspect that was pointed out concerned the fact that city mayors, elected directly, have their own election programs (strategies), which they then implement and direct actions taken in the local government. The fact that this institution is elected directly is crucial because he receives the mandate to perform his function from the citizens, and thus he has procedural legitimacy to manage public affairs. This explains very well why this particular person, and no other, has the authority to make decisions and what responsibility they bear to the voters (Schmidt, 2013, pp. 2-22).

The respondents declared that councillors, as members of the local government's legislative body, take second place among the entities that have a significant impact on the decision-making process. According to the councillors, the essence of the council primarily boils down to the creation of local acts of legislation that may refer to citizen engagement, e.g. by adopting a resolution related to a citizens' local initiative or participatory budgeting. In this way, citizens can not only take advantage of the available opportunities for civic activation, but also increase their knowledge on this subject (civic education) and cultivate an attitude which is reflected in the care for the common good around them. What is more, mayors claimed that the council plays an important role in shaping local policy, and this is largely due to the jurisdiction assigned to it on the basis of structural regulations (a legislative body). In addition, its importance is determined by the fact that councillors come from a specific community (ancillary unit) whose interests they represent in the city council. What is more, the councillor also becomes a participatory facilitator who encourages the inhabitants to be active and collaborate with others and drives their involvement in the decision-making process.

The role of city mayors and the council was also interestingly commented by the respondents, who noticed that although the mayor plays the leading role in the governing process, the role of the council is to ensure compliance with certain standards, including legal rules for the functioning of the local government. As a result, the council performs the function of social control and is a kind of "protective umbrella" that supervises the activity of the executive body, ensuring the proper implementation of tasks imposed on the local government. This proves that relations concerning power and the degree of influence on local affairs are still interpreted mainly at the mayor-council level.

As the analysis shows, the influence of individual actors on local policy in all four local governments shows that citizens belong to one of the groups with the lowest impact on the local governance process. Their impact was assessed as average/negligible. It can be presumed that this position could have been determined by the fact that the councillors identified the category of influence quite narrowly, reducing it mainly to participation in local government elections while, at the same time, recognising that between the elections their involvement was minimal. Although their role in the policy-making process was described by city mayors as significant, in the overall ranking of all value judgments (ranking all entities from those with a high impact to those with a low/negligible one) they came third after the local authorities. It is worth paying attention to the fact that analysis of the statements made by individual city mayors shows that, according to some of them, citizens should be placed higher in this ranking. According to some mayors, taking into account the degree of influence of certain groups (actors of public life) on participation, citizens should be level with the local authorities (Chełm) or even ahead of the authorities (Zamość). These were, however, individual voices. Most of the statements positioned citizens as entities that cannot significantly influence public policy. There were also voices that the hierarchy of these stakeholders changed over a specific period of time, placing the mayor first, and then citizens on an equal footing with him (Lublin). One person created a kind of triad in which the mayor and councillors, and citizens are equal. As he noted, "in my opinion this triangle is a figure that describes this composition well" (Lublin) because the decision-making process must, in his opinion, take into account the interests of all the above-mentioned bodies.

The results of the research also show that the inhabitants played the role of participants in the governing process, during which they were informed about the public policy and took part in the public consultations. They were active consultants in Lublin and Zamość, and passive consultants in Biała Podlaska and Chełm. Rarely has their role proven itself to be what constitutes the essence of participatory governance – that is, co-decision making (Lublin). Focusing on the issue of the role of residents in the decision-making process, it should also be stated that it is difficult to talk about their significant participation in this regard, because the research indicates that they were most often involved at the initial stage of decision making-process, i.e. identifying problems and planning activities, and seldom in actually making decisions and then evaluating the results. Moreover, representatives of local authorities participating in the study claimed that residents should be empowered to decide on the scope of matters related to their neighbourhood, i.e. the space where they live – there should be "minor" or "micro" initiatives, while "all other important issue" should be taken care of by their representatives, meaning the local government authorities.

I will also briefly refer to another interesting group of stakeholders ranked fourth among those with a significant impact on the governing process. This issue was developed in an open-ended question, where the respondents could mention other important entities in their opinion. Non-governmental organisations played a particularly important role here. These entities are an important partner for local government, as they support the local government in the provision of public services – by playing the role of a service provider or – as they were

called – “subcontractors of the city's tasks”. In addition, non-governmental organisations are a conscious partner that can identify the needs of the local community for a potential solution. Moreover, non-governmental organisations are able to join the discussion on the development of the city, thus favouring its more efficient management. As one of the interviewees emphasises, the partnership cooperation that occurs between local government bodies and NGOs is a natural solution in each local government. On the other hand, among this category of participants in the governing process, the mayors most often mentioned the councils of auxiliary units, and sometimes the media too. Sporadically, they mentioned social councils, but if so, mainly the senior and youth councils were singled out. According to one opinion, the church also played an important role.

CONCLUSIONS

As the article presents, the border between participation and real participatory governance still exists. Not all activities enhancing civic participation lead to the handing over of the decision-making process to the inhabitants and, consequently, co-decision on public matters. Certainly, some visible changes have occurred in local governments in order to improve the governing process and its institutions, in particular those based on the emergence of new civic engagement tools offering citizens more active participation in governing and a genuine impact on the decision making-process. Therefore, in addition to traditional civic participation instruments such as local elections, more and more new tools appear, which are often referred to as democratic innovations. These new participatory mechanisms are starting to play an increasingly important role in the proper functioning of local government. The research results confirm the first hypothesis proposed in the article (H1) that traditional instruments of citizen participation are supplemented by new participatory tools that give citizens a wider voice and more direct participation in the decision making-process. While research shows that elected representative bodies continue to play a key role in public life and in the governance process, active citizenship is no longer solely based on the act of voting. On the one hand, residents can participate in public life, taking advantage of the traditional institutions of citizen involvement, and on the other hand, new ones have begun to emerge, develop and change the existing forms of citizen involvement.

On the basis of the conducted research, it can also be stated that in the examined cities, the new methods of participation have been complementary to the classical instruments. At this point, it should be underlined that it is often difficult to maintain a balance between the forms of representative and participatory democracy. Therefore, both councillors and city mayors suggested that the proper functioning of the institution of representative democracy and its basic act of participation, i.e. local elections, is a condition for the health of participatory instruments.

The analysis of the collected empirical material also shows that the way of exercising power in the studied local governments is deeply embedded in the system of representative government. Despite the increasing opportunities for citizens to participate in public life, relatively traditional tools are still used. The most frequently applied innovation was the civic budget.

Importantly, there is some evidence that confirms the transformation of the governance model – for example, the changing governance style of the local government leader, the inclusion of new participatory tools, or even greater openness to the participation of residents in decision-making. Certainly, a significant influence that determined the direction of these transformations was, among others, the introduction of direct election of the executive body, accession to the EU and greater access to external funding, which made it possible to undertake investments and boost interest in the city's affairs among residents. The influence of national legislation on the shape of participatory instruments also played an important role, which meant that the implementation of participation began to constitute a “reform process” in local development management. It has also changed the attitude of the inhabitants to the city, who have begun to notice the new image of the city and its potential. Despite this, cities with county status also had shortages and problems with the implementation of participatory tools as the idea of residents actively participating in decision-making has not found its full application – they are not included in the decision-making process throughout every stage. They may tend to play a passive role in the participation process and are marginalised in some spheres, which, in the opinion of the respondents, should be decided only by representatives of local authorities. This has contributed to the fact that this is really a question of civic participation and involvement of residents rather than implementing participatory governance.

In view of the conclusions presented in the article, it turns out that the surveyed local governments implemented an approach in which representatives of local government became more open to residents and their participation in the governance process. There is no doubt that participatory governance has gained traction, but not in all spheres in practice. At this point, it seems important to note that despite the complexity of the governing process and the involvement of new bodies/stakeholders in it, in accordance with the applicable legislation, i.e. formal conditions, representative bodies are still treated as the basic and main link in the decision-making process (Radzik-Maruszak, 2019, s. 272). At the same time, practical experience shows that, in the opinion of councillors and city mayors, the influence of the legislative body on the outcome of this process is limited. Their role in public policy has changed. The considerations contained in this study prove the second

hypothesis (H2) that the idea of governance, and in a special way one of its offshoots too – participatory governance – had an impact on the role of representative bodies. The city mayor has transformed from a task leader and manager to a visionary, strategist and local leader who is open to interaction with social partners and involving them in decision-making. As a result, he is able to steer networks of social partners and use democratic innovations. In addition, it plays the role of main decision-maker in creating local politics, including the one based on the participation of residents. It is on his initiative that pro-participation activities are undertaken, and the local community is mobilised to engage in civic activity. In turn, the council plays two dominant roles in relation to the inhabitants: representation in the governing process and at the same time acting as an intermediary between authorities and citizens, as well as advocacy of their interests. The conducted research shows, however that councillors also perform other functions, although in their opinion they are not as important as the previous two. In the course of the research, it turned out that the council acted as a political representative, and somewhat less often as a participation facilitator and a co-operator, especially in relations with non-governmental organisations (Szulc-Wałęcka, 2021). It turns out, therefore that participatory governance influenced the emergence of new roles played by representative organs.

The above statements lead to the conclusion that the election of a representative remains the basic act of participation, and this is also confirmed by talks with councillors and city mayors. In this sense, although the importance of the institution of representation is declining, participation is not able to completely replace it, but can complement it or remedy the difficulties and problems it faces. The approved style of conducting urban participatory policy is to strengthen the activity of residents, which is currently a condition for the development of local government.

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