

Participative Governance Tools in the Polish Local Government

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Abstract

Participation is an important element of good governance and has impact on both its efficiency and its democratic character. This is why the local governments in Poland apply a growing number of diverse participatory tools in strategic planning, as well as problem solving. The article aims to review the most common among those tools to provide an overview of how communes encourage citizen involvement in decision-making processes. Among others, the article discusses such popular tools as consultations and participatory budgeting, as well as the more innovative ones, including civic panels and city labs. It also reflects on how participatory governance tools should be assessed and which of their features are key.

Keywords: participation, good governance, local government, Poland

1. Introduction

Participation is now perceived as an important feature of good modern democratic governance (Kriesi and Müller 2013). In the context of the populist backslide, there is a growing awareness that broader involvement of citizens in the processes of decision-making at various stages and levels might not only improve the quality of governance, but also enhance democracy and legitimise particular decisions, as well as the political system as a whole (Gastil and Knobloch 2020).

These concepts are frequently referred to as decentralised multi-level governance (Berner et al. 2011, 129). At the local level, participation is easier to organise, and also its impact may be more perceptible for citizens, thus bringing a more significant effect in terms of governance efficiency, as well as legitimating the local authorities in view of re-election. In Poland local governments have gotten involved in the development of participatory tools (Kalisiak-Mędelska 2015, 251–281) – those described in legal provisions concerning local government like elections, referenda and consultations, those known from other states and local governments, like participatory budgeting, as well as original new concepts, such as civic panels. The meaning and impact of these tools is variable, some of them, even though they are broadly discussed and increasingly popular, have less impact than the less appreciated ones; however, they all contribute to a new, more open and inclusive image of communal governance.

The objective of the paper is to review different participatory tools applied by Polish communes, considering their characteristics and potential impact and discussing how communes

encourage citizen involvement. The paper explores various possibilities of inclusion of citizens in the decision-making processes, referring to popular participation tools. It is based on desk review, analysis of legal acts, information published by the National Electoral Commission and by communes themselves. Finally, the paper also reflects on how participatory governance tools should be assessed and attempts to identify their key features.

The remaining part of the paper is structured as follows. Section two describes shortly the concepts of participation and deliberation in the democratic systems, as analysed by other researchers. Section three provides the local context, describing Poles' attitudes toward the local and regional government as compared to the central institutions (especially the government and the Sejm, i.e. the lower chamber of the Polish parliament). The fourth section focuses on selected participatory tools, starting with those that are regulated in legal provisions, i.e. two types of referenda, consultations, ancillary and participatory budgeting, including the specific form of participatory budgeting called the village fund. Further, the section proceeds to discuss two of more innovative tools, which have been recently introduced by some Polish local governments: civic panels and urban labs. While quite new, both solutions have already been applied in several communes in Poland. Finally, the section turns from mechanisms developed by local authorities to possibilities arising from bottom-up activities of the civil society and non-governmental organisations. Section five is an attempt to identify major features that allow for characterisation and assessment of the participative tools. The paper is closed with conclusions.

2. Participation, deliberation and participatory democracy

With the modern crisis of democracy reflected in the rise of populism in Europe (Valadier 2019, 31-38), a lot of attention has been paid to participation, participative democracy and deliberative democracy as a bottom-up response to the diminishing trust in democratic representation. The concept of deliberative democracy focuses on the process of achieving decisions through discussions among citizens (Rostbøll 2001, 168). It focuses more on the process of reaching an agreement than on acting on the interest of a specific group or groups of citizens (Pietrzyk-Reeves 2006, 3-4). It therefore relies on informed cooperation within a community and a well-intentioned effort to find a compromise and on the participation of citizens in the process of development and selections of solutions to be applied in various issues.

Participation is a concept long explored in political science and deeply rooted in practical policy implementation. While it is frequently analysed through the classification referred to as Arnstein's ladder (Arnstein 1969), one should remember that the ladder was a reflection based on Sherry Arnstein's prior experience in attempts to introduce increasingly participatory mechanisms in the problem-solving of American authorities she had worked with (Gaber 2019), which indicates the concept's immersion in practical policies concerning political empowerment of communities on one hand and prevention of in-community conflict on the other.

Even though Arnstein's classification is now re-explored and modified by many researchers (Lim et al. 2018, 45-48), still, scholars reflect also on the difficulty of implementing the

concept of participation which is key to the idea of participative democracy: "the model of participatory-deliberative democracy is more attractive as a truly democratic ideal than the model of formal deliberative democracy, but it certainly faces more difficulties when it comes to the practicalities, and especially the institutional design" (Pietrzyk-Reeves 2006, 1).

Participation is sometimes analysed in association with – or in contrast to – deliberation. "The theory of deliberation would emphasize the process whereby preferences are formed and described, while participatory theory would pay more attention to the inclusion of the broadest diversity of citizens" (García and Ganuza 2010, 2-3). These terms describe therefore different stages of the process, with deliberation referring rather to the process of articulation and aggregation of interests to build up and enhance a more efficient communication process within governance structures, while participation reflects the process of inclusion of broader and more diverse groups of citizens or residents within the decision-making procedures themselves. However, they are both gaining momentum in the context of what is frequently referred to as the crisis of democracy (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018). The inclusive, consensus-driven deliberation aimed at building consensus is discussed as a counterbalance to the populist discourse (Zaslove et al. 2020), especially considering the populist claims that representative democracy has been alienated from the broad society. Thus, participatory democracy might serve as a tool to boost legitimacy of the political system, but also improve quality of governance.

3. Legitimacy and perception of local government in Poland

Poland after 2015 has undergone significant reforms, especially concerning the judiciary. The outcome of the reforms for the rule of law in Poland has been controversial, triggering a serious conflict with the European Union (Coli 2018) and major criticism by EU institutions (e.g. European Commission 2017) and non-governmental organisations (Freedom House 2019). In the scientific literature, there have also been discussions on the impact of populism on the Polish government (e.g. Bakke and Sitter 2020). However, public opinion polls and results of local and regional elections show a significant discrepancy in perception of the central administration on one hand, and self-government on the other.

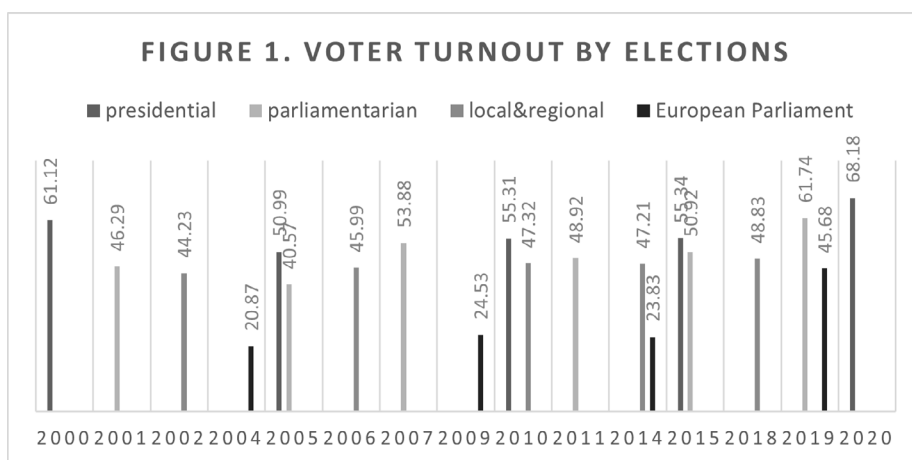
The perception of central public authorities and institutions is bad, and analogically, citizens declare a low level of trust in them. As evidenced by all-Polish studies on representative samples by the Public Opinion Research Centre, between 2010 and 2022, trust for the government ranged from 31 to 46%, while distrust ranged from 45 to 62%. The respective ranges for the parliament were between 21 and 34% for trust and 53 to 68% for distrust (CBOS 2022). The increase in trust observed after the change of the ruling majority in 2015 was temporary, and neither the parliament nor the government exceeded 50% of trust at any wave of the survey.

In this context, the public's attitude toward self-government is a positive exception. In a survey held in February 2020 by the Public Opinion Research Centre (CBOS 2020b), local government¹ ranked sixth among the most trusted institutions; however, this was higher than the president, government, parliament or courts, or even the ombudsman. Overall, 74% of respondents of this survey declared they trusted local authorities, while 17% declared distrust. According to another survey of the same year (CBOS 2020a), these generalised declarations

¹ The survey provided respondents with a list of 20 institutions, which included the local authorities but did not refer to the regional self-government.

of trust corresponded also to the assessment of operations of the self-government²; 73% of its respondents were satisfied and only 18% were dissatisfied with policies of self-government. The results were consistently high from 2014 until 2020 (satisfaction varying within the range between 62 and 73%, and dissatisfaction reaching the highest level of 29% in November 2014 and then ranging between 18 and 23%). The positive opinions on the local self-government were not affected by the very negative image of political parties: between 2002 and 2022 trust in political parties never exceeded 28%, while distrust in political parties never fell below 54% (CBOS 2022). However, especially local elections are dominated by independent local activists and groups: out of almost 2,500 mayors and village mayors elected in 2018, only 18.18% were officially party candidates³ (Polska Komisja Wyborcza).

Also, in another study, as many as 60% of respondents declared that they felt they had an impact on public affairs at the local level as compared to 40% in the case of the central state level (Gendźwiłł and Żerkowska-Balas 2018, 11), but this opinion did not translate to higher voter turnout in the self-government elections. Actually, with a quite stable participation of voters around 50%, local and regional elections consistently remain the lowest-turnout votes in Poland, only above the elections of the European Parliament (Figure 1). It is especially prominent in comparison to national elections: turnouts at both parliamentary elections in 2019 and presidential elections in 2020 were record high, exceeding 60%, while local and regional elections in 2018 had a turnout below 50%, analogous to the result of 2014 and significantly lower than in 2010.



Source: original development of data by the Polish National Electoral Commission, www.pkw.gov.pl, accessed on 1 December 2020.

Importantly, Polish local governments witnessed another important grassroots phenomenon with urban movements. Although their origins are dated even earlier, the current phase of their dynamic development started after 2004 and Poland's accession to the European Union (Grzechnik 2019, 88-89). Their postulates included broader participation and more social justice in the name of citizens' right to the city (Wojtaszak 2017, 74). In the elections of 2014 and

² In this case, the survey referred to the self-councils in general, without quoting the tier.

³ The situation was different in the case of regional council (sejmik wojewódzki): in this case the ruling Law and Justice Party took 46% of councillors' seats and participates in governing coalitions in 9 out of the 16 voivodeships, while the main opposition party took 35% of the seats and formed ruling coalitions in the remaining 7 regions. Candidates who represented no party took only 3.8% of seats in the regional councils. Therefore, the discrepancy in the residents' opinions about the central and local governments should not be associated with support or lack of support for an individual party.

2018 many urban activists were elected to hold positions in local governments (Kubicki 2019, 20–21), giving them an opportunity to gain a direct impact on the way how local communities are governed, and to initiate or stimulate the introduction of new forms of policy-shaping.

Therefore, the local self-governments strive to apply participative, frequently also innovative tools to use the potential of support and include more citizens in the decision-making process. There is a variety of mechanisms that encourage citizens' deliberation or provide channels through which citizens or residents of communes can communicate their interests and opinions, but also shape decisions made within the local authorities.

4. Participatory governance tools in local government in Poland

Statutory provisions on the local government in Poland provide for several obligatory mechanisms involving the direct inclusion of citizens in decision-making, starting with the fundamental ones in the form of elections, then providing for a possibility to organise referendums with respect to local affairs (including the removal of the local authorities). The general act on communal self-government (Act on communal self-government 1990, art. 5) refers also to other mechanisms, such as consultations and ancillary units. Since the 2018 amendment, large cities are also obliged to organise participatory budgeting processes. The special form of participatory budgeting applied at rural communes (sołectki fund) is not obligatory, but its terms are regulated in a special act of law (Act on Sołectki Fund 2014). Still, there are also many other initiatives, originating from the self-governments themselves, from local activists, NGOs or scientific milieus, that are aimed at introducing new, more inclusive mechanisms of governance.

The objective of the paper is to discuss some of the widespread tools of citizen participation offered by the Polish communal self-government and to define criteria of their efficiency. The list is not exclusive, especially in view of the constant evolution in this area with new concepts being developed and implemented. However, this selection serves to provide an overview of the current situation.

4.1 Removal referendum

Provisions of the Act on communal self-government provide for a possibility to organise local referendums concerning local issues. Referendums may concern the establishment, joining, division or liquidation of a commune; there are also consultative referendums; referendums on the imposition of new local taxation; and referendums on the removal of local authorities. A motion to hold such a referendum is effective, if signed by 10% of residents of a commune or powiat, or by 5% of residents of a voivodeship, otherwise such a referendum can be initiated by the local or regional council (Rachwał 2014, 82–83). Thus, they are not a regular tool, and each individual case has to be preceded by a lengthy procedure of collecting votes or persuading councillors.

According to the current data of the Polish National Electoral Commission, during the first two years of the current term of local authorities (2018–2020), there were 42 removal referendums held in Polish communes, including 26 concerning the executive organ, nine concerning the

communal or municipal council and seven concerning both organs. Thus, this is quite a rarely used mechanism.

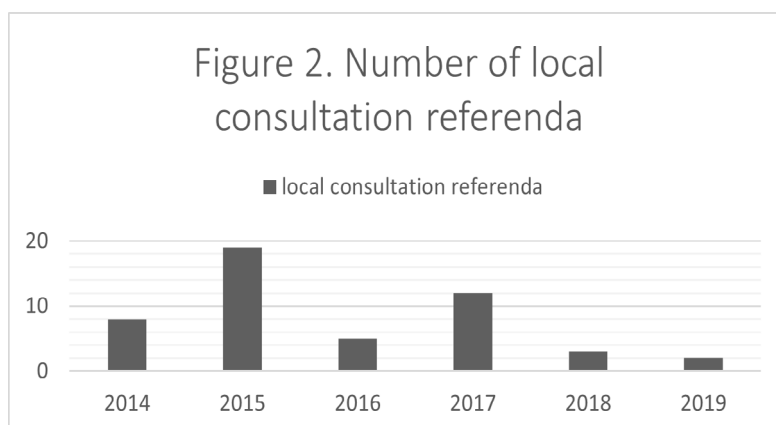
A removal referendum is valid if the voter turnout equals at least 3/5 of the number of voters who partook in the original elections, making it difficult to ensure such validity – according to data published by the Parliamentary Analytic Office, average voter turnout in council removal referendums between November 2015 and September 2016 was 14.61% as compared to 47.40% in the general elections in 2014, while in the case of the executive organ removal referendum the numbers were 15.86 for referendums as compared to 47.40% in the first round of the original elections and 39.97% in the second round (Rulka 2016, 2). In the term of 2006–2010, out of 62 removal referendums held, only 12 (19.5%) were valid, and their results were binding for the local authorities. In the term of 2010–2014, the rate fell to 13% (15 valid referendums out of 114 held), and in the first half of the next term, 2014–2017, only 3 referendums were valid in 36 held (Jureczko 2017). This shows how difficult it is to mobilise citizens to take part in this mechanism, leading to the conviction that a removal referendum is not an efficient way to take action within the local community. This may be viewed as a paradox, since according to the legal provisions each citizen is allowed to vote in the local referendum, making it formally an inclusive mechanism.

A removal referendum and especially the referendum campaign provide a chance for the residents to discuss the prior achievements of the local authorities; however, the final decision is either for or against the organ. Thus, it offers less possibility of reshaping policy priorities or articulating interests than deliberative tools and may in consequence polarise the community, as has been discussed in the case of referendums in general (Bell and McVeigh 2018, 68).

4.2 Consultative referendum

Removal referendums are a basic mechanism of citizen participation, since they are a tool of enforcing responsibility of the authorities and the citizens' right to censor their representatives. However, they do not offer a space for discussing solutions to be implemented within the community. This objective can be served by consultative referendums, which may concern any issue within the competencies of the local authorities or "other issues related to social, economic or cultural bonds binding the community" (Act on Local Referendum 2000, art. 2). Importantly, a referendum may be initiated by residents themselves (10% of the total number of inhabitants authorised to vote within the given commune or powiat), equally as by the respective council. For the validity of a referendum, a voter turnout of 30% is required. The law defines that a consultative referendum may concern any issue within the local authorities' responsibilities, which is a broad definition, but in no circumstances is it mandatory, so – like the removal referendum – it is not a regular, recurring tool.

It has to be highlighted that the referendum result cannot replace a respective act of local law, and therefore, even if valid, it is in no way binding for the local authorities. Although local government leaders frequently treat them so, declaring beforehand that they would follow the voters' decision, this solution, which offers hardly any space for deliberation, is less efficient than a general consultation process, and therefore it is not highly popular in local governments, as evidenced by the sheer number of referendums held (Figure 2), as well as the fact that if organised, they frequently combined with elections or the national referendum (as in 2015) to save costs and effort.



Source: original development of data by Statistics Poland, www.bdl.stat.gov.pl (last accessed 30 March 2021)⁴.

In 2014–2019, there were only 49 consultation referenda held, none of them concerning voluntary taxation. Thus, this mechanism cannot be considered an efficient tool of boosting citizen participation, especially considering that only half of them on average reach the mandatory validity threshold of 30%, making their result not binding for the authorities (Zakrzewski 2020, 15). This also shows that while the mechanism is potentially inclusive and open to all residents, it is not attractive for them.

4.3 Consultations

There's more space for important deliberation among citizens in the case of the consultation process. The Act on communal self-government leaves local authorities with a very broad margin of freedom in organising such consultations, indicating only several circumstances when the process is required (Act on communal self-government 1990), and allowing the authorities to organise the process according to their specific needs.

Consultations serve basically to include residents' opinions in the decision-making process, but they also stimulate transparency and efficiency in governance. They encourage self-organisation of residents and articulation of their needs (Czopek and Żołnierczyk 2017, 85). They are open to anyone living inside the territorial unit or even non-residents; however, considering their form and effort required for participation, they attract the most active and involved citizens.

Local consultations may concern the entire local community or selected groups. An express example of the latter concerns the establishment of ancillary units (Act on communal self-government 1990, art. 41), but it can involve also other selected groups, as in the case of communal youth councils or communal senior councils, in which young or elderly citizens respectively are invited to provide regular advice and initiate measures adapted to the groups' interests. These tools are not very popular, as research shows that in 2015 only 6% of communes in Minor Poland had appointed communal senior councils and a further 4% planned to do so (Mańka 2015, 6), while youth communal councils operated in 16% of Lower Silesian communes in 2020⁵; however, it provides opportunities to promote easily overlooked needs of specific groups, as well as to encourage social involvement among residents. On the other hand, due to the specific process of appointment and accountability, the councils

⁴ Statistics Poland platform, table data: Category: Local Government; Group: Organs of Gminas; Subgroup: Gmina referendums by case types; last accessed on the 4 March 2024.

⁵ Dolny Śląsk. Młody Dolny Śląsk. Młodzieżowe Rady Miasta na Dolnym Śląsku, <http://www.umwd.dolnyslask.pl/mlody-dolny-slask/mlodziejowe-rady-na-dolnym-slasku/> (last accessed on 4 March 2024).

cannot be unequivocally categorised as representative bodies (Pawłowska 2022, 69).

It should be stressed that such councils, when appointed, are permanent, and therefore they are always available to citizens and not only when a specific consultation process is organised as in the case of general consultations. On the other hand, neither the minority-specialised councils nor the general consultations process generate solutions that are formally binding to the local authorities. It depends on the local authorities' will and policy whether they are incorporated in the decision-making process or not.

4.4 Ancillary units

Ancillary units are a solution that stands out in its aetiology, as they are not a recent innovation. On the contrary, they rely on a tradition dating back centuries (Ptak 2016, 33–45). Present-day Polish legal provisions are very flexible in defining ancillary units by communal authorities – in terms of their territorial demarcation, responsibilities, funding, as well as organisation (Swianiewicz et al. 2013, 56–67). This is why the internal structure of Polish communes (division into ancillary units and their competencies) is diversified, but the solution itself is quite widespread. The most popular type of ancillary unit, *sołectwo* (village), was established in 2,137 out of 2,477 Polish communes, and there are more than 40,000 such units in Poland⁶. Thus, sublocal ancillary units are far more popular in rural areas than in Polish cities.

As a consequence of their dependence on the communal council's decisions, ancillary units are not a guaranteed right of citizens' right; they may or may not be established. However, when created, they become quite a regular and permanent actor in the local political processes. They rarely get a chance to make decisions or provide even binding recommendations. On the other hand, they serve as a useful forum for deliberation, discussing and articulating interests for sublocal activists willing to participate. Although the system allows for the involvement of a limited number of people, their turnover shows that ancillary units may be quite inclusive. They also try to reach out to residents through various community-building initiatives (Madej 2021).

Ancillary units serve various purposes within the communal governance system, as some of them play an active role in investment planning, as in the case of Kraków or Opole, others act as consultative bodies, as in Łódź, or assist in the organisation of municipal social consultation processes, as in Lublin, and yet others are restricted to community-building activities. However, in many cases, there is no clear strategy or concept of the sublocal governance structure, and ancillary units are more of a tradition than a well-adapted tool of overall self-government strategy (Madej 2022). This is also why in some cases (e.g. Wrocław, Łódź), city authorities undertake to reform the ancillary units system.

4.5 Participatory budgeting

Participatory budgeting has become a very popular solution in Poland, applied for the first time in Sopot in 2011. Currently, it has been introduced not only in communes, but in voivodeships and poviats as well. According to currently binding provisions, it is obligatory to apply this mechanism in major cities. In general, the Polish version of participatory budgeting is focused

⁶ Statistics Poland platform, table data: Category: Territorial Division; Group: Administrative Division, Settlement; Subgroup: Village Administrator's Offices (<https://stat.gov.pl/>, last accessed 4 March 2024)

on the phase of project selection and not on the deliberative aspect of defining priorities and development strategies (Michalska-Żyła and Brzeziński 2017, 211–213). Therefore, the highest level of citizen participation is associated with a vote – in most cases either a traditional or an online vote is accepted (Pytlik 2017, 114), which requires little involvement and commitment.

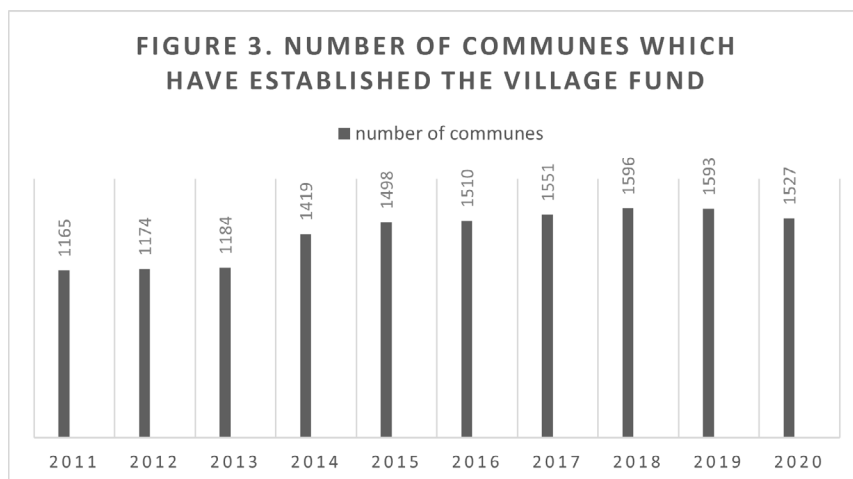
In terms of activating citizens and encouraging them to take responsibility for their neighbourhood, the stage of project initiation and development is the most important. It is also this stage which involves the highest level of deliberation, as opposed to the vote itself. Self-government strives to stimulate its inclusiveness by way of organising workshops and consultations. To avoid inequalities between city centres and outskirts, communes divide the funding between commune-wide and subcommunal projects. In Poland, it has become a mainstay that participatory budgeting is a regular annual process and that decisions made by citizens in the vote are binding for the authorities.

The Polish participatory budgeting usually does not cover a large percentage of the local/regional government units' budget, usually falling below 1% (Madej 2019, 271), which is also a reason why the investments do not affect the overall strategies, but it has become an important tool for urban movements and sublocal activists to promote postulates of small as well as bigger communities within communes. While it is spreading to more and more local and regional government units, its popularity among citizens is wavering⁷, but it has certainly paved the way for various other forms of participative and also deliberative mechanisms of decision-making on the self-government level.

4.6 Village fund (fundusz sołecki)

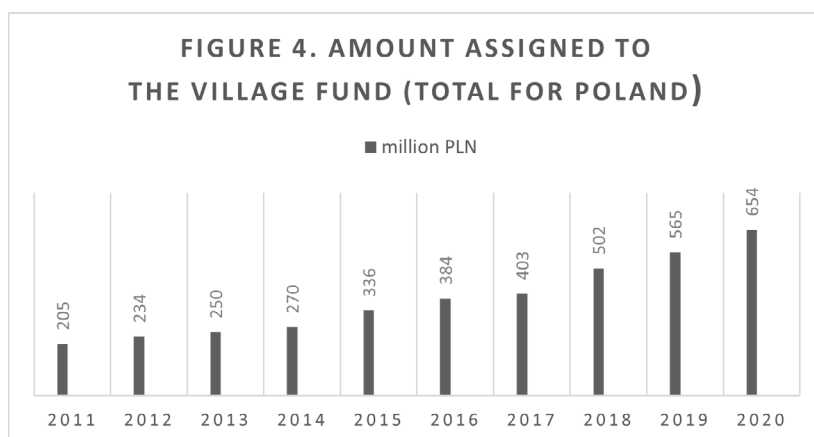
A specific form of participatory budgeting has been introduced in Polish rural communes in 2009, currently regulated by the Act on Sołecki Fund of 2014 (Act on Sołecki Fund 2014). It is applied in ancillary units called sołectwo, established mostly in the countryside, deeply rooted in Polish traditions and quite widespread in Poland. According to data of Statistics Poland, rural and mixed urban-rural communes make up 87% of all communes (2,175 out of 2,477), and more than 99% of them had appointed village administrators (*sołtys*) for at least one locality. In 2020, more than 70% of those communes had established the village fund and – as shown in Figure 3 – this number was steadily growing within the last decade with a slight fall in 2020, making the mechanism more and more inclusive.

⁷ Report on implementation of the act on public benefit and voluntary work for 2014 and 2015, Sejm of the Republic of Poland, entry no. 1171, 8 December 2016, p. 2.



Source: original development of data by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Administration, <https://www.gov.pl/web/mswia/fundusz-solecki>, accessed on 1 February 2021.

Also the amounts assigned for the village fund (Figure 4) show that this mechanism of participatory allocation of resources to projects is gaining momentum.



Source: original development of data by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Administration, <https://www.gov.pl/web/mswia/fundusz-solecki>, accessed on 1 February 2021 (data for 2020 reflect the estimated plan, as the actual data are not confirmed yet).

The application of the village fund in a given commune requires a resolution of the commune's council, but when the decision is made, the village fund mechanism becomes a regular solution, applied on an annual basis. Within the set terms and amounts, the decisions made by the community are binding and have to be carried out.

The funding within this mechanism is allocated by communal authorities upon an application approved by the village assembly. Projects may be initiated by the village administrator, village council or a group of 15 residents and may concern any issues, provided that it lies within the competence of the communes, serves to improve the residents' wellbeing and is consistent with the commune's strategy. Projects may be implemented jointly by cooperating villages. Thus, the funding assigned to the village fund can be used to implement bottom-up projects, and it helps peripheral communities express their needs and initiate measures funded by the communal government. In the smaller, rural communities, this mechanism

requires more cooperation and deliberation than the urban, vote-centred participatory budgeting.

4.7 Cooperation with NGOs

Another participatory mechanism applied within the local government involves cooperation with local activists associated with non-governmental organisations. The Act on public benefit activities and voluntary work states in its art. 5 that "public administration organs perform their activities in the scope of public responsibilities ... in cooperation with non-governmental organisations" (Act on public benefit activities 2003) in their respective territory of operations and defines a non-exclusive list of forms of such cooperation, including mutual communication about planned activities, consulting normative acts in their respective areas of interest, as well as form joint advisory or initiating teams. Another key form suggested by the act concerns authorities' "entrusting of public tasks" to NGOs. In the case of local governments, the same act defines their obligation to develop and implement yearly plans of cooperation with non-governmental organisations. This broad list makes this a very inclusive tool, and at the same time it opens a forum for the deliberative role of the residents.

According to the (latest available) report of implementation of this act in 2014–2015 (Report 2016), entrusting public tasks to NGOs or financial support for them in the implementation of such tasks was the most popular mechanism among public agencies. Thus, it can be perceived as a regular or even permanent element of the broadly-defined local and regional policies. It was most often applied by marshal's offices (self-government on the regional level) and urban poviats (big cities' self-government). Local government most frequently entrusted NGOs with tasks associated with promoting sports and physical well-being, as well as arts, culture and cultural heritage. Upon the conclusion of a relevant agreement, both the NGO and the authorities are bound by its provisions.

4.8 Civic panels

The freedom of organising consultations with citizens opens a space for local authorities' innovativeness in providing communication opportunities that would be more efficient in customising local policies, while simultaneously also attractive enough to involve citizens. The low voter turnout in local and regional elections, as well as referendums, and falling participation even in participatory budgeting votes reflect the need for new tools and mechanisms that would enhance citizens' motivation and also give citizens a sense of real impact.

One such concept is civic panels, a form of mini-publics (Grönlund, Bächtiger, Setälä, 2014), first introduced in Gdansk in 2016, then implemented also in other cities, including Warsaw, Lublin, Wrocław. This mechanism involves a series of meetings and discussions of a representative group of members of the community, devoted to a pre-defined, specific subject concerning the community and falling within the competence of the local self-government. During the meetings they learn about the issue in question, they are presented with potential solutions and talk about them in order to choose and recommend to the authorities a specific option they deem the best for the commune and community (Gerwin 2018). A very important strength

of this method is its deliberative character. Contrary to a referendum, it does not involve a yes/no answer to a question, it creates space for consensus and sharing opinions. Another positive feature is the informative aspect: as the panel's works are spread to the community (by way of video transmission, publication of the panel's reports, as well as by personal communication with members of the panel), the community is better informed about experts' opinions on the discussed subject. With its random selection of participants and ensuring time for the information and discussion stages, mini-publics are very inclusive and deliberative tools. Their decisions can only be binding if a high percentage of the participants agree on a solution, but their impact on the authorities and the communities is also indirect: through presentation of various arguments and potential decisions (Gastil and Knobloch 2020). On the other hand, civic panels are a complex and long-lasting process, requiring long-term commitment by its members, and thus the scope of their potential application is limited. Therefore, it is not a frequently used tool.

4.9 City labs

Another form of involving various local actors in city governance that has been applied in Polish communes lately is city labs. They serve as a communication, deliberation and cooperation platform for local authorities and residents, but also other institutions, such as social organisations and companies, thus integrating various milieus involved in urban development. The inclusion of diverse actors lies at the foundation of the concept of city labs. They provide for interdisciplinary co-creation and testing of innovative solutions for the city and the community, in terms of organisation, service provision, as well as governance (Kopyciński 2018, 100). Importantly, they are designed to serve as long-term measures and do not depend on fast and spectacular outcomes, but become permanent hubs and provide a forum for regular discussions and sharing of ideas.

So far, city labs have been implemented as pilot initiatives in two Polish Cities – Gdynia and Rzeszów (Kaszkur 2020, 38). In the Polish case, the process was initiated by local authorities and focuses on selected themes concerning the operation of the commune, such as local environmental policies, public transport or smart city, but also issues related to the improvement of decision-making quality and citizen participation. City labs also provide space for self-development and integration by way of organising training, urban cafés and similar solutions. However, they do not gain the position of decision-makers, and they can only provide concepts, inspiration and advice.

5. Evaluation of participatory tools in the Polish local government

The applied mechanisms of involvement of broad groups of citizens in decision-making processes differ in many respects, and then, as legally authorised and practically reasonable, they are adapted to specific needs and conditions of different communities and territorial units. As participative governance tools are designed to draw citizens into the processes of governing their local and regional communities, the most important challenges to be confronted involve ways to attract residents on one hand and making the participative decisions a part of the entire complex of strategic solutions applied in the commune, powiat

or voivodeship. The former issue requires mechanisms that are innovative and attractive, give the residents a sense of actual impact and responsibility for the community, but still they have to be adapted to residents' limitations, both in terms of knowledge and the time they can devote to governing their community. The latter aspect refers to the noticeable tendency by which participative tools function as separated elements of the local strategy and operations, limited in practice to either a consultative role or lifestyle projects concerning small sublocal communities with only a potential to influence and transform the entire local or regional policies.

In terms of governance quality and practical significance, the above review allows for development of several criteria in the assessment of participative tools.

1. inclusiveness: the scope of inclusion of all residents of the territorial unit in question on one hand, and a demarcation of who is considered a stakeholder on the other; it also involves striking a balance between broad participation and ensuring that all participants are equally heard; and finally the question of how to encourage participation of marginalised groups and thus avoid transformation of social participation into a mechanism of empowering the privileged;
2. deliberative nature: the important role of a forum where residents' wishes and complaints are articulated; the opportunity for everybody concerned and willing to have a say on the discussed issues and attempts taken to build a consensus around major themes or specific solutions;
3. actual impact: conditions and terms of implementation of the solutions selected through the participatory mechanism; whether the mechanism involves true decision-making or rather a consultative and supportive role;
4. regularity: whether the mechanism is a one-off tool to make strategic decisions or rather a regular, repetitive process, involving residents in the day-to-day governance of the local government units.

Table 1 provides a preliminary evaluation of the tools discussed in the paper. It shows that each mechanism involves a trade-off between different elements which have to be very carefully and thoroughly considered by local authorities. The selection of the right tools has to be guided by the character of the problem in question, as well as the specific nature of the given community.

Table 1. Assessment of participatory tools in the Polish local government.

	Inclusiveness	Deliberative nature	Actual impact	Regularity
Removal referendum	high potential, but unused	none	high potential, but unused	no
Consultative referendum	high potential, but unused	low	low	no
Consultations	high potential, but unused	high	low	no
Ancillary units	high potential	high	low	yes
Participatory budgeting	high potential	high potential	yes	yes
Village fund (fundusz sołecki)	yes	yes	yes	yes
Cooperation with NGOs	yes	yes	yes	yes
Civic panels	yes	yes	high potential	no
City labs	yes	yes	no	yes

Further research will enable the inclusion of other tools as well.

6. Conclusion

Participative governance has become an important and ever more popular tool in the Polish local governance. The developing urban movements, changes in social expectations and attitudes, social research results, as well as patterns spread from various parts of the world encourage local authorities to develop solutions present in the local government at least since the 1990s (ancillary units, consultations), adapt solutions developed elsewhere to Polish conditions (participatory budgeting) or innovate (civic panels). This process changes policies, as well as the governing style.

If well considered and well implemented, participative tools stimulate not only more diverse and more efficient measures taken, but also deeper transparency and accountability of local and regional authorities and officials; however, some of them remain scarcely used by local authorities or neglected by local communities. The broad range of tools used in Poland, along with the possibility of developing new ones or improving the existing ones offers a space for encouraging participation and deliberation to improve local policies, as well as governance. To achieve that, further research is required with respect to the application of participative mechanisms, taking into account contemplated subjects, involved actors, achieved levels of participation, course of the process and its impact, as well as overall assessment.

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