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Political empowerment of citizens in online public consultations on the example of Polish local self-government activities

Abstract

The article presents the results of a research, which aimed was to verify the hypothesis about potential of the online public consultations, conducted by Polish local self-government representatives in order to strengthen the citizens' sense of political empowerment. The attitude that emerged from the respondents' answers, despite various shortcomings in implementation of the process, allows assuming that online consultations presage the improvement of participatory democracy. Implementation of interactive form of communication with citizens is a challenge for public administration.

Keywords: political empowerment, participation, public consultations, Internet, self-government communities, public administration

Podmiotowość polityczna obywateli w internetowych konsultacjach społecznych na przykładzie działań polskich samorządów

Abstrakt

W artykule zaprezentowano wyniki badania, którego celem była weryfikacja hipotezy na temat potencjału tkwiącego w internetowych konsultacjach społecznych, prowadzonych przez przedstawicieli polskich miast samorządowych, do wzmacniania poczucia podmiotowości politycznej obywateli biorących w nich udział. Można sądzić, że konsultacje internetowe, pomimo wad w zakresie realizacji, mogą być uznane za rokujące dla poprawy jakości demokracji partycypacyjnej. Wdrożenie interaktywnych form komunikacji z obywatelami stanowi wyzwanie dla administracji publicznej.

Słowa kluczowe: podmiotowość polityczna, partycypacja, konsultacje społeczne, Internet, samorząd terytorialny, administracja publiczna

Introduction

Local communities in Poland make joint decisions according to the representative democracy model, though we can observe increasing power of individuals and informal groups expressing their opinions and communicating their needs publicly, more often and more effectively. In such a context effectiveness could be understood as critical influence of individuals' will on public decisions. Changes in the democracy model are popularized mostly by actions inspired and coordinated by non-governmental organizations leaders. This is also a result of global changes in perceiving the role of public administration. This trend is an important quality of the good governance model which is consciously implemented in strategic and operational management by public administration officials and elected authorities. The core of good governance is widening stakeholders' circle for public administration actions and decision-making process – from business and NGO's leaders to individual citizens who are the most interesting subjects for the purposes of this article. Public governance or good governance is translated, after Jerzy Hausner, as participatory public management which means that the public sector keeps interacting with the members of the civic society by the means of appropriate consultation procedures (2010: 93-94).

“Citizen participation” is a synonym of citizen power and means the division of power enabling the inclusion of people currently excluded from political and economic processes into decision-making process. According to Sherry R. Arnstein (2012: 13, 18-39) participation ladder concept, public consultations are situated among deceptive participation forms. Typology of participation has a gradable character – the higher position on the ladder of participation, the greater influence of citizens on the process of public decision-making. The ladder of participation, thanks to certain features characterizing its individual rungs, allows estimating the level of participation of the action we organize or we participate in.

According to Arnstein, consultations, in other words asking citizens for their opinions, still remain apparent actions since the citizens' view has no influence upon the matters discussed.

The procedure of public consultations can be defined, according to the social participation guide *The citizens co-decide*, as a means of extracting opinions, standpoints, propositions, etc. from subjects (institutions or people) who will be, in a way, affected, indirectly or directly, by the results of the proposed and consulted by the administration actions. It could be also understood as the process of exchanging information with the public, discussing, sharing the knowledge, and even (to some extent) sharing the power (Długosz, Wygnański 2005: 23). Eventually public consultations conducted in the Internet could be defined as a stage in decision-making process on public matters. It is still communication between particular persons – citizens and public officials or elected authorities, but facilitated by online solutions. Online public consultations could be also understood as a set of tools used to conduct decision-making process in local matters with the participation of the communities they concern. It can be claimed that such participation is direct because individuals speak on their own behalf. At the same time, from the technological point of view, it is indirect communication and as such, it influences citizens' experience of participation (analogical to user experience applied in internet marketing).

The experience of being online changes the way of thinking about consultation process and its planning, managing, informing, concluding and is simply being a part of the process. Technical aspects, the choice of tools to communicate, quality of design and communication language – have a significant influence on the process of consultations itself. Thanks to the good governance model, developed technical solutions are not as important as relations which authorities have built with the consultations participants. This article presents the results of the research conducted to juxtapose an objective world of designed functionalities and Internet addresses with the subjective sense of political empowerment of the users (participants) of described systems, whether they feel subjects or objects of the political process.

The selection of tools for conducting communication between a citizen and public officials or local authorities is very important. The application of information technologies in political decision-making processes may adopt a form of electronic voting in election offices, remote participation in the elections or referendums, or participation of external stakeholders in process of law making (Luterek 2010: 49). The latter form is the form closest

to Internet social consultations examined in this article. The range of the tools applied is not random – it expresses our particular notion of the political order (Przybylska 2006: 186). Therefore, if an authority, while communicating with a citizen, applies only promotional or informational material, failing to apply materials of interactive nature, it could mean that the preferable model of the relationship between a citizen and an authority is based on unilateral communication. Within each type of democracy (from legislative to participatory one) specific Internet tool suited to the preferred model may be used to support the process. Within the participatory democracy, the role of the new media is particularly essential because it allows for the elimination of institutional intermediaries in the act of communication. What may influence the quality of these relationships are technology as well as equipment and competence capabilities possessed by the participants of the electronic debate.

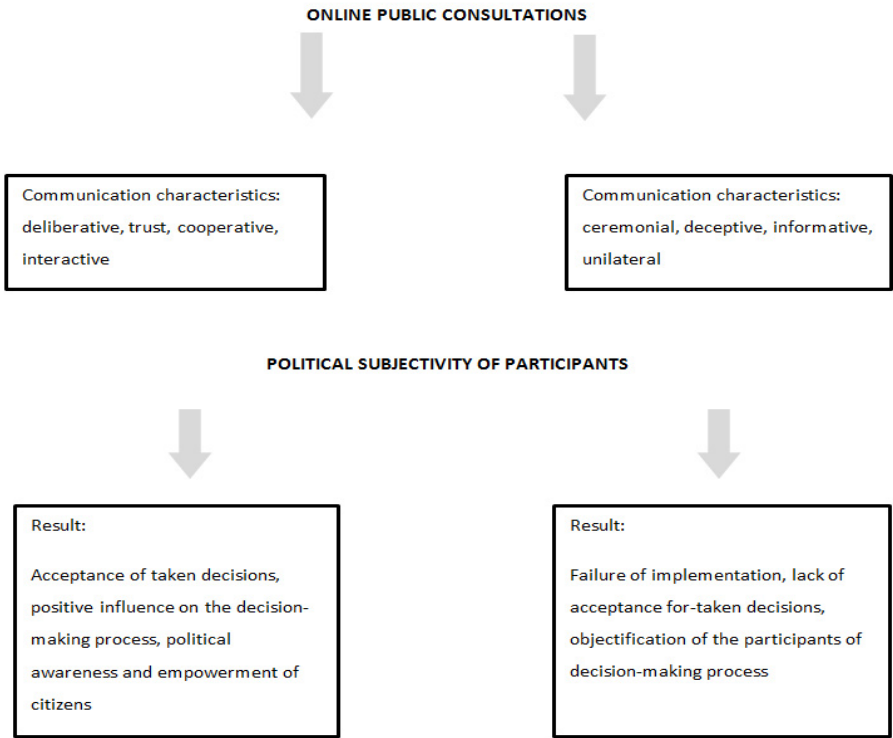
We can assumed that political empowerment is a category that reflects the character of interpersonal relationships among mutually reliant social groups. Mariusz Gulczyński defines political empowerment as: „the ability of groups and individuals to take conscious, rational and organized action aimed at the realization of their interests by exerting influence on the realization of social processes" (2007: 44). The degree to which that social groups or individuals can exert the desired influence on political processes, depends on the ability to articulate interests in equal position, the possibility to legally (or illegally) gather in political organizations and the effectiveness of actions taken by such groups or individuals (ibidem: 39).

Similarly to the concept of citizen participation, political empowerment or objectivity are of gradable character and the processes of becoming political subject or object are dynamic. Becoming a subject of politics is realized only in the form of cooperative participation in social and political life, not in reactive form (ibidem: 47). In this way the concept of political empowerment is related to the consultation process. Thus, empowered citizens realize their goals not in revolutionary way, but positively and by constant taking action. Therefore, the higher the level in empowering a given individual or self-government community attained, the more effective will be the realization of the consultation processes. As we may observe they are mutually dependent processes, which also means that political empowerment of the citizens

is shaped by experiencing by them every public activity or contact with the moderator of such process.

In this article I have attempted to verify the hypothesis that online public consultations involving citizens in a decision-making process on local matters, have the potential to build political empowerment of citizens. This potential is closely linked with the basic qualities of Internet communication such as an ability to include masses of citizens, its egalitarian character, non-hierarchical structure as well as the opportunity to express individual position on the consulted matter.

Figure 1. Hypothesis model



Source: Kania 2015.

The hypothesis remains justified as long as public administration is able to provide an adequate communication platform and support the decision-making process designed in such a way. In the case of failure of consultative

platform and the disappointment of Internet citizens-users, the activities of public administration may have the opposite effect – weakening the sense of being a subject of political decisions and weakening the belief in the value of direct democracy. Low awareness of one's own political empowerment is expressed not only in the lack of civic engagement, but also in the low social trust and even hostility towards local authorities and their activities.

Methodology of the research

The first step of the research was an overview of Internet webpages administered by local authorities and analyzing their content with respect to conducted public consultations. At the beginning of January 2014 I visited websites of Białystok, Bydgoszcz, Gdańsk, Gorzów Wielkopolski, Katowice, Kielce, Kraków, Lublin, Łódź, Olsztyn, Opole, Poznań, Rzeszów, Szczecin, Toruń, Warszawa, Wrocław and Zielona Góra. It was significant to reduce the number of analysed municipalities only to eighteen having the same legal status.

The research was aimed at finding public consultations microsites in the structure of the official council websites and specially dedicated to public consultations websites (outside of the structure of official page). Its goal was also to find the dominant a form of communication with users (citizens), main functionalities of the platforms, terms and conditions for users, presence of social media references, available statistics, consultation acts and contact details to responsible department. Description of the selected elements is important for the subsequent hypothesis verification.

The websites were compared with the use of the same criteria, primarily with the criterion of functionalities used for communication during the consultation process. For the purposes of this analysis, I directly expending the methodology applied in marketing surveys of interactive markets and in website accessibility audits. It was widely relating to strictly determined standards of websites usability.

This task requires transferring the assumptions dominating in the business, commercial sector, with a specific structure of aims to be attained by

actions directed towards user satisfaction onto the public sector. Despite fundamental differences, the preferences of users accustomed to certain communication solutions used on the Internet, dominated by commercial entities, should be implemented by the public administration with the intention to achieve goals other than sales. Users adapt their expectations regarding a website to what they have learned earlier, visiting other sites (Nielsen, Loranger 2007, p. 104).

After the analysis, I carried out a research that lasted 1,5 month, with the use of an online questionnaire filled out by anonymous respondents. The online survey titled *Online public consultations in Polish self-government* (<http://internetowekonsultacje.badanie.net/>) was distributed from 28th July to 14th September 2014 within citizens and public administration officials of eighteen Polish cities – capitals of voivodeships.

I have received 30 complete questionnaires out of 233 views of online forms, which makes approx. 13 % success rate. Invitations to fill out the polling were sent to officials responsible for public consultations conducted in various forms, to officials responsible for participatory budgets and to representatives of the third sector involved in the consultation process. I also attempt to reach individual citizens engaged in local matters, by using Internet platforms where online consultations were conducted, and on Facebook fan pages devoted to local communities' problems, not only governmental, but also communal, NGO's and private initiatives.

Formulating my conclusions, I am referring to existing concepts and assumptions on democracy, including participatory democracy and the theory of new media, as well as to theoretical models of consultation processes and interactive business solutions. Based on the collected literature, I have constructed a hypothesis that I will confront with the results of empirical studies.

Online public consultations in Poland: analysis and interpretation of the research results

In this part of the article, I will analyse online consultations platforms and single tools to assess its abilities to build political empowerment of citizens, on an example of the eighteen chosen cities. Properties of tools which local

authorities made available to conduct online consultations are mostly qualitative: aesthetics, usability, comprehensibility, technical efficiency, responsiveness, up-to-date information, exhaustive references, credible data, objectivity, diversity of topics. Such service requires public officials' engagement in and the responsibility for the process, which in the Internet evince through professionally designed tools adjusted to the capacity of average users. Confrontation of the results of analysis of platforms and tools with opinions and experiences of respondents who took part in online research, would tell more about social dimension of the applied technology.

1. Analysis of communication schemes

Bydgoszcz, Kielce, Lublin, Opole, Rzeszów and Szczecin – these cities did not place public consultations on the main pages of their official council websites. It was hard to find information about conducted consultations in the site map. Citizens interested in past consultations processes had to use search engines or read the news section about current events in the city. After ten months, only Bydgoszcz did not provide any information on the main page of the city council website. Another city that did not release that information was Katowice, despite its freestanding platform for public consultations. In two cases, public consultations were placed in the structure of Public Information Bulletin (Rzeszów, Szczecin). Dominant form of communication were the consultations cards in pdf or in electronic form, dedicated to specific topic or just simple contact forms to send messages to local authorities, e.g. president of Lublin¹ or Gorzów Wielkopolski² inviting citizens to share their opinions.

Lublin as well as Szczecin, Kielce, Opole and Bydgoszcz are examples of cities, which are fashion-conscious on participatory budgets. At the beginning of January 2014, it was hard to find information about any local authorities' activities concerning interests in citizens' ideas or thoughts about managing cities. Couple of months later, Lublin designed new, freestanding website dedicated i.e. to participatory budget consultations for 2015 (it has its premiere on 23rd of September 2014: <https://obywatelski.lublin.eu/>). This

¹ Social dialog box, <http://dialog.lublin.eu/> [08.10.2014].

² Dialog service, <http://www.eurzad.gorzow.pl/index.php?action=30> [11.10.2014].

site became separate consultations platform, not only for participatory budget issues. Szczecin was a good example of achieving informational requirements, even if public consultations microsite was hardly accessible (not visible for users on the official main page). Szczecin published video (unfortunately not to be played online) and audio files as well as minutes from consultation meetings and, on the other hand, electronic forms to give an opinion and e-mail address to contact with responsible officials.

Interactive and easy to use elements appear next to the electronic voting functionalities in participatory budgeting consultations. Citizens in each of the cities have an opportunity to vote for qualified projects using electronic forms, cards, applications of high usability standards or just simple forms in specific formats, which is a less useful way to make a choice. However, comparison of consultation tools in these two periods, in January, before participatory budgeting popularity growth, and in September, when participatory budgets became an important media and political issue, shows the difference.

Cities, which conduct public consultations only within the participatory budgets, such as Białystok, Gdańsk and Zielona Góra, focused on voting procedures on qualified projects. Electronic forms were the most popular solutions (verified by PESEL number) and additionally voting cards in traditional form to leave in special points. Great example of a city encouraging citizens to take part in participatory budgeting procedure is Białystok in 2013³.

Public officials, after closing the enrolment of the projects and making public justification of decisions about rejection of some ideas (files in pdf to download), helped people to promote their concepts by making a short video on You Tube website with authors talking about the necessity of realisation of their ideas. This is very interesting and a unique initiative of public officials which enables voters to meet authors of the projects and gives a feeling of community.

However, it shows the type of democracy which in this case is less participatory and more plebiscite. People tend to judge – basing on delivered information, like descriptions or videos – which project should be financed and then vote for some solutions. They do not discuss or convince one another in

³ News section about participatory budget in 2014 of Białystok: <http://www.bialystok.pl/1281-budzet-obywatelski-2014/default.aspx> [11.10.2014].

substantive conversation which project is socially profitable; they simply accept project or not, and then cast a vote. I discern endangerment of consumerism tendencies in such a scheme. Such tendencies are compensated by massive engagement of citizens who share their ideas and, what is very important in these particular public consultations, having an access to guaranteed budget. It means that citizens have power and real influence.

Websites, especially the content of their main pages, must be treated as manifestation of authorities and public officials' priorities in local politics. Tools which are hard in use, complicated, demanding of users to spare too much time and effort, poorly designed – show, firstly, underestimation of such channel of communication as the Internet and, secondly, participatory democracy, or in case of participatory budgeting – rather plebiscite democracy models.

Basing on the results of the research, I have abstracted seven types of communication schemes concerning online public consultations:

1. Councils which do not have any information in their websites structures (rarely in the news section);
2. Councils which have microsites in the structures of their websites or Public Information Bulletins, but there is no access from the main pages;
3. Councils which have microsites in structures of their website and an easy access from the main pages (to public consultations or participatory budgeting procedures);
4. Councils which have freestanding websites dedicated to participatory budgeting procedures;
5. Councils which have freestanding websites dedicated to public consultations;
6. Councils which have freestanding websites dedicated to NGOs;
7. Councils which have freestanding websites dedicated to space planning information or new perspective of EU funds.

Only a third of the researched cities have separately managed websites to communicate with citizens. The most common scheme of online communication is no 3: councils that have microsites in structures of their website and an easy access from the main pages (to public consultations or participatory budgeting procedures). There are very few city councils, which have free-

standing websites dedicated to public consultations or participatory budgeting procedures. Top cities (with the biggest number of implemented communication schemes) are Warsaw, Łódź, Toruń and Lublin.

Katowice and Olsztyn deserve mentioning as special examples of free-standing websites with diversity of applied functionalities to conduct interactive exchange of standpoints, mostly through Internet fora. Public officials in Katowice are active moderators; statistics of discussions are very high (in comparison to above described cities, e.g. Łódź and Kraków). Every topic has its own coordinator, which is related to the position of the official in council organizational structure. It is opposite to Warsaw's solution, where local authorities' have established an office for conducting public consultations. This is probably the cause of using formal language on forum.

Similarly, after closing a consultation process, Warsaw always publishes city council resolution in a particular matter. Public officials in Warsaw have matched tools for every particular topic. It is apparent, based on structure of every public consultation initiative, managed as a single project and succeeded according to project management methodology. Olsztyn is a great illustration of using the best practices from Katowice and Warsaw. Every consulted issue has its topic on Internet forum. Particular public consultation is managed by responsible organisational unit in the city hall, which designed initial materials, planned agendas of meetings, schedule, promotional materials and reports about the whole process.

II. Analysis of applied functionalities

After the comparative analysis of websites and on that basis, it was created a list of 26 different solutions to conduct online public consultations and communicate with citizens during such a process.

Documents to download and news section are mostly used to support consultation process. Their role is important – informational, but these are not interactive tools. If these are only supplementary to other existing ways of communication, just simplifying the understanding of the complexity of consultations objects and giving complete information about an issue, then we could speak about high standards implemented in a particular self-government community. Informational requirements give citizens the guarantee

that taken decisions have rational and real fundamentals. The form of informational material presentation should not be neglected. Documents to download or articles to read online have to be designed in appropriate style and formats to support the usability and accessibility of websites, which should finally lead to higher social awareness of consulted problems. That is the reason why public administration documents have to be written in a simple but also attractive language. Such informational materials have to be helpful for people who have little knowledge about discussed matters, not enough time to explore the topic and take part in online consultations process or are just not interested in local issues (while being a target group).

Another group of the most popular functionalities used by local authorities are forms in different available formats, internet forums, electronic surveys and e-mail addresses dedicated to consultations projects. E-mail addresses permit to contact successfully responsible public official recipients, but still citizens have no guarantee that their inquiries will be answered. Forms in different available formats and electronic surveys are similar, but their structure facilitates managing great sets of data. These are simple questionnaires to vote on particular issues or share own ideas and solutions with local officials. It has potentially interactive features, although forms or surveys are normally used to analyse quantitative results.

Users have an access to the results of voting immediately or after a definite date, but we cannot state that such a means of communication is deliberative, enabling the exchange of qualitative arguments. Such ways of communication are very close to representative democracy mechanism with this difference that a vote is cast for a particular solution of a problem and not for a person whose political orientation citizens identify with. This form of online consultations is frequently practised to solve simple issues, with minor number of options, e.g. choice of location for a playground in a city.

A tool that are entirely different from the above functionalities are internet forum platforms. These are forums where well-developed discussions are moderated. Very often public officials initiate the topic which is later advanced by users. What is most important conversations are episodic, deep and deliberative. Being a part of such a conversation and gathering forum users' ideas require from public officials engagement, mindfulness and a quick, responsible response. Interactive tools give citizens the possibility to

react, give an opinion, criticise or follow and discuss probable options. Communication skills like the foregoing ones are desired in consultations conducted in town meetings as well as in the online form, with the difference, that the amount of communication receivers is incomparably greater in the Internet. The table below presents the division of online consultations tools into two groups: interactive and non-interactive.

Table 1. Division of internet tools used to conduct online public consultations

Interactive tools	Non-interactive tools (informational function, means to communicate)
<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Registration process / Login system / Profile edition▪ Electronic surveys▪ Adding information▪ Online voting / Interactive form to vote▪ Online chat▪ Mobile devices surveys▪ E-mail dedicated to the project / Contact form▪ Internet forum	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Calendar▪ Search engine in structure▪ Categorization of topics▪ Forms in pdf, doc, rtf / Documents to download▪ Promotional movie on You Tube / Multimedia section (video, audio)▪ Interactive map▪ News section / Newsletter▪ Instruction and knowledge▪ Traditional form to vote▪ Minutes from consultation meetings

Source: Kania 2015.

Each of these tools carries a message how public administration would cooperate with the society. Based on the examples of local self-government activities Polish online public consultations could be divided – in my opinion – into four types:

- Interactive and substantive;
- Substantive but not interactive;
- Interactive but not substantive;
- Not interactive and not substantive.

Only the first one can be identified as a truly participatory consultation process. The second one does not present consultations' results and uses traditional tools like questionnaires that should be printed out or sent by e-mail. The third type

should be treated rather like an entertainment: it builds users' well-being but it does not teach them how to become a responsible citizen. The last type is often a simple contact form to send a message on any topic, without structure and defined purposes.

III. Online public consultations in the users' perspective

As we could see almost 90% of respondents agreed that consulted matters were important for citizens.

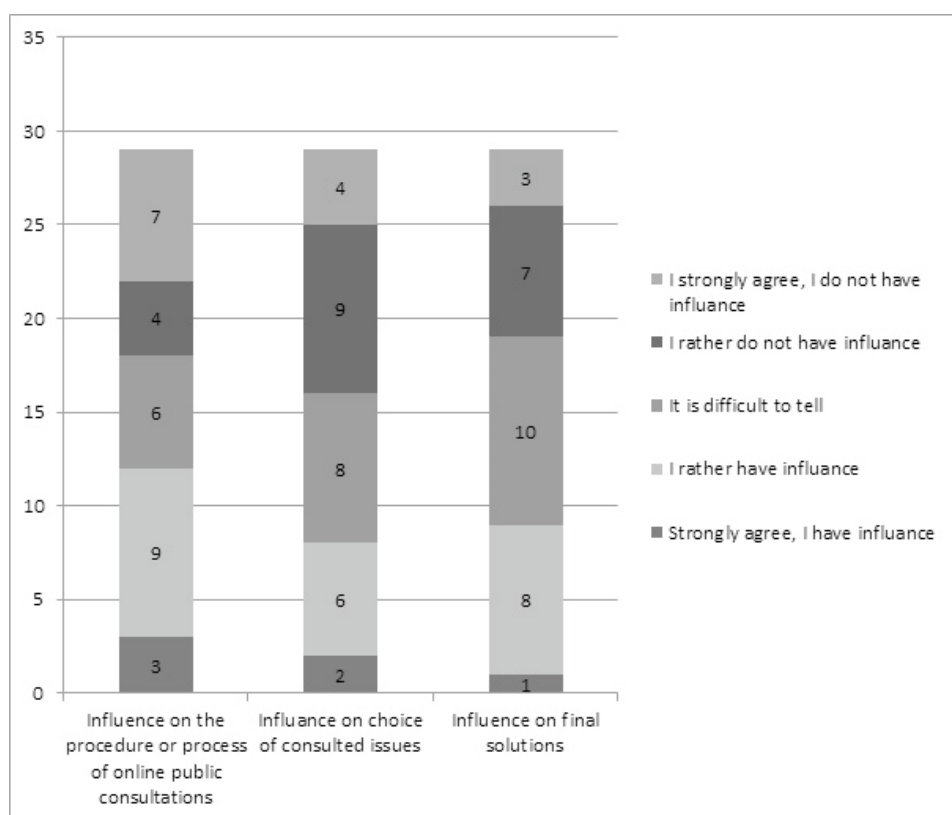
Table 2. Percentage of individuals who used tool personally

	Applied by PA	Percentage of users who used a tool personally
Council official websites	27	66,67
Websites or freestanding consultation platforms	23	86,96
Electronic surveys	18	83,33
Online voting	17	82,35
Documents to download	16	62,50
E-mail dedicated to the project	15	73,33
News section	13	53,85
Newsletters	13	61,54
Minutes from consultation meetings (reports, presentations)	13	69,23
Forms in pdf, doc, rtf	12	58,33
Internet forums	12	58,33
Traditional forms to vote	11	27,27
Promotional movies on You Tube, multimedia (video, audio)	11	36,36
Calendars of consultation events	10	50,00
Instructions and knowledge	10	80,00

Source: Kania 2015, p. 93-120.

Respondents were also asked about topics they wished to consult online. Local budget expenditures and public space planning were the most popular themes. Based on the percentage of users who used tool personally, respondents preferred taking part in online public consultations through websites or freestanding consultation platform, electronic surveys, voting online, using e-mails dedicated to the project and reading instructions about consulted matters. Electronic surveys, online voting and Internet forum (58,33% of respondents used it personally) are classified as interactive tools. The answers showed that traditional forms to vote and promotional movies on You Tube or other multimedia (video, audio) were the least popular.

Chart 1. Citizens influence on procedure, consulted issues and final solutions



Source: Kania 2015; *Appendix 2.*

An important question concerned subjective perception of respondents' influence on the procedure of online public consultations, choice of consulted issues and final solutions. Chart below presents results according to which citizens believe that they have more influence on procedures than on choice of consulted issues, which – in my opinion – is a surprising result. It is the citizens' influence on consultations procedures that seems to be the most sophisticated type of impact.

As we see more than 86% of respondents agreed that online public consultations are different from traditional ones. The respondents focused both on positive as well as on negative consequences of conducting online consultations. The features like anonymity of participants which allows them for expressing unfettered opinions and comfort of saving time due to the Internet potentials, are of course considered helpful and encouraging to take part more often in online procedures. Negative opinions relate to the problem of digital exclusion of older people or those without access to computer and to the problem of non-deliberative process of consultations, which in my opinion is a very serious issue. The respondents pointed out that „consultations through Internet are rather reception of fixed opinions” (Kania 2015, *Appendix 2*), and it is meetings which give real possibility to establish own perspective in discussions, asking questions, exploring the topic (supposition – online consultations are in opposition). Moreover, respondents claimed that online consultations are single thread, too general, while traditional ones allow having a multi-thread and in-depth conversation.

Despite the above critique, more than 70% of respondents considered participation in online public consultations a civil responsibility and the same number of respondents believed that online consultations results would influence the majority of decisions taken by local authorities in the future. Almost 60% of respondents felt that due to online public consultations, they were achieving more control over decisions made in the city by local authorities and public officials.

I would like to dedicate the last paragraph of analysis to respondents' understanding of success in online public consultations. I have received 29 different answers, which – in my opinion – could be divided into five groups, according to the following qualities:

- Evaluation of solutions which were rejected or accepted by public officials (final report with justification of taken decisions);
- Unquestionable citizens influence on taken decisions in the form of decisions conformable to majority citizens' will, changing public officials' line;
- Unquestionable citizens influence on taken decisions in the form of visible effects of implemented solutions;
- Finally taken decisions which are compliant with public good values, regarding issues important for citizens;
- Important elements of discussion: being heard and having a chance to speak; recognition of diversity of opinions; attaining compromise; taking mature decisions.

While defining the meaning of successful ending of public consultations, the majority of respondents focused on procedures and formal aspects of the process, rather than on substantive solutions. Justification of taken decisions is significant in order to understand the diversity of incentives (motivation of public officials and of other citizens) and then for the social acceptance of finally taken decisions.

With respect to the unexpected respondents' answers about the strength of their influence on public consultations procedures, issues and solutions, I have to assume that respondents represented mature attitude to participatory democracy model.

Conclusions

My main conclusion from the analysis of the results of the examined websites is that in the process of Internet public consultations Polish public administration uses interactive but not deliberative ways to communicate. Online voting procedure is most popular, especially during implementation procedures of participatory budgeting. Alas, such a tool does not favour participatory democracy – as I have mentioned earlier; it rather supports plebiscite democracy, determination of majority – not a dialogue and substantive argumentation. Such opinion about online voting delivered was expressed by the respondents' answers (single thread, many general, fixed opinions). The option of downloading the materials are frequently applied on the websites,

but only in fewer cases, it is useful for Internet users. Platforms, despite three examples, are poorly moderated and administrated, and an effect of such inaction is badly developed discussions, not only in substantive aspect but also with regard to poor attractiveness and not accessible language. The feedback which public administration give is also unsatisfactory. Responsiveness of public officials is a very important component of building citizens' trust to local authorities.

There is no doubt that respondents spent much time in the Internet during the day (5,5 hour), over 80% take part in online consultations procedure and over 70% take part at least once a year (Kania 2015, *Appendix 2*). Respondents in majority agreed that consulted matters are important for them. It is a positive result from public administration point of view as well as for the future of online procedures.

With regard to public consultations the purpose of the change could be understood as final solution, terms of a particular reality as choice of consulted matters and means as procedure or process of public consultations. Respondents believe that they have more influence on the final solution by means of the consultations procedure, than by their influence on the choice of consulted matters. For me this result is surprising as I consider the influence on procedures the most sophisticated aspect of participation in public sphere. Nevertheless, it cannot be said that such configuration of answers proves strong political empowerment of respondents.

What further emerges from the respondents' answers is their confrontational attitude to local authorities and public officials. The complaint that consultations were illusive or false may have an impact on the overall process of decision making. Public administration officials should appreciate the importance of mutual trust and respect between them and civic society. Dissatisfaction on the part of Internet users could threaten achievement of the goals of policymakers. This could be a reason why the ambition to design public consultations process as a deliberative one, in my opinion is fundamental for citizens' sense of dignity and their self-esteem in the process of democratically taken decisions.

Another thing worth mentioning is that respondents understand democracy in two modes: as decisions taken by the will of majority, and as decisions taken after the process of deliberation/discussion resulting in compromise.

Still, public administration representatives are treated by respondents as outsiders, common institutional strangers. Such attitude is a serious problem for development of partnerships, trust and social dialogue between public administration and citizens.

Based on the conducted research, I was able to say that only in a few cities out of eighteen the usage of internet tools by local authorities gives a chance for the engaged citizens to release their creative potential. Using non-interactive tools together with unsatisfactory administration of their only theoretically responsive functionalities, holds back the development of a process enabling the actor with a strong feeling of political empowerment to emerge.

Respondents are mostly enthusiastic towards online public consultations – they believe that this is the future of local democracy. Even though, in my opinion, current tools developed by public administration are far from ideal. There is a strong belief that respondents have more control over decisions taken in their neighbourhoods because of online consultations and that taking part in online procedures should be considered as a civil responsibility. Definition of successful online public consultations, where in majority of answers respondents focused on the process (discussion, diversity of opinions, evaluation reports), I consider as very mature answers which allows to presume that there is a potential in Polish society to build strong civil society.

Summing up the phenomenon of political empowerment exists in two dimensions: factual (which is measured by subjective perception of participants of the process) and formal or procedural one. In volitional aspect, respondents could be considered as subjects of politics. However in confrontation with procedural aspects of public administration or local authorities' activities, which could be qualified as the standards of public consultations' (concerning design, management, implementation and evaluation), citizens are mostly treated as objects of politics.

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