

## The Use and Misuse of ICT in Local Civil Dialogue in Poland

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**Abstract:** This article aims to analyze the extent to which the authorities of eighteen Polish cities with the status of provincial capitals use ICT to stimulate local civil dialogue. The quantitative analysis of the content of Internet media managed by local self-government institutions shows that over 80% of the aforementioned cities have not implemented an integrated online system, which would allow residents to report current local problems and obtain feedback concerning these issues. The analysis of online tools utilized during public consultations indicated that the most frequently adopted mechanisms are those, which not only exclude the in-depth dialogue between authorities and citizens but also deprive residents of a chance to respond to opinions of other members of the local community. An analogous situation also occurs during participatory budgeting, the formula of which includes the involvement of citizens at an early stage of a decision-making process. While residents of almost three-fourths of the analyzed cities can submit proposals of budgetary tasks via the Internet, only every fourth provincial capital uses online tools allowing residents to comment on the aforementioned projects. This situation should be perceived as a part of a broader problem – the vast majority of the analyzed cities have not even made an attempt at using ICT to establish a platform enabling a permanent, bilateral exchange of ideas and opinions between residents and local policymakers.

**Keywords:** participatory budgeting, public consultations, local self-government, citizen participation, civil society.

### 1. Introduction

The dynamic development of online media has led to a significant modification of the structure and functioning of local communication systems. One of the symptoms of this phenomenon is a growing pluralism of local public debate occurring both on the objective (a number and diversity of participants) and subjective (the scope of the problems discussed) levels. On the one hand, popularization of ICT offers local non-governmental organizations, informal social movements and individual citizens chance for a more active engagement into the co-shaping of local public opinion. On the other hand, the interactive and inclusive character of the online communication platform turns it into an effective tool which can be used by local authorities to stimulate a dialogue with citizens, as well as to include them into the process of governing their communities.

The pioneers in the studies on the role of ICT in the process of bilateral communication between local self-government (hereinafter: LSG) and citizens are the Scandinavian countries. One of the first such studies was Ranerup's (2002, pp. 177-193) analysis of Internet applications that aimed to democratize local government in Sweden by improving citizen-government links. Berntzen (2004, pp. 300-307), on the other hand, analyzed the discussion forum *demokratitorget.no*, established by a group of Norwegian local governments, which provided a platform for communication between residents and local politicians. The problem of the impact of the new media on the functioning of Norwegian local governments and their relationships with citizens was also discussed in the study by Hanssen (2007, pp. 355-382) in the framework of the project entitled "ICT and local democracy."

Since the middle of the last decade, research on the role of ICT in communication between local governments and residents has also been conducted in Poland. Of note in this regard are the analysis by Dzienniak-Pulina and Faliszek (2007, pp. 103-122) of websites of counties and communes of the Silesian Province as instruments for shaping the relations between local governments and citizens, and the study by Bohdan (2014, pp. 305-322) on local public consultations conducted on the Internet. Among the nation-wide research that has been conducted in Poland, particularly noteworthy is the comparative analysis by Kuć-Czajkowska and Wasil (2014, pp. 109-122) of Internet tools used by rural communes and municipalities in the process of bilateral communication with residents.

The present article, the main objective of which is to analyze the extent to which the authorities of eighteen Polish cities with the status of provincial capitals use ICT to stimulate local civil dialogue, is intended to contribute to this type of research. The analysis covered mechanisms allowing residents to report current local problems, online platforms facilitating a permanent exchange of information and opinions between citizens and local authorities, as well as Internet tools used in the course of local public consultations. Regarding the latter, particular attention was paid to consultations related to participatory budgeting, due to the fact that they raise considerable interest among citizens and involve them even at the early stages of the decision-making process.

## **2. Civil Dialogue Concept(s)**

Since the last decade of the 20th century, civil dialogue has become a popular concept within European Union institutions as well as in many of its member states (Kendall & Anheier, 1999, pp. 283-307; Smismans, 2003, pp. 473-495). In recent years, this term has appeared both in statements made by politicians and representatives of NGOs, as well as in official government documents and acts of law. It is also frequently used by researchers analyzing processes related to political communication, civil society, and citizen participation. However, as Makowski (2011, p. 56) correctly argues, it is hard to support the claim that a civil dialogue theory has been already developed and the

concept in question is interpreted in various ways. A step toward ordering the somewhat chaotic nomenclature in this regard is to agree with Misztal (2016, pp. 57-58) who claims that the term “civil dialogue” is used in scientific debate in a dual context. According to the first, inclusive approach, civil dialogue is considered to be a fundamental form of public discourse which allows citizens to participate in public debate and to present their opinions concerning social problems that they find to be important. As a result, they are able to contribute to the shaping of public opinion, which can potentially influence the decisions made by public authorities. This meaning of civil dialogue resembles the concept of citizen deliberation conducted within a democratic public sphere (see Gimmler, 2001, pp. 21-30; Habermas, 1989).

The second, exclusive approach to civil dialogue, reduces its material scope to a systematic process of communication between decision-making centers and formal structures of civil society, conducted in accordance with adopted procedures. Some researchers equate civil dialogue with institutionalized forms of public consultations conducted by public authorities and involving representatives of NGOs, concerning decisions that are important from the point of view of different social groups (Mandrysz, 2007, p. 115). A broader perspective is adopted by Makowski (2011, p. 50), who defines civil dialogue as “a system of relations between citizens and the state where citizens, through social organizations, communicate with centers of authority in an effort to exert influence on their decisions and on public policies.” This approach to civil dialogue emphasizes its institutionalized nature, which is manifested both in the formalized status of the participants of the process (public institutions and social organizations) and in setting their interactions within a strictly defined procedural network (public consultations, public hearings, etc.).

However, as Fazi and Smith (2006, p. 22) argue, civil dialogue carried out at various stages of decision-making process can include the interactions of various levels of formalization, “ranging from informal to legally recognized structures, from ad hoc to continuous exchange.” Such a standpoint is shared by Lewenstein (2011, pp. 12-13) who refers a concept of civil dialogue to the practical dimension of local public life, in which the increasingly important role is played by non-institutionalized actors. According to her, the category of local civil dialogue should include the processes of a two-way communication of a various level of institutionalization, occurring between local authorities and residents, including those who are not members of NGOs. A similar approach is also adopted by Theiss (2011, pp. 57-69) in her analysis of civil dialogue from the social network perspective.

In case of Poland, the adoption of the broad definition of the local civil dialogue is justified by reluctance of citizens to join social organizations and their limited interest in the participation in traditional public debates. According to the *Social Diagnosis 2015*, merely 9% of the adult population declares active participation in any organization, association, party, committee, religious group or trade union (Czapiński, 2015, pp. 333-334). This indicator would have been even lower, had the membership in religious unions and sports clubs been excluded from the analysis. Only every fifth adult Pole had

participated at least once in any public meeting outside his working place, in the year preceding the study.

Taking into account the aforementioned data, it was decided that this analysis of the use of ICT in the local civil dialogue in Poland should include all aspects of a two-way communication between LSG institutions and citizens referring to the problems of the given local community. The study has particularly focused on such mechanisms adopted by local authorities, which – on the one hand – allow citizens to engage in local public life in the way not requiring physical participation in public debates or consultations, and – on the other hand – are addressed also to the residents not associated with any formal structures of the civil society.

### **3. Design of the Study**

While analyzing the use of ICT in local civil dialogue in Poland, it was decided to focus on 18 cities with the status of provincial capitals. This choice was based on three premises. Firstly, these metropolises possess greater financial and human resources than smaller towns, which should favor more professional approach to their communication policies and the use of diversified communication tools adapted to the needs of various groups of residents. Secondly, the great number of residents of the provincial capitals, together with relatively long distances reduce the effectiveness of the traditional forms of civil dialogue such as public debates or workshops.<sup>1</sup> Thirdly, the surveys carried out by the Central Statistical Office of Poland justify the assumption that the residents of big cities use the Internet more regularly and in a more comprehensive way than the rest of the society. This reflection can be illustrated by the case of acquiring information from the websites of public authorities. While in 2016 over 35% of the respondents from Polish cities with more than 100 thousand inhabitants declared that they had been engaged in such activities in the 12 months preceding the study, in case of rural areas this rate was lower by 19 percentage points (Główny Urząd Statystyczny, 2016, pp. 147-149).

In the process of developing methodological assumptions of the study, a decision was made not to use surveys addressed to representatives of local authorities. While the abovementioned method allows to include into the analysis a large number of LSG units, the data acquired in this way are of a declarative nature and not necessarily reflect the true state of affairs. The fact that such concerns are justified was proved by the outcome of the pilot survey, concerning the provision of local public services facilitating citizen participation. The review of the acquired data showed that in case of questions referring to the participatory budgeting, from among 186 analyzed communes only 6 provided

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<sup>1</sup> It must be noted that the analyzed cities significantly differ in the size of their populations. While there are about 1.75 million inhabitants in Warsaw, the number of residents of the smallest provincial capitals in Poland does not exceed 130 thousand.

answers compatible with the information published on their official websites (Główny Urząd Statystyczny, 2015, p. 22).

Taking into account the above considerations, it was decided to select quantitative analysis of the content of Internet media managed by individual LSG units as the basic research method. Communication platforms supplied by external entities and used by local authorities, including websites administered by LSG institutions as part of community portals, were also taken into consideration. Contrary to the analysis carried out by Kuć-Czajkowska and Wasil (2014, pp. 109-122), the study did not cover e-administration tools applied by local authorities. It is because communication between citizens and LSG institutions taking place via these tools refers not so much to the problems of a local community, but rather to individual affairs of particular citizens.

The analysis covered these cases of the use of ICT in local civil dialogue, which had taken place since the beginning of 2014 up to the end of February 2017. In case of the annual initiatives, including – *inter alia* – consultations concerning participatory budgeting, the study included data referring to their last edition, and wherever possible, to their current edition. A single municipality with the status of provincial capital was the basic unit of the analysis. Each municipality was assigned parameters according to four sections of the adopted coding sheet. The first one referred to online solutions allowing citizens to report current local problems. Elements identified at this stage of the analysis included: the presence of an integrated system covering issues which different municipal services are responsible for, the scope of feedback concerning progress in solving a specific problem, and the possibility to comment on reports submitted by other citizens.

The second section of the coding sheet concerned the use of ICT during public consultations organized by local authorities. It allowed collecting information on the method of presenting information concerning particular consultations on the portal, the type of online communication tools used for their purpose, and the scope of online coverage of direct meetings with citizens. The analysis also verified whether the homepage of the town portal featured a hyperlink to a website devoted to consultations, and whether the latter included materials explaining the basic rules and mechanisms of such a form of civil dialogue.

Due to a specific nature of consultations concerning participatory budgeting, including the involvement of citizens at an early stage of the decision-making process in particular, a separate, third section of the coding sheet was dedicated to them. It referred to such issues as the procedure of submitting proposals of budgetary tasks via the Internet, the method of presenting information on the latter, the possibility for web users to comment on individual projects and providing an e-voting option. At this stage, the analysis verified whether the citizens have the possibility to follow the progress in implementing the winning projects online, and to what extent local authorities use ICT to consult residents in terms of general rules and methods of the participatory budgeting process.

The last section of the coding sheet focused on the degree to which LSG institutions used ICT to stimulate permanent exchange of ideas and opinions on the

functioning of the local community between citizens and representatives of local authorities. The analysis covered the type of communication tools used, and verified if, in each particular case, issues reported by residents and responses of representatives of local authorities were made available to the public, and if the citizens had the possibility to express their opinions on the proposals of other members of the local community. In reference to the online discussion forums run by LSG units, it was also verified if the citizens were free to initiate new subjects of debates, and if the publication of their comments required website administrator's approval. Other elements covered by the analysis included the number of forum users, the number of comments posted by them, the share of posts published by representatives of LSG institutions in the total number of posts, and the extent to which the discussion was dominated by the most active citizens.

Although the basic part of the study was of quantitative nature and relied on formalized categories, each stage of the analysis provided for the possibility to add additional, descriptive comments. The purpose of this solution was to take into consideration these factors which were difficult to account for in the quantitative analysis, and which might have influenced the effectiveness of a given communication tool as an instrument of local civil dialogue. For instance, during the analysis of the *Katowice Platform for Public Consultations* (<http://pks.katowice.eu>) it was noted that its users complained that it took too long for the website administrator to publish their comments. The quantitative analysis of the content of Internet media run by LSG institutions was also supplemented by an analysis of secondary data including, in particular, evaluation reports on the public consultations. Among other things, it allowed verifying if, and to what extent, the abovementioned documents included the opinions and proposals submitted by citizens via a specific Internet tool.

#### **4. Analysis of Results**

The analysis showed that only six provincial capitals have implemented an integrated online system allowing residents to report current problems requiring the urgent response by municipal services. The remaining cities provide only online contact forms or email addresses of particular municipal services. The basic limitation of these mechanisms is the fact that the submitted reports are not available to the public. Therefore, residents cannot express their opinions on the issues raised by other citizens. The lack of public pressure also reduces the motivation of LSG institutions to react promptly and effectively to the problems signaled by residents.

Only three of the analyzed cities – Opole, Lublin and Białystok – use applications similar in their functionalities to the popular *FixMyStreet* platform (<http://fixmystreet.org>). They allow citizens to easily raise – via an interactive map – problems concerning the local public space. Each report is directed to the relevant municipal institution and published on the website. It can also be supported or commented upon by other users of the platform. The residents can also follow the

progress in solving a particular problem online. In case of Opole and Białystok, such feedback is limited to marking the report as “being processed” or “accepted for realization”. More precise feedback is provided to the users of the Lublin-based website functioning within *NaprawmyTo* (“Let’s fix it”) platform, which has been developed in cooperation with several dozen NGOs (<http://lublin.naprawmyto.pl>). However, also in this case, some situations occurred in the considered period, when the status of particular reports had not been updated for several months and even years. In spite of these limitations, the abovementioned platform is immensely popular among the residents of Lublin. They have used it to raise over 12 thousand issues over the last four years. Almost three-fourths of those problems have been marked by the website administrator as “solved”.

The abovementioned communication mechanisms may seem unimportant from the perspective of the development of local civil dialogue as they generally pertain to smaller issues like illegal waste dump or damaged sidewalk. Nonetheless, the fact that a vast majority of provincial capitals resigned from implementing systems allowing residents to report current problems and obtain feedback concerning these issues significantly reduces the credibility of LSG units as institutions open to the postulates and needs of the citizens. This situation may disincline members of the local community to get involved in more complex forms of civil dialogue, including public consultations.

Furthermore, the way in which the information concerning consultations is presented on the municipal portals also does not encourage residents to engage in this kind of activity. Over one-fourth of the provincial capitals do not publish on the homepages of their portals direct links to the websites devoted to civil dialogue. The access to the information on public consultations is also hampered by the fact that it is presented in a dispersed way, in various sections of municipal portals, as well as on separate websites of different LSG institutions. This problem can be illustrated by the example of the portal devoted to civil dialogue in Gdańsk (<http://gdansk.pl/dialog-obywatelski>), which does not provide the list of public consultations carried out by the city authorities. In consequence, the residents interested in this form of participation in the local public life are obliged to follow all the news published on the main portal of the city, in the public information bulletin and on the websites of particular municipal institutions. Another problem is the fact that the details concerning particular consultations are not presented on the websites managed by LSG units in a user-friendly way. An extreme example of this phenomenon is the portal of Łódź (<http://uml.lodz.pl/konsultacjespoleczne>), where the publication of the information on the scope and form of particular public consultations is limited to posting links to the PDF files containing the official decrees of the city mayor.

The analysis also showed that provincial capitals do not use Internet media to broaden the residents' knowledge on available forms of participation in the process of governing their communities. Only every fourth city publishes materials explaining basic rules and mechanisms of public consultations and other forms of civil dialogue on municipal website. A more common practice is to make it possible for citizens to take

part in consultations via the Internet. Communication tools most frequently used for this purpose by the provincial capitals include online questionnaires (83% of analyzed cities), polls (61%) and e-forms (33%). At the same time, it should be noted that the majority of analyzed cities still refer to solutions which unnecessarily complicate participation in public consultations via the Internet. In more than half of the provincial capitals, e-participation in certain consultations, covered by the analysis, required downloading, completing and printing the form, and later signing and sending its scanned copy via email. In Katowice and Gdańsk, qualified electronic signature or verified account on a public administration platform were required to participate in some consultations carried out in the considered period.

The analysis of the catalogue of online tools utilized by LSG units while conducting public consultations leads to the conclusion that the most frequently adopted mechanisms are those, which enable only the following communication scheme: problem raised by officials – residents' opinions – final report and/or position of the authorities. Such solutions not only exclude the in-depth dialogue between policymakers and citizens but also deprive residents of a chance to respond to the opinions of other members of the local community. Only one-third of the provincial capitals encourage residents to publicly express their opinions and ideas by posting comments on the e-consultation platform or its Facebook fan page. It has to be noted, however, that this kind of activity is often treated as an event accompanying the consultations but not as an integral part of this process. The good example of this situation are consultations launched at the beginning of 2017, concerning the adaptation of the network of schools in Łódź to the new, nationwide educational system. During these consultations, the discussion threads were initiated on the online forum run by local authorities, which resulted in the publication of over 1.5 thousand comments. The official report on consultations, however, merely noted the fact that such a platform was used, ignoring the opinions and ideas of the residents expressed on that forum (see *Urząd Miasta Łodzi*, 2017, pp. 2-3).

The conducted study also proved that the online media are not used by the provincial capitals to expand the social range of the traditional forms of civil dialogue such as public debates or workshops. The residents have no possibility to participate remotely in the abovementioned events, and they are not broadcasted online. It is not even a common practice to provide Internet users an access to the recordings or protocols of such meetings. The issues raised during these gatherings are often presented only in evaluation reports on the public consultations, and therefore they cannot have an influence upon the residents' opinions.

One of the few positive examples of using ICT for supporting the process of the consultations based on direct meetings with residents is the citizen panel organized in 2016 in Gdańsk, referring to the protection of the city in case of heavy rainstorm. The project's website (<http://gdansk.pl/panel-obywatelski>) provided then the knowledge base containing the information regarding both the mechanism of the citizen panel itself and the subject of its first edition. All meetings organized within the framework of that panel

were broadcasted online, and the recordings of the experts' speeches as well as their presentations were also published on the website.

While the citizen panel in Gdańsk was the first attempt in Poland to use such a form of public consultations, all the provincial capitals have already implemented the participatory budgeting (hereinafter: PB). The significant merit of such a mechanism is the fact that it involves citizens at an early stage of the decision-making process since they can submit their own proposals of budgetary tasks. Moreover, the results of the residents' voting on the aforementioned projects are usually respected by the local authorities, which gives the citizens the feeling that they have a real influence on the functioning of their community. The abovementioned factors result in the fact that in Poland the successive editions of the PB raise interest of a significantly greater number of citizens than other local public consultations. This regularity may be illustrated by the example of Łódź where in 2016 nearly 150 thousand residents took part in the PB voting (Urząd Miasta Łodzi, 2016b, p. 433). In the same year, only 86 people participated in public consultations concerning the overall budget of Łódź (Urząd Miasta Łodzi, 2016c, p. 1).

Taking into account the aforementioned premises, the limited use of ICT by the provincial capitals for stimulating civil dialogue in the process of PB, seems rather surprising. While all of the analyzed cities allow the citizens to vote online, only in nearly three-fourths of them the procedure of submitting a project may be fully executed via the Internet. Only every sixth city included in the study does not demand sending scanned documents at this stage of the proceeding. The complicated procedure of forwarding proposals of budgetary tasks is accompanied by the fact that the descriptions of the particular projects are not presented on the websites in a user-friendly way. In more than half of the analyzed cities, such data are published in the form of separate files, while every third provincial capital posts online scanned copies of the paper documents. Obstacles in the access to information also occur as far as reporting on the implementation of the winning projects is concerned. Every third provincial capital does not provide such information on the websites devoted to the PB. Only half of the analyzed cities present data concerning the current status of all the projects. The remaining provincial capitals publish online a list of the completed projects or articles referring only to the selected investments.

From the point of view of the development of local civil dialogue, particularly relevant problem is the fact that the budgetary tasks do not become a subject of a wider public debate carried out with the use of ICT. Only 4 out of 18 analyzed cities have adopted online mechanisms allowing residents to respond to proposals submitted by other members of the local community. In Kraków, Bydgoszcz and Wrocław, citizens have a possibility to post comments under the descriptions of particular projects. In case of Warsaw, once the budgetary proposal has been sent via online application, the discussion thread is automatically initiated on the Internet forum (<http://app.twojbudzet.um.warszawa.pl/forum>). It has to be noted, however, that it does not offer many functionalities typical for this kind of platform, such as search tools or a

possibility to browse the profiles of the users. A more common practice is to consult the general rules of the PB with Internet users - such actions are taken in 60% of the provincial capitals. In this respect, the online surveys with the purpose of evaluating particular editions of the PB, are among the most frequent. Nevertheless, in none of the analyzed cities the principles of the PB have become a subject of a wider online debate between residents and local policymakers, devoted to the development of this form of citizen participation in local public life.

This situation can be perceived as a part of a broader problem. The vast majority of the analyzed cities have not even made an attempt at using ICT to establish a platform enabling a permanent, bilateral exchange of ideas and opinions between citizens and local authorities, concerning the functioning of their community. This function is not fulfilled by chats with local officials organized in nearly half of the analyzed cities, since they are hosted quite irregularly. Their effectiveness as instruments of the local civil dialogue is additionally limited by the fact that they do not allow for communication interactions between residents, and the content of the conversation itself is not registered on the municipal portals. Such limitations also occur while conducting a dialogue with residents on the basis of a contact form mechanism. This fact can be illustrated with the example of the Lublin-based website *Social Dialogue Box* (<http://dialog.lublin.eu>). It makes it possible to send to the mayor inquiries, comments and opinions concerning the functioning of the city. It has to be noted that both the issues raised by residents, and the responses they receive are not available to the public. A different solution was implemented on the Wrocław-based platform for civil dialogue, which allows citizens to forward e-petitions (<http://wroclaw.pl/petycje>). In this case, both the content of all petitions addressed to the local authorities and the responses of their representatives are presented on the website. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of this tool is significantly reduced by a complicated procedure of submitting a petition. Citizens are supposed to download, complete and print the form, sign it and then send its scanned copy via online contact form. It has to be noted, however, that pursuant to the Polish *Act of 11 July 2014 on Petitions*, in case of petitions sent via the means of digital communication, it is sufficient to indicate the entity submitting the petition, and provide its email address.

Every fourth provincial capital operates a discussion forum aimed at stimulating a dialogue with residents. Both, from the point of view of the number of active participants, and the number of published comments, they are inferior not only to the forums functioning on the commercial local news portals, but also to some communication platforms managed by local NGOs and informal social movements. A good example here is the Kraków-based *Social Dialogue Forum* ([http://dialogspoleczny.krakow.pl/Strona\\_główna/Forum](http://dialogspoleczny.krakow.pl/Strona_główna/Forum)), on which over 900 entries have been published. In comparison, the users of the *Kraków Communication Platform* (<http://pkk.info.pl>), run by a group of residents interested in the municipal transportation system, posted over 1.5 thousand of comments during only one discussion devoted to the plans concerning the construction of the subway system in the city.

It also has to be underlined that the discussions on the forums operated by the local authorities are often dominated to a great extent by their representatives and the narrow circle of the local activists and members of the NGOs. This phenomenon can be illustrated by the example of the *Katowice Platform for Public Consultations* (<http://pks.katowice.eu>). From among nearly 6.5 thousand entries published on this forum, 42% were posted by its administrators and the representatives of the LSG institutions. As far as the opinions of residents are concerned, one-third of all comments from the forum were posted by five of its most active users.

One of the reasons for the limited social range of the forums run by the LSG units is almost a total lack of promotion of these services. From among five provincial capitals operating discussion forums, only Poznań informs about this fact on the homepage of its portal. The additional factors, which discourage potential interlocutors, include a complicated procedure of registration, delayed publication of comments and unjustified narrowing of the topical scope of the debate. The latter problem is reflected by the example of the forum managed by the authorities of Łódź (<http://forum.samorzad.lodz.pl>), the activity of which has been limited by the website administrators to the topics and periods of formal public consultations launched by the city mayor.

The growing popularity of social media in Poland encourages the LSG institutions to make attempts at using them as platforms for debates with residents.<sup>2</sup> In the considered period, such a situation occurred, for instance, in Gorzów Wielkopolski, where in 2016, during the works on the Local Landscape Decree, a discussion forum was launched, which functioned as an event on Facebook (<http://facebook.com/events/1876747902559446>). A similar solution was also adopted by the authorities of Łódź. In the course of the public consultations on a new model of local public transport, they asked residents to share their opinions on the Facebook group "Łódź Connects" (<http://facebook.com/groups/1521145454874046>). During four months of the consultations, 579 people joined the group and they published 150 posts and 736 comments (Urząd Miasta Łodzi, 2016a, p. 234).

While using the social media facilitates the inclusion of a wider group of residents into the local civil dialogue, the specific nature of this kind of communication platforms does not favor the in-depth analysis of the discussed public problems. In this context, such issues like limited possibilities to structuralize discussion, difficulties in the access to archival comments or the limited functionality of the offered search tools are of a great importance. It also has to be noted that - despite the fact that the local authorities more and more frequently encourage citizens to participate in the discussions conducted via social media - they still have significant problems with analyzing the information received in this way. To illustrate this phenomenon, it is worthwhile referring again to the

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<sup>2</sup> In 2015, every third Pole aged 16 and more utilized the social media at least once a week (Batorski, 2015, p. 387). In comparison, the use of discussion groups or forums with the same regularity was declared by 14% of respondents. The same percentage of those surveyed declared acquiring information from the websites of public institutions at least once a week.

Facebook group “Łódź Connects”. The official report on the public consultations included only the quantitative data concerning the activity of the aforementioned group while the opinions forwarded by its members were omitted (see Urząd Miasta Łodzi, 2016a, p. 234).

Another problem are the cases, when possessing an account on a community portal becomes an indispensable requirement in order to participate in the discussions initiated by the local authorities. In the considered period, such a situation occurred, for instance, at the beginning of 2014, when the Wrocław municipality introduced an option to comment the content of its portal, albeit limiting it to the users registered on Facebook (Nowaczyk, 2014). This solution was criticized by some of the residents who pointed that the citizens wishing to share their opinions concerning the functioning of the city should not be obliged by a public institution to register on the particular commercial portal (see Kromolowski, 2014).

## 5. Conclusions

The analysis of the content of Internet media managed by the provincial capitals in Poland shows that the extent to which they use ICT for stimulating local civil dialogue is very limited. Over 80% of the aforementioned cities have not implemented an integrated online system, which would allow residents to report current local problems and obtain feedback concerning these issues. The fact that a vast majority of provincial capitals resigned from using a mechanism, which could make residents feel that they have a real influence on what their nearest social environment looks like, might discourage citizens from getting involved in more complex forms of civil dialogue, including public consultations. The analysis of online tools utilized by LSG units while conducting public consultations indicated, in turn, that the most frequently adopted mechanisms are those, which enable only the following communication scheme: problem raised by officials – residents’ opinions – final report and/or position of the authorities. Such solutions not only exclude the in-depth dialogue between authorities and citizens but also deprive residents of a chance to respond to ideas and opinions of other members of the local community. An analogous situation also occurs during participatory budgeting, the formula of which includes the involvement of citizens at an early stage of a decision-making process. While residents of almost three-fourths of the analyzed cities can submit proposals of budgetary tasks via the Internet, only every fourth provincial capital uses online tools allowing residents to comment on the aforementioned projects.

This situation can be perceived as a part of a broader problem – the vast majority of the analyzed cities have not even made an attempt at using ICT to establish a platform enabling a permanent, bilateral exchange of ideas and opinions between residents and local policymakers, concerning the functioning of their community. The authorities’ lack of interest in a more extensive use of ICT in the abovementioned sphere of local civil dialogue seems hard to understand in the light of the current studies on the potential of

online media as platforms for citizen deliberation. They have proved that in case of Poland, online discussions concerning local public issues are significantly more rational and interactive than debates devoted to the nationwide problems (Parnes, 2016, pp. 94-97).

Undoubtedly, an evaluation of the role of ICT in the process of two-way communication between local authorities and citizens in Poland requires further studies covering various types of LSG units and applying quantitative methods more extensively. Also the impact of the local civil dialogue conducted via online media on the concrete activities and decisions undertaken by local authorities should be considered in the analysis. It has to be underlined, that regardless of the kind of communication tools used by a particular LSG unit, the basic factor which determines their effectiveness as instruments for civil dialogue remains the real – and not only declared – readiness of local authorities to adopt postulates and opinions presented by residents. This conclusion can be illustrated with the example of the *Warsaw Platform for Public Consultations* (<http://konsultacje.um.warszawa.pl>). This portal presents both legal regulations concerning public consultations and details of the issues which are currently being considered. The platform uses different mechanisms including e-forms, online questionnaires, interactive maps, discussion forums and online polls. The latter instrument was used in 2011 during the public consultations concerning the name of a new bridge. Seven thousand of Warsaw residents took part in online voting and 80% voted for “The Northern Bridge” (Urząd Miasta Stołecznego Warszawy, 2011). The members of the City Council, however, ignored this result and dubbed the bridge “Maria Skłodowska-Curie Bridge”.

This case reflects a broader problem of tokenistic character of many civil dialogue processes conducted by the local authorities. They too frequently perceive online debates and e-consultations not so much as an instrument for real inclusion of residents into the process of governing their community but as a chance to promote the LSG unit as a modern institution, open for dialogue with citizens. In effect, municipal officials, on the one hand, encourage Internet users to present their opinions and submit their postulates concerning the local community, while on the other hand, they ignore the issues raised by residents.

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