

Public Participation in Polish Municipalities in 2020-2022 Period

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Abstract: The article compares three similar forms of public participation for residents of municipalities in Poland – civic budgets, village funds and local initiatives. The study covered the use of these tools by all Polish municipalities in 2020-2022. The analysis showed that about 70% of all municipalities use at least one of the analyzed forms of public participation. As noted, the village fund dominates among them, which is due to the structure of the types of municipalities in Poland. For urban and urban-rural municipalities, interest in using other forms of public participation is lower. A negative surprise is the very limited use of local initiatives which, unlike the other two forms, are characterized by a very simplified procedure and do not require the involvement of a large part of the local community.

Keywords: public participation; participatory budget; village fund

JEL Classification: H72; O18; O30

1. Introduction

The search for a way to better tailor public services to the needs reported by citizens is one of the most significant challenges facing modern public administration. One of the solutions advocated, and eagerly implemented, is the active involvement of citizens in decision-making processes. The very concept of citizen participation is not new, as already in the second half of the 20th century there were considerations of the importance of public participation in the functioning of the state (Milbrath, 1981; Verba et al., 1987; Wengert, 1976). It should be noted that the very concept of public participation is not unambiguous – "public participation is an umbrella term that describes the activities by which people's concerns, needs, interests, and values are incorporated into decisions and actions on public matters and issues" (Nabatchi & Leighninger, 2015).

At the same time, a discussion of desirable forms of participation has been undertaken in the literature, referring to the actual influence of individual citizens on the decisions of those in power. Arnstein (1969), Verba-Nie-Kim (1987) or Connor (1988) models pointed to the relationship between the form of the participation process used and the actual decision-making of citizens. This discussion, which continued in subsequent years, led to the conviction that the desirable form of participation is one where "the goal is for citizens to have an active role in decisions and not just be passive 'consumers' of government services." (Ebdon, 2002). It is

worth mentioning that Rowe and Frewer (2005) narrowed the concept of public participation by separating it from public communication and public consultation. These three concepts were differentiated according to the nature and flow of information between exercise sponsors and participants constituting together in their approach the category of public engagement. The main argument here was the aforementioned tidal influence on the decisions of those in power – referred to as the effectiveness of participation practices.

Fung (2006), on the other hand, points out that public participation mechanisms differ in the types of participants, the mode of communication between participants, and the influence of participants on public policy or action. In his view, these three dimensions form a space ("democracy cube") in which any particular participation mechanism can be located. One combination identified by Fung is one in which the main decision-making actors are citizens who have open access to participate in the process, make decisions through deliberation or negotiation processes, and have direct authority over public decisions or resources. The aforementioned features are characteristic of participatory budgeting processes in the broadest sense. In Poland we can point at civic (participatory) budget, village fund and local initiative.

The purpose of this article is to present and analyze the scale of operation in Polish municipalities of selected forms of public participation in Poland that meet the indicated combination of characteristics. It should be stipulated that the analysis will be subjected only to formalized on the basis of the provisions of national law solutions that can be commonly used in Polish municipalities. The article poses five research questions.

RQ1 What differences and similarities characterize the three forms of public participation selected for analysis?

RQ2 What is the scale of use of each tool by municipal governments in Poland?

RQ3 Do municipal governments use several tools of public participation in parallel?

RQ4 Are there differences between different types of municipalities in the use of individual participation tools (taking into account the specifics of the village council fund)?

RQ5 What is the territorial variation in this use?

It is important to note that this article is the first, in the existing literature, attempt at a comparative analysis of the extent of use in municipalities of these solutions covering all municipal governments in Poland. This is made possible by using reporting data on municipalities' interaction with residents from 2020-2022 made available by the Central Statistical Office.

2. Methodology

The article uses an analysis of the literature on theoretical and practical forms of public participation, an analysis of legal rules regulating the functioning of public participation of residents in the activities of municipal governments in Poland, and an analysis of statistical data on the scale and forms of public participation.

The data used came from the Central Statistical Office's survey SG-01 "Municipality statistics: interaction with residents" made available in the CSO's Local Data Bank database, from reports on the implementation of municipal budgets made available in the CSO's Local Data Bank and databases of the Ministry of Finance.

The study covered all municipal governments in Poland for the period 2020-2022. 19 districts of the city of Warsaw were also included in the analysis due to their analogous way of functioning in the area of public participation to urban municipalities.

Due to the limited availability of financial data, a detailed analysis of the direction of spending under the various tools of public participation was not carried out.

The study analyzed:

- The scale of use of individual public participation tools in Polish municipalities.
- Their co-occurrence within individual municipalities.
- The diversity of their use by type of municipality (urban, rural, urban-rural).
- The territorial distribution of units using these tools.

3. Results

3.1. Literature and Regulations Analysis

Poland is one of the few countries in the world where there are legal regulations at the national level that normalize the possibility and ways of using public participation in the management of local government units (Dias, 2018).

In practice, Polish municipalities have at their disposal a wide range of tools for including residents in decision-making processes. According to the theoretical concepts of public participation cited earlier, municipalities can both use tools with little influence on the decisions of those in power (e.g., sharing information, meetings with residents, educational and informational activities) and tools with greater influence (part of public consultations); tools involving selected groups of citizens or individuals (e.g., representatives of residents appointed to advisory organizations) and a larger part or the whole community (e.g., participatory budgets). Importantly, these tools can also be characterized by varying degrees of deliberation and negotiation opportunities - from public hearings to local initiatives.

Poland's basic legal regulations are primarily concerned with enabling municipalities to implement consultation processes. The essence of consultation processes is to seek opinions from municipal residents who do not have expertise in a given area, but who have a certain opinion on the subject of the consultation due to their direct involvement in the matter. These consultations can take a variety of forms - from meetings with councilors, through surveys to participatory budget type processes. Regulations on the possibility of involving residents in the municipal management process are also included in other laws. They concern, among other things, the possibility of creating a village fund, as a specific form of participatory budgeting for small rural communities, and the possibility of implementing a local initiative as a form of joint implementation of a public task for the benefit of the local community.

The three forms mentioned – civic budget, village fund and local initiative – are significantly different from the others at the disposal of municipal authorities. First, all willing residents can participate in them. Secondly, their consequence is the (in principle obligatory) implementation of a selected project/activity relevant to the local community. Thirdly, they are based on processes of deliberation and negotiation between residents in which the final shape of the selected project depends on residents' preferences. Thus, as noted

in the introduction, the municipalities' use of these three forms of public participation will be the subject of further analysis.

Civic (participatory) budget

Regulations devoted to civic budgets were introduced in 2018 (Olejniczak & Bednarska-Olejniczak, 2021). They concern the basic principles of the operation of this form of direct democracy, and the competence for detailed solutions was left to municipal authorities. The establishment of a civic budget in a given municipality is not mandatory. It depends on the decision of the authorities of a given municipality. However, in the case of large municipalities (cities with county rights), the establishment of a civic budget is mandatory. In addition, the law sets a minimum level of funds in the civic budgets of such cities. Within the framework of the civic budget, residents decide annually by direct vote on a portion of the municipality's budget expenditures. In accordance with the Law, the tasks selected under the civic budget are included in the municipal budget resolution. Thus, the municipal council, in the course of drafting the budget resolution, may not remove or significantly change the selected tasks. The legislator provided for the possibility of dividing the funds of the civic budget into pools covering the whole municipality and its parts in the form of auxiliary units or groups of auxiliary units. It is left to the discretion of municipal authorities to determine the requirements to be met by the civic budget project, in particular: the formal requirements to be met by submitted projects; the required number of signatures of residents supporting the project; the rules for evaluating submitted projects as to their legality, technical feasibility, their compliance with formal requirements, and the procedure for appealing against a decision not to allow a project to be voted on; the rules for conducting voting, determining the results and making them public, taking into account that the voting rules must ensure equality and directness of voting.

Village fund

Municipalities located in rural areas can establish "sołectwo" as auxiliary units (equivalents of, for example, neighborhoods or districts in cities). They usually cover the area of one or more villages. Their establishment is within the competence of the municipal council, and their goals, tasks and powers are defined in the statute of the sołectwo. The main purpose of the functioning of auxiliary units is to provide residents with the opportunity to influence the activities of the municipal authorities and to involve residents, non-governmental institutions and other entities in local affairs (Bednarska-Olejniczak et al., 2020). The municipal authorities may, in order to better implement the tasks of the sołectwo, create a village fund. This is a separate pool of funds in the municipal budget, which can be allocated for the implementation of projects indicated and selected by the residents of the village. This requires the fulfillment of three conditions: the project proposal submitted by residents must be the municipality's own task, it must contribute to improving the living conditions of residents, and it must be in line with the municipality's development strategy. These project proposals usually concern, among other things, the retrofitting or renovation

of village community centers, the development of green spaces, the construction and modernization of municipal roads and sidewalks, or the modernization of lighting.

Local initiative

The local initiative is a form of cooperation between local government units and their residents. It is aimed at joint implementation of a public task with the residents for the benefit of the local community (Gawłowski, 2018). It should be noted that it is "a form of cooperation between the municipality and residents based on their participation and involvement of their own forces and resources." In contrast to the first two tools, the legislator imposed on municipal authorities the obligation to regulate the principles of the local initiative, which makes the right to initiate cooperation belong to residents. Within the framework of a local initiative, residents both propose an idea for the implementation of a specific project and undertake to participate in its implementation. This participation may consist of community service, monetary or in-kind benefits.

In this case, even more strongly than in the case of village funds, involved residents are the initiators of activities and actually participate in the performance of public tasks. The subject of the application for a local initiative may be, for example, activities supporting the development of local communities and communities (e.g., construction, expansion or renovation of municipal infrastructure); charitable activities and, inter alia, maintaining and disseminating national tradition, cultivating Polishness; activities in the field of education, education and upbringing; activities in the field of supporting and disseminating physical culture and tourism and sightseeing; activities concerning ecology and animal protection and protection of natural heritage.

Comparison of civic budget, village fund and local initiative characteristics is encapsulated in Table 1.

Table 1. Comparison of civic budget, village fund and local initiative characteristics

	Civic Budget (B)	Village Fund (F)	Local Initiative (I)
Where?	All municipalities	Only municipalities with "solectwo"	All municipalities
Mandatory?	Partially (big cities)	No	Yes
Who decides to launch?	Municipal authorities	Municipal authorities when asked by residents	Residents
Main task area?	Pointed by the municipality authorities	Connected with upgrading local quality of life	Law regulated municipality tasks
Project proposal authors?	Residents	Residents	Residents
Limit of funds?	Only minimum in some cases	Law regulated (but not mandatory)	No
Project size?	dependent on municipal authorities	Small	Dependent on municipal authorities
Form of selection of the proposed projects?	Ballot	Deliberation and voting	Deliberation and contracting
Participation of residents in project implementation?	Usually not present	Possible	Mandatory

3.2. Data Analysis

All municipal governments in Poland (2,496) were analyzed, including also 19 districts of the capital city of Warsaw (functioning in a manner similar to municipalities in the implementation of local initiatives and civic budget).

It is important to note that while the civic budget and local initiative can be implemented by all surveyed entities, the village fund can only be implemented in those municipalities that have separate auxiliary units in the form of sołectos. In Poland in 2020-2022 there were 2,173 of them (including 11 cities). This means that civic budgets were implemented in about 13-14% of the units, local initiatives in about 9% of the units, and village funds in about 50% of the municipalities (see Table 2).

Table 2. Scale of use of selected forms of public participation in municipalities in 2020-2022

	2020	2021	2022
Civic budget	340	319	359
Village fund	1,551	1,494	1,472
Local initiative	227	205	205

Of course, it should not be forgotten that individual solutions can occur simultaneously within a single local government unit. Table 3 presents detailed data on the co-occurrence of individual public participation tools in Polish municipalities.

Table 3. Scale of use of combinations of selected forms of public participation in municipalities in 2020-2022.

	2020	2021	2022
Only civic budget (B)	151	147	156
Civic budget and local initiative (BI)	69	60	77
Only village fund (F)	1,330	1,298	1,266
Village fund and civic budget (FB)	101	94	109
Village fund, civic budget and local initiative (FBI)	19	18	17
Village fund and local initiative (FI)	101	84	80
Only local initiative (I)	38	43	31
None of them	687	752	760

As can be seen, about 30% of municipalities in Poland do not use any of the previously mentioned tools in their activities. On the other hand, about 1.3% of the surveyed municipalities (32) used all three forms at least once during the period under review. Among them were three urban municipalities with separate sołectwos as auxiliary units. The vast majority of municipalities use only one of the public participation tools in question, with the village fund dominating due to the number of municipalities located in rural areas. Interestingly, about 1.5% of municipalities use only the local initiative.

Tables 4-6 present detailed data on the use of various forms of public participation in 2020-2022 in urban, rural, urban-rural municipalities and districts of the city of Warsaw. Differences between different types of local government units are evident here.

In the case of urban municipalities, about 60% of them use at least one of the forms of participation discussed, with about 65% of them using only participatory budgeting. In addition, about 20% of these municipalities use participatory budgeting and local initiative.

In the case of rural municipalities, between 65% and 70% annually involve residents in the public participation processes studied. As it was mentioned earlier, the vast majority (about 90%) here is made up only of village funds.

An interesting situation can be observed in the case of urban-rural municipalities. This is the group of municipalities in which various forms of public participation are most often used. At least one of the surveyed tools was used annually by more than 80% of them. Due to their specifics, more than 65% of these municipalities used only village funds and a further several percent used village funds and participatory budgeting.

Table 4. Scale of use of selected forms of public participation in municipalities in 2020

Municipality	F	FB	FI	FBI	B	BI	I
Urban	3	2	0	2	124	31	12
Rural	935	9	73	1	7	2	20
Urban-rural	392	90	28	16	15	2	6
Warsaw districts	0	0	0	0	5	14	0

Table 5. Scale of use of selected forms of public participation in municipalities in 2021

Municipality	F	FB	FI	FBI	B	BI	I
Urban	3	3	0	2	115	35	10
Rural	889	12	58	2	8	0	29
Urban-rural	406	79	26	14	9	2	4
Warsaw districts	0	0	0	0	5	13	0

Table 6. Scale of use of selected forms of public participation in municipalities in 2022

Municipality	F	FB	FI	FBI	B	BI	I
Urban	3	5	0	2	130	38	7
Rural	872	12	57	2	9	0	20
Urban-rural	391	92	23	13	11	6	4
Warsaw districts	0	0	0	0	6	13	0

Figures 1-3 show the spatial distribution of municipalities using each form of public participation. As can be seen, there are clusters of municipalities throughout the country that have not introduced any of the three solutions (gray). The distribution of municipalities using village funds appears to be even across the country. As can be seen, participatory budgets are mainly found in the western part of the country, which is mainly due to the concentration of urban centers in these areas. Local initiative, on the other hand, is used mainly in the provinces of southwestern Poland, central Poland and Pomerania. Concentrations of municipalities using this solution are evident.

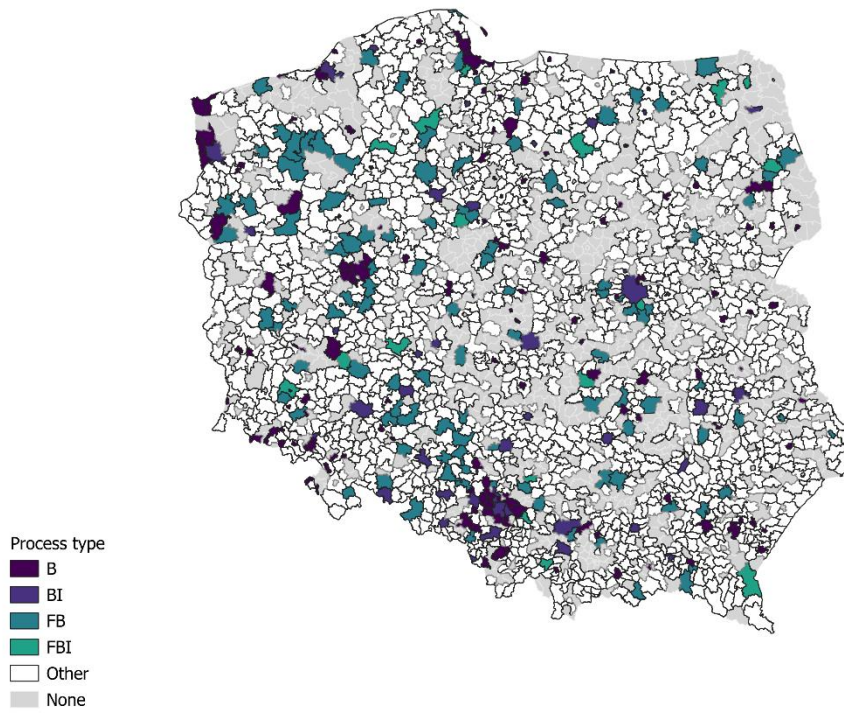


Figure 1. Territorial distribution of processes with civic budget

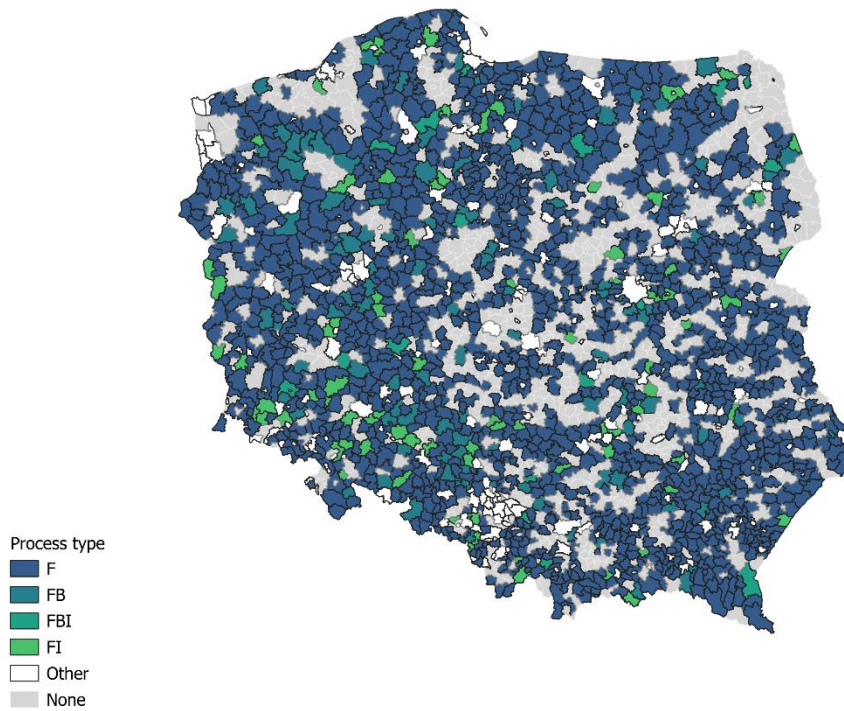


Figure 2. Territorial distribution of processes with village fund

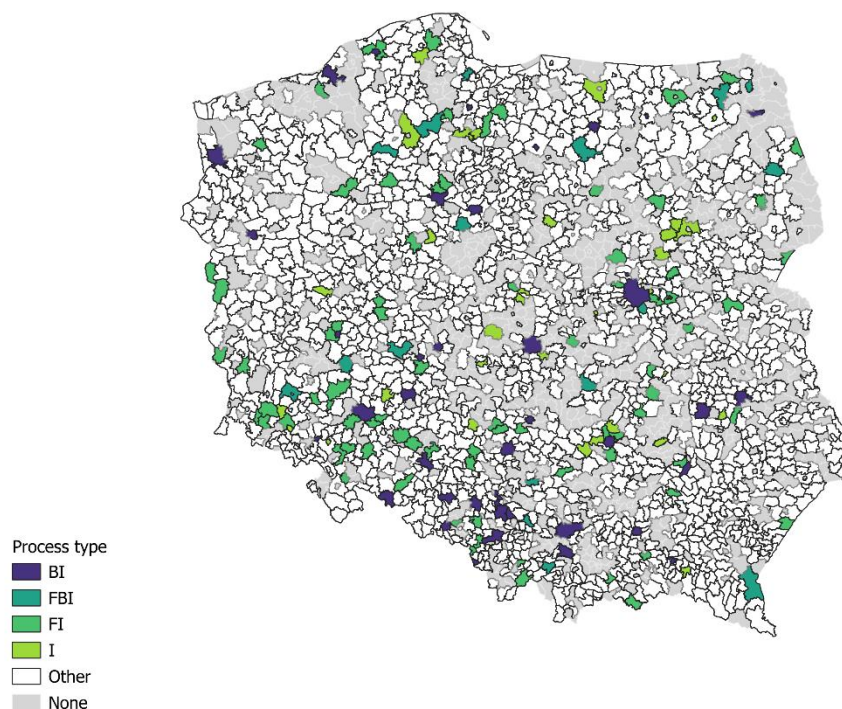


Figure 3. Territorial distribution of processes with local initiative

4. Discussion

Comparing the studied public participation tools, it is important to note their complementarity (RQ1). While participatory budgets are aimed at large communities in which individuals play leadership roles, and residents' involvement in participation revolves around the process of preparing a project proposal and voting, village council funds are aimed at small local communities that are also able to participate in project implementation. On the other hand, at the opposite end to participatory budgets are local initiatives, in which small groups of residents take responsibility for the entire process from design to implementation. Thus, thanks to this differentiation, it is possible to activate different groups of residents, which is what some local governments are doing in practice.

In the years under study, a gradual decrease in the percentage of municipalities using the surveyed public participation tools is visible, from 71% to 69% of all municipalities in Poland (RQ2). Undoubtedly, such changes were influenced by the crises recorded during this period, as they negatively affected the finances of municipalities. In the analyses presented, it is evident, despite the widespread use of participatory budgets, that rural and urban-rural municipalities mainly use village funds (RQ2). This situation may be due to a better "fit" of village funds to the needs of small rural communities. A dozen or so auxiliary units in a rural municipality (*sołectwo*) may have such a variety of needs that the logical solution to meet them all is a village fund.

In the case of urban-rural municipalities, it turns out that the village fund for the rural area of the municipality occurs far more often than the participatory budget. The reason for

this may be the decidedly weaker availability of public services in rural areas, which may lead to a desire to "compensate" for these inconveniences with investments from the village fund (RQ2). Due to the fact that the urban area in urban-rural municipalities cannot be covered by the village fund, a number of municipalities decide (about 20% of the total) to introduce a participatory budget as a supplement to the participation mechanism (RQ3).

Importantly, it usually applies to the entire area of the municipality - including the areas covered by the village fund. In practice, it is possible to introduce solutions similar to village funds for auxiliary units of the municipality located in an urban area, which can replace the participatory budget. Unfortunately, data on the implementation of such solutions nationwide is not currently available.

A big negative surprise, however, may be the relatively low popularity of participatory budgets in urban municipalities (RQ2). Previous studies have indicated that cities are usually characterized by a high potential for introducing such solutions. This potential is due to the existence of strong pressure from residents to implement such solutions, a high level of social capital and the willingness of cities to introduce good governance practices.

Changes in the number of municipalities implementing participatory budgets in 2020-2022 may also be a consequence of the crises occurring during this period. However, the increase in the number of municipalities in 2022 using participatory budgets indicates that there is no reduction in the implementation of this form of public participation, unlike village funds.

The least used public participation tool turns out to be the local initiative (RQ2, RQ4). This is a significant surprise, because despite the very low formalization, high flexibility of the process, and the lack of need for significant involvement on the part of the municipal administration, residents of most municipalities do not use this solution. It should be noted that this is usually a complementary tool to one of the above (RQ3). In local governments using this tool, more than 70% of municipalities introduce other public participation tools in parallel (RQ4).

The problem here may be, on the one hand, the lack of knowledge about the possibility of using the local initiative and the need for residents to engage their own forces, time and resources. However, bearing in mind the strongly developed structure of non-governmental organizations in Poland, and thus of people active in various areas of social life, it can be expected that this form will be used to a greater extent in the future.

The territorial distribution of the use of particular forms of public participation depends largely on the specifics of the region. The use of village funds is widespread nationwide (RQ5). Participatory budgets, on the other hand, are introduced most often in the western part of the country, which is mainly due to the concentration of urban centers in these areas (RQ5). Local initiative is used mainly in the provinces of southwestern Poland, central Poland and Pomerania. It should also be noted that the observed clusters of municipalities using the local initiative mechanism may be indicative of ongoing processes of "learning from others" new solutions. A similar process could be observed in the case of the spread of village funds.

5. Conclusions

Poland is one of the few countries with such broad statutory regulations on public participation processes. This should promote active use by citizens of the opportunities thus created. The analysis showed that about 70% of all municipalities use at least one of the analyzed forms of public participation. As noted, the village fund dominates among them, which is due to the structure of the types of municipalities in Poland. For urban and urban-rural municipalities, interest in using other forms of public participation is lower. A negative surprise is the very limited use of local initiatives which, unlike the other two forms, are characterized by a very simplified procedure and do not require the involvement of a large part of the local community.

It should be pointed out, of course, that due to the breadth of the problem and the partial lack of data, the article does not undertake an analysis of the direction of spending and the scale of spending on individual areas of municipal activity. This article can be a starting point for further discussion on the use of individual forms of public participation both in Poland and in other countries that would like to model themselves on Polish solutions.

Conflict of interest: none.

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