

Mixed responses: Councillors' attitudes towards citizens' participation

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, many European local governments have taken actions to expand citizens' say in the decision-making process. This practice, however, often challenges the traditional operation of local authorities, including the role of elected politicians. In this article, we explore the coexistence of representative and participative frameworks in different contexts. Our research question is whether the context – particularly different governing systems – has an impact on adoption of democratic innovations. For this purpose, we investigate the attitude of councillors from four European municipalities towards non-electoral forms of citizens' participation. The examined municipalities represent different governing traditions and models as well as have various participative agendas. The research results point to a connection between the governing model and the councillors' attitude towards non-electoral framework. But although politicians understood the role of non-electoral framework differently, they encountered very similar problems related to its operation.

Key words: representation, participation, local government, England, Finland, Poland, Slovenia

Introduction and research aim

Citizen participation is a key prerequisite for a well-functioning democracy. Therefore, many countries as well as international organisations, such as the EU and OECD, are looking for innovations to expand participation (OECD, 2017). The insufficient involvement of citizens into societal decision-making was noticed and criticised decades ago (Arnstein, 1969; Pateman, 1970). Nevertheless, before the “governance era”, a new participatory framework was applied to only a minor extent at the local level. At present, a growing awareness of the need for civic engagement and inclusive governance is visible both in old and newer democracies (Loughlin, Hendriks and Lidström, 2012).

There are various forms and understandings of participation. Some definitions pay attention to the selection of governmental personnel and/or the actions they take (Verba, Nie, 1987:2), while others focus on more direct formulation, preparation or implementation of collective decisions. Originally, in ancient Greek city-states and the Republic of Rome, the decision-making power was in the hands of citizens, however, the number of people who had genuine say was limited. Then, the decision-making power was bestowed upon elected representatives. Recently, representative democracy has been criticised for a variety of reasons, including unresponsiveness and elitism. Numerous local governments have recognised that more direct citizens' engagement into political decision-making is needed. In some of them the process was additionally supported by the shift from government and governance (Rhodes, 1997).

Scholars and practitioners give numerous arguments for deeper and more direct citizens' involvement into the decision-making process (Michels, de Graaf, 2010; Bun Ku, Yuen-Tsang, 2011; Radzik-Maruszak, Mieczkowska-Czerniak, 2013). Participation *inter alia* educates citizens, enlarges their view of issues, and broadens the discussion at large. It also has a positive impact on the transparency of policy-making. At the same time, participative actions do not, however, always resonate smoothly with representative democracy and the way elected politicians operate. The "standard-account" of representative democracy is influenced in at least two ways. Firstly, new actors and stakeholders that emerged in local arenas make representative claims and try to serve representative functions beyond democratically elected representatives. And secondly, traditional instruments are supplemented by non-electoral tools based on direct democracy, participative and deliberative solutions as well as on democratic innovations (Smith, 2005; Smith, 2009; Sørensen, Torfing, 2011; Hartley, Torfing 2016). As a result, as Urbinati and Warren indicate, the landscape of democratic representation has been clouded by the growing complexity of issues, which increasingly strains the power of representative agents, and their capacities to stand for and act in the interests of those they represent (Urbinati and Warren, 2008:390; Hendriks, 2009; Pitkin, 1967).

Experiments with democratic innovations are particularly evident at the local level as self-governments provide a perfect arena for testing new ideas and solutions. More innovative governing seems to be *en vogue* due to at least two reasons. On the one hand, it undoubtedly contributes to overcoming a malaise of representative democracy and to stimulating policy innovation. On the other hand, it encourages discourse and exchange of ideas between politicians and citizens, something that is frequently missing in representative regimes. At the same time, however, the coexistence of "traditional" electoral frameworks and more innovative ways of governing may create tensions and challenges.

This comparative article contributes to contemporary research on the way democratic innovations are met by local councillors. Our research question is "how does adoption of democratic innovations connect with councillors' views on non-electoral participation?" We are also particularly interested in finding out if different governing traditions and models affect councillors' views on non-electoral participation. To answer the research question, we have examined the attitudes of councillors from four European municipalities – Welwyn Hatfield (England), Tampere (Finland), Lublin (Poland), and Nova Gorica (Slovenia) – towards "traditional" non-electoral forms of participation, such as consultations, as well as democratic innovations, for example, participatory budgeting. The municipalities are located in local governments that are rooted in different traditions of public administration and belong to diverse local governing models (Loughlin, Hendriks and Lindström, 2012), which allows us to verify to what extent the settings matter. This can prove to be important, considering that so far there have been few analytical attempts to make similar comparisons.

The article proceeds as follows. In the first section, we briefly discuss the issues of representation and participation. We focus both on virtues and drawbacks of deeper, non-electoral citizens' involvement into the decision-making. Next, we provide description of our cases. Thereafter, we introduce the data and methodology of the research. In the following section, we present research results. The conclusion aptly summarises our research findings.

Theoretical claims about the contribution of representation and participation

In most Western countries, the establishment of elected parliaments was treated as a milestone in the development of modern governing. Indeed, presently there are more countries with representative democracy than ever before (Warren, 2002). From the practical perspective, representation means that certain groups of residents who live in territorially defined constituencies have an opportunity to authorize and hold representatives into account through elections (Rehfeld, 2005). Representative democracy is here associated with elected officials who make policies and public servants who implement them (Bevir, 2010:96). Despite being formalistic this type of policy-making has many unquestioned merits. It is universal and still relatively easy to understand and follow for the majority of people. Additionally, by applying the rule “one man, one vote” it guarantees formal equality. Through the mechanism of majority voting, representative democracy comprises also a widely accepted procedure for conflict resolution, and at the same time produces rather clear and determinate outcomes of the governing process. Finally, it assures accountability of power holders (Sørensen and Torfing, 2019).

At the same time, the idea of grounding the governing process solely on elected representation has considerable drawbacks (see Przeworski et. al., 1999; Mansbridge, 2003; Taylor, 2016). Urbinati indicates that popular sovereignty appears in representative democracy like a comet, at fixed and rare intervals of elections (2010:3). Some suggest that “the standard account” of representative democracy is not accurate any longer, because elected politicians are unable to solve many pressing – often wicked – problems afflicting contemporary society, connected *inter alia* with environmental protection or social inequalities (Rittel, Webber, 1974; Urbinati, Warren, 2008:390). Others notice the gap between citizens’ expectations and actions undertaken by elected representatives as well as the elitist twist of representation (Sartori, 1987; Rehfeld, 2005). Finally, it can be claimed that present-day policy-making, construed as a complex and permanent involvement of various private and public stakeholders, is simply a must. Therefore, the role of the citizen cannot be limited to passive voting (Jäske, 2018:10).

There are several strategies aimed at mitigating and overcoming the malaise of representative democracy. Some local governments have intended to link principles of representative and direct democracies. Therefore, although elections are perceived as a main channel for communicating views, specific – very important, difficult or controversial – decisions are undertaken through referenda. In some, a growing attention is drawn to participative and deliberative democracies and the possibilities they offer. The first, as Bevir indicates, *seeks to promote a form of self-determination or self-rule in which individuals actively make decisions that determine how they are to be governed* (2011:145). The latter argues that legitimate public decisions should depend less on voting and more on public dialogue, reasoning and deliberation (Bevir 2011:69; Habermas, 1984; Dryzek, 2012). Importantly, both – participative and deliberative – democracies are eager to incorporate democratic innovations (Smith 2005; Hartley, Torfing, 2016).

Whereas representative democracy is often criticised in the public discussion, deeper citizens’ involvement into decision-making process is cherished. Indeed, it is hard to find a policy document, politician or bureaucrat who speaks openly against wider participation. Deeper, non-electoral engagement certainly has many virtues. It provides a vehicle for

education and empowerment of the people (Fung, Wright 2003). This argument is important both in well-established democracies where citizens become passive or prefer the so-called “hidden democracy” (Hibbing, Theiss-Morse, 2002) as well as in countries under democratic transition where people search for a better model of civic influence. Participation can also contribute to breaking the monopoly of elitist institutions, building in the process shared values, mutual understanding, and common trust (Patemen, 1970; Bevir, 2011). These in turn support the process of civil society building, strengthen people’s ability to make choices, determine opportunities, and narrow the gap that has arisen between elected politicians and citizens (Bun Ku, Yuen-Tsang, 2011). Unquestionably, a wider engagement may also impact the efficiency and effectiveness of the governing process. The incorporation of citizens into policy-making at an early stage builds support for political decisions and at the same time expands the knowledge base of the given issue. Thus, in this context participation not only provides government with additional information and points of views but also helps to inform the public (Quick, Bryson, 2016). Finally, non-electoral participation fosters transparency of the decision-making process.

However, the widespread application of non-electoral forms of citizens’ involvement into decision-making process raises considerable doubts and poses serious questions. The first, very important, issue is linked to legitimacy. While in representative democracy legitimacy is achieved through the act of election, in a participatory and deliberative democracy the answer is not so simple. The second doubt concerns accountability. In this context, Damgaard and Lewis indicate that participatory governance makes citizens appear on both sides of the equation as holders and holdees of accountability (2014:262). Thirdly, what appears from the above, more interactive policy-making may substantially transform the roles traditionally attributed to politicians, local officials, and citizens. Torfing, Peters, Pierre, and Sørensen indicate that while politicians are supposed to metagovern, citizens should be responsible co-governors (2012:145-165; see Sweeting, Copus, 2013:123). This, however, opens further questions, for example, connected with residents’ knowledge and expertise. On the one hand, residents could be better experts than elected politicians and bureaucrats as they really experience the problem. Nevertheless, on the other hand, many issues are so complex and complicated that professional input seems to be a must. Moreover, as Quick and Bryson indicate, the lack of sufficient knowledge may provide a platform for NIMBY advocates who oppose more complicated policies and programs, *inter alia* those addressed to homeless or addicted citizens (2016:163). The next important uncertainty of non-electoral tools is connected with their vulnerability to manipulation. Arnstein (1969) already identified this phenomenon in the 1960s, however, her observations seem to be equally valid nowadays. It appears that many forms of involvement have a perfunctory and tokenistic character. Additionally, the experience of some local governments indicates that the new forms of participation have drawn attention of particular – often louder and concentrated on a single issue – groups, which again can give decision-making an elitist feature, opening in turn a discussion about diversity and inclusion (Quick, Bryson, 2016). Finally, whereas representative democracy is based on repeated, well-known procedures, many of the “new” participative and deliberative tools are less regular and thus provide less predictable outcomes.

Lastly, when discussing the issues of representation and participation, the importance of the particular context should be noticed. On the one hand, some researchers indicate that depending on governing traditions and models, the idea of participation and involvement can be understood differently (Denters, Rose, 2005; Radzik-Maruszak, Bátorová, 2015). On the other, the willingness and, consequently, the extent to what specific authorities decide to

implement innovative solutions may depend on the political culture of a given local government, its traditions, the socio-economic situation as well as citizens' attitude towards democratic innovations (Bokszczanin, 2014:37).

Methodology

To be able to answer the posed research question, we selected four local governments – English, Finnish, Polish, and Slovenian – that represent different administrative traditions and local government models, respectively Anglo-Saxon, Northern, and Central and Eastern European (Loughlin, Hendriks, and Lindström, 2012; Kuhlmann, Wollmann, 2014). The first two models are characteristic of the so-called old, mature democracies, whereas the Central and Eastern European model is present in countries that have undergone a democratic transformation. Our second criterion was to select municipalities or cities which have shown some interest in broadening their non-electoral participation, but which, at the same time, vary in their attitude towards “the size” of necessary democratic renewal. Third, we wanted to compare the attitude of elected politicians towards non-electoral framework in old, “mature” democracies and in the new ones that do not have such a long tradition of democratic governing. After careful document analysis and expert interviews, we selected Welwyn Hatfield in England, Tampere in Finland, Lublin in Poland, and Nova Gorica in Slovenia.

In the case cities, we altogether conducted 39 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with councillors. We chose elected politicians as informants because they are still considered to be the key decision-makers, responsible for the well-being of the whole municipality. Additionally, the broadening of the non-electoral framework may have significant impact on their work. The interviews were carried out in 2015-2018. The informants were selected based on the following criteria: 1) their experience (number of terms served as a councillor); 2) status and their role in the council (front-bencher vs. back-bencher councillor¹); 3) party affiliation. The most important criterion was the first one, as the longer experience enabled the councillors a better formulation of their view on citizens' activity (Table 1).

Table 1: Overview of data material

	Welwyn Hatfield	Tampere	Lublin	Nova Gorica
Total number of interviews conducted	9	12	10	8
Front-benchers	4	3	3	3
Back-benchers	5	9	7	5
Ruling party councillors	4	8	5	Not applicable
Opposition councillors	5	4	5	Not applicable

During all the interviews, we asked the same open-ended questions, sometimes slightly modified due to differences in the participatory framework applied in a given municipality under examination. We were particularly interested in: 1) councillors' contacts

¹ This criterion was not fulfilled in Nova Gorica.

and interactions with residents; 2) their understandings of non-electoral forms of participation, especially the attitude to the further development of participatory instruments, including more innovative tools; and 3) how they assess the impact of citizens on the decision-making process. Additionally, representatives were free to present their personal views in regard to citizens' engagement. Through that approach, we were also able to familiarise ourselves better with their opinion on advantages and drawbacks of broadening the participative framework. All the interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Then we used a six-step process to analyse and interpret our raw data (see McNabb, 2013:397-401). Firstly, we conducted a preliminary analysis searching for patterns and structures. Secondly, we performed systematic coding and identified themes relevant to our research. Then we identified similarities and contrasts in the collected data. That step was particularly important to our investigation. Subsequently, we re-examined major categories and implemented axial coding to clarify the themes once again. Following this, we identified relationships between some of them. Finally, we tried to establish a connection between data collected during research trips and the current scholarship (see also Myers, 2013).

Characteristics of investigated cases

English local government belongs to the Anglo-Saxon model and, despite being one of the oldest in Europe and responsible for many services, has a rather weak status. There is no constitutional right for local authorities to exist and almost no legal protection of their autonomy (John, Copus, 2012:30). For a long time, the activities of local governments were also hampered by the *ultra vires* doctrine. At the turn of the 1970s and the 1980s, the New Public Management strongly affected the operation of local authorities. Local councils were converted mainly into service providers, while the role of the residents was reduced to clients who express their satisfaction or dissatisfaction as service consumers. The situation began to change slightly in the 1990s when the Labour Party came to power. As Pratchett indicates, after the 1997 elections the Blair government-conducted a programme of "modernisation" that covered almost every aspect of political reforms, including local democracy (2004). Among others, the citizens were granted power to choose executive arrangements, for example, directly elected mayors. Attention was also paid to the so-called "New Localism" and a wider autonomy of operation of local authorities. Presently, English citizens can use both binding and non-binding local referenda (see more Standford, 2016) as well as express opinions during consultations. Additionally, they can launch petitions and involve in the work of some social councils (e.g. youth).

The examined English municipality – Welwyn Hatfield – is a borough and non-metropolitan district, located in southern Hertfordshire. The whole borough has around 122,300 inhabitants. Many of them commute every day to London. In 2002, when all local authorities in England exceeding 85,000 inhabitants were obliged to introduce new executive arrangements, Welwyn Hatfield decided to adopt a rather conservative leader-cabinet model (Rao, 2005). Therefore, power is presently divided between the elected council and the executive cabinet with a leader. The council consists of 48 members and since 2002 has been controlled by the Conservative Party. Borough authorities use, however, different channels to communicate and interact with citizens. Firstly, they inform residents about planned policies and actions. Four times a year they publish a print magazine that is distributed among residents. Secondly, they encourage citizens to take part in local referenda and consultations, as well as to start a petition and to fill in a complaint scheme. Councillors also organise

surgeries, kind of open public meetings where residents can meet them and voice their own concerns (*Meet your councillor* (surgeries) 2019). Additionally, citizens can involve themselves in neighbourhood planning and borough panels. Also, a type of quasi-participatory budgeting operates in the wards. However, residents cannot independently decide about the allocation of funds, but they are invited to co-operate in this matter with councillors instead. The borough has also a Youth Council that aims to make a positive difference and raise awareness of issues that matter to young people (Welwyn Hatfield, 2019).

The Finish local government paradigm is included in the Nordic model. Local authorities share here some of the experiences of the English local government, especially those related to the role of the New Public Management paradigm. However, local government in Finland enjoys a strong autonomy with constitutional protection, a local tax-based financing system and legitimacy. Since the 1990s, the number and scale of statutory functions has increased significantly and this trend has strongly influenced the operation of local authorities. Firstly, municipalities, which used to be political communities, have – to a certain extent – been transformed into “service machines” (Nyholm 2006; Nyholm, Haveri, 2009). Secondly, which follows from the above, the overload of responsibilities and vulnerability to central government interventions resulted in a narrowing conception of local democracy (Haveri, 2015). Now again in recent years more interest has been paid to new forms of participation. Although service provision still plays a key role in the development of the local government system, citizens are more often recognised as co-producers and co-creators of services (Tuurnas, 2016). At present, Finnish residents can, apart from taking part in local elections, express their opinion in non-binding referenda (Sjöblom, 2012; Büchi, 2011), during consultations and meetings of social councils (youth, senior, disabled residents). They can also propose a certain policy, solution or actions through local initiative.

Tampere – the municipality investigated in Finland – is the capital city of the Pirkanmaa region. The city currently has 231,853 inhabitants. Tampere is not only recognised as one of the best places to live in Finland but also as a city that is continuously piloting innovations in governing. In 2007, Tampere decided to give up the city manager model – characteristic of most Finnish municipalities – and introduced a new one, labelled currently as the “Tampere model.” The model consists of three pillars: 1) the mayoral pillar; 2) the purchaser-provider pillar; 3) and the civic-participation pillar. The latter was aimed at increasing the independent, resident-led activity (Rannisto, 2015). In the city administration structure, the special Local Democracy Unit (LDU) was established to plan and to coordinate new forms of citizen participation. Apart from statutory rights for elections, referenda, consultations, creation of youth, senior and disabled councils and an opportunity to start the local initiative, Tampere residents are included in the decision-making process in a variety of ways. These include the Valma web-based forum, Alvari neighbourhood workgroups and the so-called “residents’ nights” (Radzik-Maruszak, Bátorová, 2015). In one Tampere neighbourhood, Tesomajärvi, experiments with participatory budgeting have also been initiated. Tampere is governed by a 67-member council and the executive board is chaired by a mayor. At the time of the research, three parties controlled the council: the National Coalition, the Social Democratic Party, and the Green Party.

Slovenia and Poland still belong to the so-called “New Democracies” model. In both countries, the democratic transformation of the 1990s opened a space for broad reforms. Many of them, such as establishing the Rule of Law, promoting New Public Management and fostering governance, were introduced in parallel (Campbel, Coulson, 2006). This attitude has

triggered the “jump-into-deep end” philosophy and opened a window for experiments. The reforms have frequently been implemented on a wider scale, without any pilot-programmes. Importantly, the inspiration for changes has come both from newly established central authorities, grassroots movements, and citizens. The latter have been perceived not only as service-users but also as a key element of democratic transformation. And whereas in England and Finland the emphasis was on practical “useful” solutions, in Poland and Slovenia participative reforms were recognised also as a stimulus for social development and for building civil society.

Additionally, Polish and Slovenian local governments have a relatively similar non-electoral framework. Firstly, citizens can take part in binding and non-binding local referenda (Piasecki, 2011; Nežmah, 2011). Secondly, both local governments arrange consultations that cover a broad spectrum of matters, often related to spatial planning or changes in service provision. In both, social councils can also be established, providing a wider say to particular, frequently unheard, social groups, e.g., youngsters. Besides, citizens can launch petitions and propose a certain policy, solution or actions through local initiative. In both, local governments operate a system of citizens’ assemblies. During these gatherings citizens can present their views, and in the case of Slovenia also change some policies. Finally, in both examined local governments, a growing importance of neighbourhoods can be witnessed.

The examined Slovenian municipality – Nova Gorica – is the capital of the Goriška Region. The city has around 32,000 inhabitants and is governed by the council and the directly elected mayor. In the course of our research, the 32-member city council was not controlled by either a single political party or a coalition of political groups. Instead of a stable political agreement, we noticed “project coalitions” that changed from one council meeting to another, depending on an individual issue under discussion. Inhabitants of Nova Gorica can take part in referenda, consultations, launch a petition, and file a complaint. They also can start a local initiative and participate in local assemblies (*zbor občanov*). Neighbourhoods (*krajevna skupnost*) constitute quite an important channel for participation and expressing views. It is through them that citizens can express their opinion, start initiatives as well as decide about budgetary issues and various projects (Mesta občina Nova Gorica 2019). Nova Gorica can be, however, distinguished on the “participatory map” of Slovenia mainly due to its participatory budgeting. This instrument was proposed by one of the local politicians, the candidate for the mayoral posts in the 2014 elections. Although the politician was not elected to the post, the initiative was introduced and is being constantly developed (Jazbinišek, 2016:49).

Lublin – the last of the investigated municipalities – is the capital city of the Lubelskie Region. Located in Eastern Poland, the city has around 324,637 inhabitants. The power is held by a 31-member council and the directly elected mayor. During the time our research was conducted, the council was controlled by the coalition of the Civic Platform (political party) and “Joint Lublin” (independent political group). In 2002, Lublin started to introduce participatory reforms. Its main architects were the newly elected mayor and one of the NGOs that operated in Lublin. In the city hall, the special Civic Participation Office was established to foster residents’ engagement. Over time the “traditional” participatory framework was supplemented by such instruments as the Social Dialogue Box, the “Let’s fix it!” internet platform, participatory budgeting, and citizens’ panels. Also, the number of social councils was systematically increased. There are presently around twenty such bodies. Their operation is focused on various fields starting from youth and seniors to spatial planning and culture. The role of the city neighbourhoods is also being systematically increased. Among

participatory instruments the most important seems to be, participatory budgeting. Introduced in 2014, the tool has since become a permanent, distinguishing feature of the city. PB operates in all 27 city neighbourhoods and is constantly evolving (Lublin, 2019).

Based on the given description, it is visible that the examined municipalities vary in terms of their attitude towards non-electoral participation. In other words, they seem to have a different stance towards democratic innovation. One municipality (Welwyn Hatfield) can be labelled as “a traditionalist”, as the main reason for participation here is to fulfil legal requirements, while another one (Nova Gorica) can be described as “an explorer”, as the municipality has recently started to change its participatory landscape. Finally, two municipalities (Tampere and Lublin) can be labelled as “prospectors” of participative governing. However, whereas in Tampere the new framework is an integral constituent of the city model and can be described as top-down participative “engineering”, in Lublin new tools have been introduced more on an interactive, bottom-up basis, with various stakeholders engaged in their design.

Analysis

The active relationship between councillors and residents constitutes a *sine qua non* condition for good governance that additionally stimulates the development of the municipality. Without listening to the residents’ needs and requests, it is difficult to imagine an effective decision-making process. However, at the same time, the closer collaboration with residents is not always a smooth and easy-going process. The data analysis indicates that councillors from the examined municipalities have a different notion of the role of a non-electoral participative framework. However, at the same time, on the basis of our research we can identify many similar difficulties associated with its operation. In the following section, we present the results of our analysis.

Understanding the role of non-electoral participative framework

The analysis of the interviews’ content shows that councillors from the examined municipalities have two, basic notions of a non-electoral framework.

Representatives from Lublin and Nova Gorica, as well as some councillors from Tampere, see it as a part of inclusive governing and democratization processes. In this context, the introduction of new instruments is treated as a response to the growing awareness of residents and as a method through which the knowledge of all stakeholders involved in the decision-making process can be broadened. Additionally, many interviewees perceive these instruments, especially democratic innovations, as a catalyst for further development. Local representatives point out that “people have many ideas, they want to make impact in their neighbourhoods” (SI/7/NG), and thus the new tools provide them with the opportunity not only to express their views but also to implement some concepts. According to this understanding, the non-electoral framework contributes to the bottom-up, democratic development, and influences the social capital as such. Furthermore, the councillors, again mainly from Lublin and Nova Gorica, admit that although their respective municipalities are still at the beginning of participative transformation (SI/7/NG), the changes are something that “cannot be stopped any more” (PL/8/L). At the same time, the important duty of local politicians is to monitor the operation of non-participative framework and, on that basis, to take further steps.

In this context, our findings from Tampere are interesting. Despite the fact that councillors perceive non-electoral framework primarily as a part of a bigger change and are proud that the city is a pathfinder, they do not recognize its role in the same manner. According to the first group of politicians, the implemented instruments, analogous to the Lublin and Nova Gorica cases, allow for discovering in the joint decision-making the “laymen beauty” and should be treated as a driver for further development of the social capital. As one interviewee indicates:

I think if you involve people more, they are getting more active, so they also get more active in their everyday life, they help people, they participate and that is good for the city. There are lots of outcomes for the city that we cannot measure in a traditional way, such as money... (FI/16/T).

According to the second group, the non-electoral framework should be understood mainly as something more technical that supports and enriches the decision-making process. The basic function of the instruments is to bring additional insights for elected politicians and local bureaucrats. What is significant, we noticed a very similar attitude in Welwyn Hatfield. However, in both municipalities leading politicians, such as cabinet and board members, were more eager to express these types of statements. In this context, councillors indicated that citizens’ opinions may “change their [councillors – KRM] mind” (EN/4/WH) and that “citizens are field-experts”, as they know best the problems their neighbourhoods have to cope with (FI/6/T). At the same time, local representatives point out that they are not obliged to follow residents’ suggestions and to undertake actions in the way inhabitants want. Using the example of the Valma web-based forum and Alvari neighbourhood workgroups, a leading Tampere politician addresses the issue in the following way:

I think we need this kind of forums, as we get important points from the people. They live in area, they are best specialist, they know how it is to live in this part of the city, so it is important to have discussion with them, but it does not mean that all the time we do what they want us to do. It is important that we hear them, and we get important information (FI/17/T).

Therefore, councillors do not perceive new tools here as a chance for joint decision-making but rather as a possibility to collect information, “consult” about the issues with the public and at the same time-as a way for people to express their views (Arnstein, 1969; Quick, Bryson, 2016:162). In this context, representatives seem to perform two roles. Firstly, they authorize the proposals produced by citizens (Røiseland, Vabo, 2016:127). Secondly, they constitute the “link” between citizens and civil servants. Hence, those “interested in people” (politicians) transmit authorized residents’ views to “those who do not want to talk to the people” (administrators); (FI/17/T). This task is yet easier to fulfil for leading, front-bench politicians who have a broader view and better contacts with bureaucrats than for backbenchers who are afraid, especially in the case of Tampere, that due to the complexity of city policies and networks, they are not able to transmit citizens’ requests into true policy actions (FI/14/T).

Difficulties and obstacles of the framework operation

Every social change generates its share of certain, inadvertent side effects. In this context, one of the issues our respondents addressed the most during the interviews were difficulties associated with the introduction and operation of the non-electoral framework.

Some problems were “shared” by all case study municipalities, some were observable only in select municipalities.

Citizens’ indifference

According to the councillors, the residents’ apathy constitutes an important obstacle to the introduction and later development of a participative framework. In particular, councillors from Welwyn Hatfield and Nova Gorica addressed this matter, however, the problem appeared also in the statements of representatives from other municipalities under discussion. The English councillors noticed, for example, that on the one hand British citizens “take democracy for granted” and do not treat involvement as an important anymore (EN/6/WH). On the other hand, they are very much influenced by the present, complicated political situation and tensions visible at the central government level. Representatives acknowledge that people feel unheard. Political and financial struggles lead to a situation where – as one of the councillors indicates – “the priority is food on the table (...) not involvement” (EN/6/WH). At the same time, the usage of non-electoral tools and development of democratic innovations is problematic for elected politicians who operate under financial constraints. One of the councillors, referring to local referenda, comments on this in the following manner:

In theory we could have referenda, law allows for it if we want to increase, for example, council tax ... but the referenda are expensive and we already know the results (...) now all local authorities in Britain are under financial pressure (...), (EN/9/WH).

Interestingly, we identified quite a similar situation in Slovenian Nova Gorica. One local representative indicates that:

The problem is that for 5-6 years our country is in depression and recession, and people are a bit depressed (...) not motivated, they are passive sleepers and we [politicians – KRM, AH] really have to push them (...) the media makes situation even worse than it is, and people do not have a feeling that they can change anything, they want to put away all issues from them (SI/10/NG).

According to our informants from Slovenia, the situation is additionally complicated by the fact that many residents doubt, again on the grounds of political scandals, the honest intentions of local representatives and the fact that they are really interested in widening inhabitants’ say. Using the example of participatory budgeting, one councillor from Nova Gorica addresses this issue in the following way:

People do not trust in councillors, they do not trust in the council, they find politics ugly. We will have to prove that these tools really work and we have to use them in proper way (...) I believe here we have many tools but they are not implemented right way, so the people do not think that (PB – KRM, AH) will work, they think “oh yeah this is just another thing you want to put central into our eyes, but it does not really work.” So now we really have to prove that it will work (...); (SI/8/NG).

The above statement exemplifies also the difficulties associated with the development of non-electoral engagement and proper operation of the already introduced instruments.

Architecture and operation

In the examined municipalities, the participative framework was developed differently – by local authorities (Welwyn Hatfield, Tampere) or with the involvement of other stakeholders (Lublin, Nova Gorica), nevertheless, local councillors report quite similar problems related to its construction and maintenance.

Firstly, representatives – mainly from Tampere and Lublin, where the framework is quite advanced – indicate that its current functioning is not connected with the operation of “real” decision-making bodies, like the city council, which calls into question not only the genuine impact of the tools but also their further development. Drawing on the example of Alvari, one of the Finnish councillors responds to the issue in the following way:

The problem is that in my work I do not see how this tool functions, there should be the way to connect Alvari and other tools with city council work (...) There is lack of information somewhere, we do not hear of Alvari that much (FI/14/T).

Secondly, many councillors indicate that non-electoral participation and especially democratic innovations attract only some residents, either interested in a particular, frequently “hot issue” or these more economically privileged who additionally have time to participate. Consequently, the results of consultations, borough panels, residents’ night etc. provide a one-side message and paint a narrow picture of the situation. As one of English representative points out:

if we look who responded, we have a big group of older and better-off, these are the people who have time to participate, the most effective responses came from these who are retired and are professionals – these people know how to write, how to deal with issues, they understand how to raise problems, and they are quite effective (...) The danger with participation is we can rely on people with qualifications and leave the rest behind, and council should represent everybody (EN/15/EN).

Representatives from Tampere noticed a similar drawback. As democratic innovations attract only some residents, the message that flows from the participatory tools is not balanced and often difficult to interpret. One leading councillor points out:

We know that people who use new participatory tools are mainly older people and people who have a kind of background in some organisations, like NGOs and we cannot reach the young people, the families, so it mixes up the message we got for that work. The message is not balanced. We do not have representation of the whole city, we have representation of the minority (...) I am afraid some of the decisions we make are the decisions set by the minority (FI/15/T).

The above statements allow us to identify some important drawbacks of participative frameworks. On the one hand, the proper link of the “new” and “old” tools constitutes an important challenge. On the other hand, however, according to councillors, non-electoral participation favours only some, more resourceful citizens (Baud, Nainan, 2008). Finally, local politicians have difficulty in proper reading and interpreting citizens’ needs. Therefore, the question whose guidelines councillors should follow – the silent majority or louder minority – constitutes a major dilemma.

The analysis of interviews from Lublin, where the framework was developed on a bottom-up basis, indicates also an additional difficulty. Some councillors express concern that the operation of some non-electoral tools provokes a high-maintenance attitude of residents. This is especially noticeable in regard to democratic innovations, such as participative budgeting. One leading politician addresses this issue in the following way:

I feel that residents have a big impact. On the one hand, I really like it. On the other hand, during last months I have started to come into conclusion that maybe we go somewhere to far. The demanding attitude to PB annoys me. We created a certain framework and we should act within it. There are many people who want to go beyond it, you give them an inch and they will take a mile (PL/9/L).

The above statement indicates that the councillor is afraid that PB – as many democratic innovations – can go on unpredictable paths, which in turn creates a potential to diverge from common democratic standards (Ringholm, 2017:3). He is also annoyed by the fact that some residents, despite the existing “rules in form”, want to create their own “rules in use” and develop PB in the own way (Sproule-Jones, 1993). In consequence, proper institutionalization of non-electoral tools remains important to the representatives.

Symbolic impact

Another important problem our respondents paid attention to was the token, perfunctory character of many non-electoral instruments. English councillors referred in this context mainly to the central-local relations. They indicated that the strict Westminster policy towards local governments and the fact that local authorities are in many areas subordinated to the central government, force councils to go beyond residents’ say. Therefore, although in the official rhetoric the central government supports localism and citizen inclusion, in practice – according to councillors – residents have a very limited impact on local affairs. This is particularly noticeable in local planning where central authorities can easily intervene and change local decisions. This situation is very inconvenient for councillors who are prisoners of the necessity to implement central guidelines, and at the same need to fulfil the electorate’s expectations. One of the councillors addresses this issue in the following way:

Localism is nonsense (...) we did consultations but we have to follow government line as central government can overrule local authorities (...) I do not know if we really know what localism means if we have to accept different decision than these made by the community (EN/5/WH).

At the same time, the results of our research indicate, however, that leading politicians still assess the impact of non-electoral tools higher than the backbenchers. The latter indicate that the residents’ say is not taken into account by key policy-makers. Citizens’ participation is reduced – according to backbenchers – to a “tick-box exercise”: something has been done, but it has no real-life impact (Arnstein, 1969). One English councillor comments on this in the following way:

Local authorities tend to treat residents as customers, they examine their satisfaction, but in the end make their own decisions, and thus residents are not truly involved in the decision process. If you ask about cuts in bus connections, 98% of residents are against, and the leadership makes the cuts anyway, people simply have enough such consultations because it does not lead to anything (EN/8/WH).

Additionally, Tampere backbenchers complain that there is no flow of information between them, leading politicians, and citizens (FI/14/T), which again frequently reduces residents’ say to a “just-ironic-nice-to-know” (FI/12/T). Representatives from three municipalities – Welwyn Hatfield, Tampere and Lublin – also expressed concerns that leading politicians, such as cabinet, board members or the mayor, “use” the new framework mainly to inform citizens about their own activities and to collect some data. Consequently, this leads to a situation where the leading politicians and administrators are still the only legitimate decision-makers – despite the implemented reforms. They represent real power and expertise in the municipalities (see Häikiö, 2007:2154).

We can summarize the results of our analysis in the following way (Table 2). First, councillors from the examined municipalities understand differently the role of non-electoral agenda. English and Finnish local representatives are focused on the “output” side of participation, whereas their Polish and Slovenian counterparts pay more attention towards “input” side of democracy. This also affects a different understanding of the role of politicians. In “old” democracies (England and Finland) councillors authorize and transmit citizens' opinions. In the “new” (Poland and Slovenia) they rather play the role of “watch-dogs” of the system, as they monitor how it operates. Second, what is really important is the fact that local representatives most of all notice difficulties associated with the operation of the non-electoral framework. These are *inter alia* the need of reconciliation of different dimension of democracy, difficulties linked with proper architecture of participative tools and progressing division of citizens (see more in Table 2).

Table 2: The summary of main research findings

Councillors’ understandings of:	England	Finland	Poland	Slovenia
<i>Non-electoral agenda</i>	Through the prism of results and “outputs”. Non-electoral tools are mainly seen as sources of insight and information.		The importance of the “input” side of democracy. Non-electoral tools are perceived as a catalyst for further democratization.	
<i>Role of elected politicians</i>	To authorize residents’ proposals and then transmit them to local administration.		To be “watch-dogs” of the system and to monitor how the framework operates.	
<i>Problems related to the operation of non-electoral tools</i>	<p>In all examined municipalities:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Reconciliation of the quantitative and qualitative dimension of democracy as non-electoral tools attract only some citizens, which can lead to “elitist” participation; 2) Proper design and operation of particular participative frameworks; 3) Division of residents. <p>In Welwyn Hatfield:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4) Dependence on central policy, symbolic value, division of councillors (ruling party vs. opposition). <p>In Tampere:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 5) The work of tools can be reduced to ironic “nice-to-know”; division of councillors (leading politicians vs. backbenchers). 			

Conclusions

In this article, we have explored the co-existence of electoral and non-electoral forms of democracy in specific contexts. We were particularly eager to find how adoption of democratic innovations connect with councillors' views on non-electoral participation and if the governing model and the "maturity" of the democratic regime affect their perception of the non-electoral framework. Based on our data, collected from four municipalities representing different local governments, we can formulate the following concluding remarks.

There is a connection between the "maturity" of a democratic regime and the understanding of the role of the participative framework. Councillors from "old" democracies – England and Finland – seem to put more attention into "output" of participative agenda, and they regard non-electoral tools mainly as sources of insight and information. The role of politicians is to authorize residents' proposals and then transmit them to local administration. For the representatives from the "new" democracies – Poland and Slovenia – the non-electoral instruments, including democratic innovations such as participatory budgeting, are understood as a catalyst for further democratization. In this context, emphasis is put rather on the "input" side of democracy (Heinelt, 2010). The role of elected politicians can be conceptualised here as "watch-dogs" of the system, as they monitor how the framework operates, and if it is necessary to take action.

However, we can also identify differences between "old" democracies resulting from different – Anglo-Saxon and Nordic – governing traditions. In case of England, politico-economic uncertainty as well as vulnerability to the central government's interventions seems to reinforce the symbolic value of non-electoral instruments. Additionally, the research results obtained in Welwyn Hatfield indicate that the strong division into ruling party and opposition obstructs the consensus over participatory agenda. Under these circumstances, on the one hand, it is easy to downgrade non-electoral engagement to a "tick box-exercise"; and, on the other hand, it is difficult to introduce a more innovative participatory framework. In Finland, the councillors – who are still influenced by New Public Management rhetoric – are primarily interested in the genuine input of participative tools. Therefore, some instruments are treated, especially by leading politicians as a kind of ironic "nice-to-know." At the same time, the fact that in Tampere the participatory framework was created by different political forces and presently is incorporated into the city model contributes to a broader consensus over the participatory agenda. On the contrary, in Poland and Slovenia elected politicians seem to be more interested in expanding participation as they perceive it as a further step in the decentralisation process. The relatively new experience related to the reconstruction of the political system appears to prompt councillors to greater openness towards civic involvement. Simultaneously, the broader experience of representatives from Lublin with democratic innovations make them more critical towards citizens' engagement than their counterparts from Nova Gorica. Therefore, based on research results we claim that context matters. Lack of financial pressure, the importance attached to the construction, not only to the outcome of governing process as well as the agreement over participatory agenda are conducive to experiments and to governing in a more innovative way.

Despite these differences, we can observe that councillors from all the examined municipalities notice many difficulties associated with wider civic engagement (see Table 2). On the one hand, a significant challenge is to reconcile the quantitative and qualitative dimension of democracy (Radzik-Maruszak, Pawłowska, 2017). Non-electoral tools attract only some citizens – either those who have time and knowledge how to use them, or those

interested in a given single issue. The main danger of this situation is the “elitist turn” of participation, as only some opinions and voices are heard. Against this background, representative democracy – in the councillors’ understanding – provides a platform for more balanced governing, which in the end seems to be more important than direct residents’ say (Michels, de Graaf, 2010). In this context, councillors are willing to portray themselves as people who have to make decisions for the common good. In their opinion, representation is a “tool” through which difficult decisions can be made, ensuring that the municipality is governed according to the will and in the best interest of all residents (Häikiö, 2007). Consequently, our research findings unsurprisingly, demonstrate that elected politicians understand non-electoral participation as something additional that enriches the decision-making process but that simultaneously should not constitute its core.

On the other hand, all the examined municipalities seem to struggle with the problem of proper design and operation of their respective participative frameworks. Importantly, according to our data, all cities, despite differences in governing traditions and the “size” of implemented engagement agendas, experience very similar difficulties. In this context, it is significant that non-electoral instruments not only divide citizens into those who participate and those who do not, but also create a gap between politicians. The results of our research demonstrate that mainly leading politicians engage in the operation of non-participative frameworks, whereas backbenchers felt often put aside. In their opinion, there is an inconsistency between representative and participative schedules.

To sum up, our results point to a connection between the governing model and the councillors’ attitude towards non-electoral framework. In other words, context matters. Additionally, the specific “participative environment” of each examined local authority turned out to be of particular importance. The third interesting implication of our research is the fact that local representation, regardless of the context, encounters many similar problems related to non-electoral citizens’ involvement. In our opinion, this “full of troubles” perception can significantly hamper the introduction of democratic innovations on a larger scale. Councillors who are key decision-makers often consider more innovative tools as something that only triggers additional problems. At the same time, however, there is a need for further investigation of the Central and Eastern model, as presented research findings do not demonstrate significant variations in the attitude of Polish and Slovenian politicians towards non-electoral tools.

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