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## Analysis and Evaluation of the Information Policy of Local Governments<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:**

**Purpose:** The study's main aim is to identify the most common errors in implementing local information policies and identify possible factors that may support local information policies regarding their quality of preparation and performance and the effectiveness of their impact.

**Design/Methodology/Approach:** The research methodology was based on the analysis of local information policies running in two hundred communes of south-western Poland, located in the following voivodships: Dolnośląskie, Lubuskie, Opolskie, and Wielkopolskie. It uses the own-proprietary concept of distinguishing four communal information policy models: traditional, closed, open models, and modern models, also in closed and open versions.

**Findings:** Using the own-proprietary concept helped define the practical models of local information policies, and their advantages and disadvantages were assessed. On the other hand, statistical processing of the obtained results made it possible to determine, among other things, the frequency of leading errors in the surveyed communes.

**Practical Implications:** During the survey, the authors listed the primary mistakes made during local (communal) information policies.

**Originality/Value:** The conclusions from the research on local information policies carried out in two hundred Polish communes can be fully extended to the entire country's conditions. Some can also be treated as guides to other societies and governments, especially Central and Eastern Europe. For this purpose, several practical recommendations have been formulated.

**Keywords:** Local information policy, communes, communal information policy.

**JEL Codes:** P32, R50.

**Paper type:** Research Paper/Case study.

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## **1. Introduction**

Information policy has always played an essential role in state institutions' functioning, especially public management processes. The use of information gave extraordinary opportunities to influence people and achieve the set goals effectively. The development of the information society significantly strengthened the importance of information policies, which was undoubtedly related to increased information sources, much greater ease of access to information, speedy diffusion of information, and data with different truthfulness levels (Becla, 2018). Thus, information sources' controllability is reduced (the information monopoly is broken) and information policy's effectiveness.

The development of cyberspace (information space) and global networks information and informatics, such as the Internet, create entirely new conditions for operation and challenges for the information policy (Becla and Czaja, 2016). It includes the information policy implemented both; on a macro scale (of a given country) or global scale and a local scale (at the level of a commune, settlement, or even a social group).

Identifying the most common mistakes made in implementing local information policies and identifying possible factors that may support local information policies in terms of their quality of preparation and implementation and the effectiveness of their impact was the main aim of this article. What is the mistakes and possibilities of supporting such policies, especially at the local (commune) level? To identify such factors, the authors used empirical studies done in the field of communal information policies in the region of Lower Silesia, Opole, Lubuska Land, and Wielkopolska (Becla, 2017). Various studies on the preparation of local development strategies in these communes and analyzed various local information initiatives in the surveyed communes.

The use of the proprietary concept of distinguishing four models of communal information policy: traditional, closed, and open models and modern models, also in the closed and open version (Becla, 2017), allowed for ordering the practical use of local information policy models, assessing their advantages and disadvantages. Identifying errors in implementing the information policy in municipalities and determining their frequency of occurrence allowed the authors to formulate several recommendations to avoid the most frequent errors in the future. These conclusions are so universal that they can be impressed, especially in Central and Eastern Europe (Wollmann, 2008).

## **2. Literature Review**

The functioning of municipalities and local communities is the subject of many scientific disciplines, starting from economics and sociology, through legal sciences and management sciences, to political science studies. Thus, various aspects of the functioning of these structures are analyzed. The very concept of local (communal)

information policy also arouses the interest of representatives of multiple disciplines. Iconology and other fields that study information try to identify the essence of information policy itself and the various forms of communication. For economists, costs, sources of financing, and economic effectiveness of information policy are crucial; for sociologists or representatives of social psychology, the effectiveness of information and communication projects implemented within the framework of information policy. Management sciences focus on effectiveness, or more broadly, local information policies' efficiency, while political science analyzes their practical and ideological factors. Legal sciences examine the legal conditions for the functioning of communal information policies.

The local government issues have been reflected in contemporary world literature for many years. Fundamental was the dispute between the supporters of the so-called localism and the liberal market approach to providing services at the local community level, represented by representatives of the public choice theory (Czaja and Becla, 2016), which took place in the 1960s and 1970s. It was a discussion not only on the issues of the effectiveness of local self-government units' functioning but, above all, on the legitimacy of the existence of local self-government (Steward and Greenwood, 1995). In this dimension, the issues concern local government and local democracy (Values ..., 1997), therefore the essence and purposes of its existence.

There are no studies on this subject in Polish literature, especially territorial self-government formation in the early 1990s. The then creators of local government solutions did not consider the inhabitants' subjective role, imposing their local communities' concepts (Samorząd..., 2008). This action can be viewed as a mistake, as a consequence of which negative phenomena occurred, in particular:

- the process of acceptance by the inhabitants of self-government structures took a long time, which did not end in many Polish communes even after thirty years;
- the violent politicization of local self-government and the transfer of party and political disputes to the level of local communities, which further reduces the effect and effectiveness of the functioning of these structures;
- lack of adequate knowledge about the essence and goals of local self-government among residents, and also
- insufficient level of interest in the operation of local government structures among residents.

Phenomena of this type are of significant importance for the construction and operation of local information policies. They may integrate or disintegrate local communities (Becla and Czaja, 2015), influence higher or lower acceptance of local government values, or eliminate not negative phenomena occurring at the lowest level of organization of contemporary society and the state.

Polish research on local information policies most often follows one of two methodological trajectories, namely:

- the initial acceptance of such a policy and the search for appropriately effective methods (tools) of their impact, which is often combined with an ideological approach to shaping ("molding") attitudes favoring the authorities among the inhabitants (information policy from the commune authorities to the inhabitants) (Samorząd ... 2008);
- examining the problem of how the correct, i.e., bilateral (municipal authority ↔ inhabitants) oriented local information policy should look like (Becla, 2017).

The second approach is less frequent, which is the result of certain unfavorable phenomena, such as (1) the already mentioned politicization of local governments, (2) low level of self-government awareness and knowledge in this area among residents, (3) violation of the fundamental values of local government regarding the need to build "small homelands", (4) negligible community needs among residents or (5) lack of officials knowledgeable in the field of modern interpersonal and social communication techniques. Under such conditions, local information policies contain various errors. Polish research on local information policies mainly relates to specific social and political conditions prevailing in the national self-government; some observations may have universal importance. This especially concerns the relationship between local information policies and the new conditions created by the information society.

### **3. The Ways of Understanding Local Information Policy in the Information Society**

Information policy uses many different elements that make up its very structure and mechanisms of operation. Each form of public policy consists of the following components:

- reasons for use;
- main goal and intermediate (additional) goals;
- implementing entities;
- beneficiaries of a given policy;
- mechanisms, methods, tools, and instruments of implementation and impact;
- conditions and barriers;
- sources of funding.

Each policy, including information policy, has its reasons for applying. In the case of a commune and its institutions' functioning, the information policy is justified for several reasons:

1. Local government structures and institutions are used to organize local communities' lives, and therefore, they should bring them closer to the

- legitimacy of undertaken actions. This is the essence, according to localism, of the legitimacy of creating and the existence of local government units and local populations (Values *et al.*, 1997).
2. These institutions have pro publico bono goals that must be formulated, explained to residents, and effectively implemented. In this dimension, information policy also acquires an ideological dimension to convince inhabitants of these goals.
  3. The information policy is to verify the commune's activities and compare them with the inhabitants' needs, leading to a more robust correlation between them.
  4. The local information policy must create the local information space, which is the basis of the social community's existence. A correctly implemented information policy strengthens culture, mutual interpersonal relations, shared interests, and expectations.
  5. According to which the local government tries to maintain its influence among the voters, the information policy also pursues political goals.

Information policy has always been a crucial aspect of any state agency or office's functioning, including municipal institutions. It consists of creating and acquiring, collecting, processing, and diffusing (disseminating) information. The goals of information policy can be very different, for example:

- informing all interested parties about the work of a given institution;
- developing appropriate public relations for an institution implementing information policy;
- collecting information necessary for the functioning of a given institution;
- collecting information from the external environment of the institution which is useful for itself;
- influencing entities from the environment through information in order to shape their views, attitudes, and behaviors consistent with the goals of the institution implementing the information policy.

The necessary entity implementing the local (communal) information policy is, respectively, the head of the commune (in rural communes), the mayor (in urban communes up to 50,000 inhabitants) or the president (in cities with over 50,000 inhabitants), and other offices are supporting their offices, as well as other local institutions such as schools, libraries, municipal cultural centers and municipal social welfare centers. Other entities supporting the local information policy are associations, foundations, and other similar institutions and natural persons running, such as their websites, regional publications, blogs, and discussion forums.

These actors provide some independent background information unless they cooperate with local authorities. Then they can be classified as subjects of official information policy. Another supplement to this policy is outside the commune that impacts

communes and local communities, such as the government, ministries and other government agencies, voivodes, probation offices, and other public institutions.

First of all, the beneficiaries of the local information policy are the inhabitants of a given commune. The information policy is addressed to them as recipients of individual information and projects implemented within its framework. However, it can be easily demonstrated that secondary beneficiaries are also entities implementing local information policy, especially from its reasons and goals.

Each implemented policy's particular importance is its mechanisms, methods, tools, implementation instruments, and impact. In local information policies, essential elements are created by the information society, which relates to entirely new aspects of information and communication processes. In the literature (Becla, 2018a; 2019), attention is paid, among other things, to:

- extraordinary amounts of information that fills the surrounding cyberspace and other components of reality;
- its very complex variety from the point of view of the meaning of information, its types or truthfulness;
- ease of creating and transferring information, which, however, increases the transaction costs of its use;
- rapid development of methods and tools for interpersonal and social communication;
- the emergence of entirely new forms of information disability and communication barriers.

Local information policies find themselves in a situation of an excess of information, not always of value, through which they must "breakthrough," the ease of transmitting information, with the recipients' inability to distinguish valuable and helpful information deformation of information needs (moving away from scientific information into gossipy one) among recipients and the rapidly growing information noise (Becla and Czaja, 2016). This requires very high qualifications and skills from the creators of such policies, which they usually do not have. An additional factor influencing the quality (effectiveness and efficiency) of implemented local information policies is the rapidly growing direct costs (especially personnel costs), not including transaction costs (Becla, 2019). It all adds to the phenomenon of mistakes made during Poland's communal information policies' preparation and implementation.

#### **4. The Primary Mistakes Made During the Implementation of Local (Communal) Information Policies**

The growing importance of the Internet and creating an information society and knowledge-based economy generate both known and new errors in Poland's local self-government information policy (Table 1).

The first, very significant mistake limiting the building of territorial self-government is the frequent lack of direct (personally addressed) and unaddressed communication with residents. This phenomenon occurs in almost  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the surveyed communes. Municipal offices, although they have exact addresses, rarely direct their information to individual persons. This solution of addressed the form of information transmission is usually more effective than other methods. It creates more personal relationships and better involves residents in the problems of the local community. In recent years, municipal officials have begun to appreciate the value of such contacts with residents, not just during election campaigns.

**Table 1.** *The most common errors in the local government's information policy in light of empirical research.*

The form of manifestation of errors	The average frequency of occurrence
No address, personalized communication, or information	75% surveyed communes
Alienation of local government from local communities	30% surveyed communes
The dominance of traditional information transfer techniques in communal information policy	40% surveyed communes
The systematic state of information asymmetry between the authorities and residents (manipulation of information by offices)	50% surveyed communes
Delays concerning civilization changes (information society and knowledge-based economy)	35% surveyed communes
There is no systematic examination of the residents' needs and expectations in the field of information policy	85% surveyed communes
Low effectiveness of commune information policies (providing the information)	50% surveyed communes
Low information efficiency of commune information policies	60% surveyed communes
Limiting the information policy to obligatory actions	70% surveyed communes

**Source:** *Own study.*

The second observable occurrence is the alienation of power combined with the phenomenon of a sense of superiority or even "missionary" among officials. Such a situation was noticed among 30% of the surveyed communes. Consequently, there is no relationship between local government institutions and residents, and offices and officials are treated as "foreign" elements in the regional structure. It is not conducive to building an appropriate level of civic participation and interest in projects that affect residents' living conditions. The evidence of alienation may be, for example, insufficient knowledge of leading municipal officials (village heads, mayors, or presidents), as well as their representatives in municipal councils. Low participation is the indicator of participation in local elections and the disappearing role of local political (election) programs.

Thirdly, in 40% of the surveyed communes in Lower Silesia, the Opole region, and the Lubuskie region, traditional methods of informing residents are preferred, which include: notice boards, official letters, leaflets, and information materials, oral transmission of messages, and even the use of local institutions (schools, parishes, libraries, communal social welfare centers or cultural centers). Such a situation may

result from a relatively low level of trust in electronic media among municipal officials who, admittedly, do use them but do not understand their importance in contemporary society and their growing role in interpersonal and social communication.

Offices and individual officials also do not avoid creating another error in the form of information asymmetry, considering it to strengthen their power and authority (in the form of an information monopoly). This phenomenon could be observed in half of the surveyed communes. They also use low-credibility information that is not based on scientific and expert procedures. Municipalities rarely commission research to appropriate institutions, such as economic analyses or studies of the natural environment's quality. This exacerbates asymmetry, increasing the importance of official interpretations as correct, credible, or accurate, which is not always a confirmation of the facts. Fulfilling certain obligations does not, by definition, make an expert in this field.

Fifth, the last two decades have brought a very rapid development of the information society and the knowledge-based economy, with all the consequences of these processes (Becla, 2018), which seems to surprise both many decision-makers and people who cannot deal with various forms of information overload, information exclusion, and new social relations. (Becla and Czaja, 2010). This creates significant problems in over 1/3 of the surveyed communes, resulting in a delay in these civilization changes. A common mistake is the lack of research into the needs and preferences of residents. Such a situation occurred among 85% of the surveyed communes. Few municipalities in Poland monitor residents' needs and preferences, even in random or episodic surveys. These needs and preferences are often formulated based on very fragmented information and the officials' wishful thinking.

Random research carried out by the author confirmed in half of the cases the relatively low effectiveness of communal information policies in providing information to residents. Two factors aggravate the unfavorable situation. The first is the passive attitude of many inhabitants who do not show their immediate surroundings' information needs. The second is the lack of monitoring of communal information policies' effectiveness by local government offices and their employees (or officers). This entails the dominance of closed, that is, information-based rather than communication-based models of these policies.

The situation regarding the low information efficiency of communal information policies is even more difficult. In 60% of the surveyed municipalities, analyzes of this type are neither carried out nor commissioned by external entities. These are not methodically and substantively easy research, which may suggest their implementation by specialized teams. A disadvantage of local government institutions' functioning is often limiting activity to implementing statutory tasks, excluding significant local problems. As many as 70% of the surveyed municipal offices limited themselves to this activity scope in the case of information obligations.



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## **5. Ways and Sources of Support for Local Information Policy in the Light of Empirical Research**

The empirical research, which covered a reasonably significant population of two hundred communes and the local information policies implemented by them, allows us to draw attention to several significant challenges. The need to improve communal information activities is relatively straightforward, especially if administrative structures and local communities create "small homelands" and direct democracy (Piasecki, 2007). If information activity at the local level does not support integration processes, such an idea will lose its practical dimension. Often, communal structures are treated by the inhabitants as foreign, with little or no use at all. Such relationships affect the decline in the level of prosperity and well-being at the level of municipalities.

The research results also highlight that the information society's formation fundamentally changes the information space situation. It is only apparently more effortless. Many challenges must be overcome to reach the recipient with an information message, and specific barriers must be overcome. Local information policy creators often do not realize it, recognizing that their message is the most important and is immediately received. In this way, numerous mistakes have been made during information and communication activities.

The information society poses new challenges to the participants of undertakings in the information space regarding the rapidly changing devices and their possibilities of communication and expectations in terms of information forms. This situation is because traditional means (for example, paper carriers) are quickly replaced with electronic multimedia.

Municipalities wishing to implement effective policies must revise them and include them in local development strategies (Here, 2018). Therefore, they should redefine their objectives, addressees, implementation modalities, human and technical resources available, funding sources, and ways of monitoring the impact's effectiveness. Municipal institutions and their representatives should bear in mind that their information monopoly no longer exists, and recipients' expectations have changed. The dominant information transfer techniques must meet society's conditions and the Internet (Becla and Czaja, 2016).

## **6. Summary and Recommendations**

The conclusions from the research on local information policies carried out in 200 Polish communes can be fully extended to the country's conditions. Some can also be treated as guides to other societies and governments, especially Central and Eastern Europe (Wollmann, 2008). They mainly result in the following implications and practical recommendations:

- The development of the information society has fundamentally changed the situation in the social information space, which should be realized by those responsible for local information policies.
- According to their beneficiaries' needs, information policies should be built in line with modern requirements and expectations.
- Local information policies should be a component of local development strategies and relate to the local economy and education system.
- Developers and beneficiaries of such policies should be aware that they consist of outgoing and incoming information.
- In the information sense, municipal policies should cover both the municipal office and institutions, the local community, the natural environment, the local economy, and the closer and external environment.
- An effective information policy generates specific costs that must be covered by economic resources - human, financial, and material.
- Local information policy must be based on truthful information, obtained from reliable sources, and used correctly (Becla, 2004; Bella, 2018b).
- The empirical research carried out confirms the necessity to create modern information policies at Polish communes and local communities.

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