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**Patterns of Communicating Spatial
Change in Polish Municipalities**

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Patterns of Communicating Spatial Change in Polish Municipalities

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Abstract

Each significant spatial change should be co-decided by the citizens in a transparent process of public communication. This applies especially to the rapidly changing areas, experiencing strong development pressures, where the relationship between spatial planning and public communication gains a very high importance. In this study I look for some general patterns of spatial change in Poland, reflected by the planning activity on the local level, and I present the municipalities that have been most busy in their planning duties in the recent years. Then I examine 18 municipalities, representing different types of settlements, located in various regional settings. A statistical analysis of their planning situation proves that they are particularly expansive in urban planning due to the rising needs of spatial development. Interviews with the local officials responsible for the planning process show a variety of attitudes towards public communication and enable listing the most popular practices of citizen participation. The paper concludes with necessary improvements in the structures and processes of urban governance, aiming to deal with the dynamic spatial changes.

Key words: spatial change, urban planning, public communication, citizen participation

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Introduction

Poland, as well as all other Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries, has followed for the last 30 years specific development patterns, different from the Western, Northern and Southern Europe. The political transformation from the socialist system to democracy and capitalism has profoundly impacted, in both positive and negative ways, the lives of over 400 million residents in this part of Europe, affecting the settlement processes and planning systems in their countries (Hirt, Stanilov, 2009).

In this paper I try to link the problems of spatial development in Poland in the final stage of the transitional period with the issues of public communication. Communicative planning is currently a vibrant theme in the former “Eastern Block”, where dynamic spatial, social and economic changes occur, creating a new, unique context for local policy formulation. This situation gives an unprecedented opportunity to study public communication patterns *in statu nascendi* (being currently created), to show the tensions between the need for economic development and social sustainability.

Spatial Change and Public Communication

Among many challenges of the transitional period in the CEE countries the most important are: a) liberalization and privatization of economy, often with dramatic polarizing effects (poverty, unemployment, inequality); b) de-industrialisation followed by the growth in services (particularly market services) and knowledge-intensive industries; c) globalisation (both economic and cultural) resulting in metropolisation (relative growth of capital cities and a few major centres while many other urban areas are in decline in terms of population and employment); d) negative population trends (absolute shrinkage of population); e) insufficient urban infrastructure (bearing the need to invest in transport, public services, rehabilitation of residential neighbourhoods); f) suburbanisation (rapid residential and commercial growth of the suburban zones); g) environmental concerns (pollution, inefficient industry, fast increase in automobile traffic) (Hirt, Stanilov, 2009; Nase, Ocakci, 2010; Scott, Kühn, 2012).

All those phenomena are followed by various planning activities on all levels of public administration. Urban planners in CEE cities are busy developing new paradigms and practices in order to manage the new tasks of the transitional period. In this context the planning activity (in a wide sense) reflects the need for enhancement in the space and may be qualified as spatial change (Table 1).

Table 1. *Dynamics of Spatial Change in Poland in 2010-2012*

Year	2010	2011	2012
New local plans (number)	1712	2089	1631
Planning coverage (%)	26,5	27,2	27,9

Source: based on (BDL, 2013)

A simple juxtaposition of the number of plans approved per year shows a high dynamics in this area: the number of all local plans in Poland has been rising by 5% per year and the “planning coverage” (the % of the area covered with local plans) by 0,7% per year in the recent years. There is no doubt that such a big scale of planning requires good management and appropriate policy approach.

In Poland the notions of strategic planning to a certain degree have begun to take hold in the evolving policy and governance practices, however in a much less direct way than in the West (Scott, Kühn, 2012). The former Eastern Block cities suffer from a lack of synchronicity between changes in formal institutions (aiming to manage this new, complex situation) and the persistence of older rules of actions in everyday local governance (a heritage of the socialist system).

In Poland the local political culture remains authoritarian and citizens are rarely able to impact decision-making (Hirt, Stanilov, 2009). The Polish planning law is unstable, weak and constantly changing, and planning habits are far from cultural and ethical public communication (Pawłowska, 2008). This non-communicative planning practice has allowed market-oriented forms of urban regeneration to prevail, with private developers either taking the policy “initiative” or dominating partnerships with the public sector (Scott, Kühn 2012). Therefore a very common problem of the citizen participation in the CEE countries, including Poland is a “selective” and “elitist” involvement. It means that only some particular groups of the local community take part in public consultations whereas others remain uninterested or simply indolent. This process has been accurately named by E. Swyngedouw as a new, post-political “urban governance-beyond-the-state” in which informal networks of relatively small number of individuals occupying key positions in public administration, finance, business or design take the decisions and all the rest of the citizens are politically disenfranchised (Swyngedouw 2010).

In this situation the need for more open and participatory approach to planning becomes obvious. Political scientists (e.g. Flyvbjerg 1998, Sisk 2001, Juchacz 2006) have no doubt that the representative democracy is no longer sufficient and that the quality of public debate is strongly related to the bad condition of democratic institutions. We cannot rely solely on democratic laws as they do not alter political practice – there is a need for a more communicative approach in managing the spatial development in CEE countries (if we want to make it sustainable and democratic).

The so called ‘collaborative turn’ in planning is supposed to make the whole process more democratic, more socially fair and more accessible to an increasing number of actors. As a result, more and more authors (e. g. Falleth, Hansen, 2011; Scott, Redmond, Russell, 2012) point to the need to develop research on informal channels of communication in planning. Simultaneously, communicative planning is being criticised for having little to do with the official legal procedures and resulting in low-quality spatial solutions (Alfasi, Portugali, 2007). Yet it is the politicians who have the formal power to

approve, reject, adapt or change a plan, and the rising importance of informal communication has not changed this situation so far.

This study attempts to describe and evaluate the development of communicative planning in Poland, a country being in many ways a leader (or at least a political pioneer) in the CEE countries.

Research Design

This paper aims to present an overview of public communication in planning practice in Poland. Thus the general range of the study is the whole national planning system, and the particular research is conducted on the local, municipal level.

Municipal councils are the main authorities of formal urban planning, and this position provides them with exceptional powers to regulate the planning process, including the degree of citizen participation (Horelli 2013). Those powers are exercised in various ways and involve diverse actors, hence giving the municipality a wide and unique knowledge on the forms and channels of public communication in planning. This knowledge is not limited to the formal participation in official procedures, but also links and gathers the information about semi-formal and informal communicative actions.

The research has been structured on the canvas of the classical theory of public communication where we have the source, the message, the channel and the audience (Hausner, 1999; Golka, 2008). This paper will focus on the channels and audiences of communication applied to planning as the main elements determining the level of communicativeness of the process. It will also describe the attitudes of the municipal workers towards citizen participation as an important condition of the communication process.

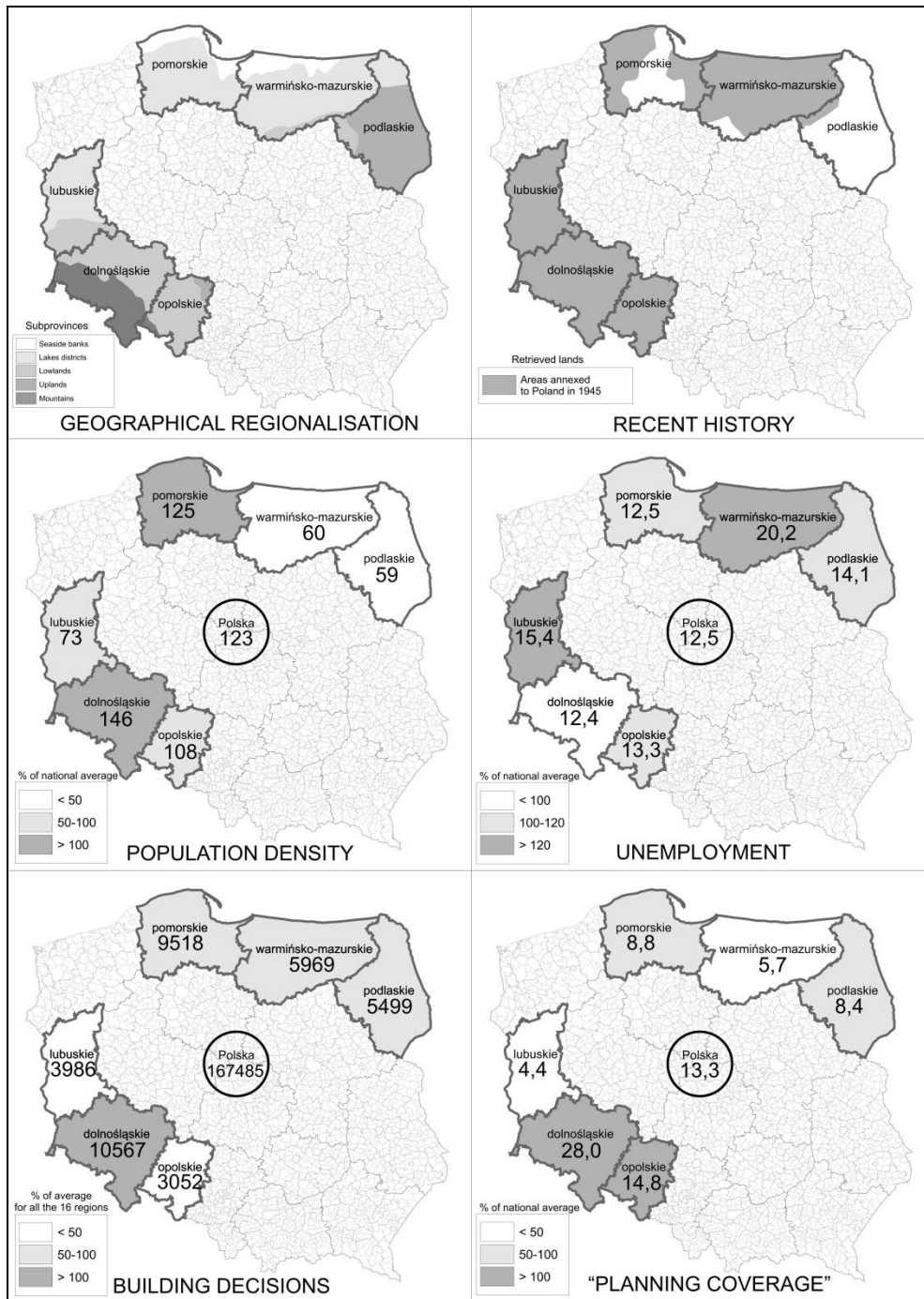
Research Sample

In order to choose the sample for the research we need some particular, measureable indicators of planning activity. A bare number of plans prepared at the municipal level would be a good starting point, though it does not reflect the participatory potential of local communities. Therefore I have linked the number of local plans prepared in *gminas* (the basic local territorial unit in Poland) yearly with the population size¹.

To make the selection more representative I have also taken into account the regional diversity of Poland. Polish *województwos* (the regional territorial units) are strongly polarised in terms of geography, history, economic and demographical development (Figure 1) and this typology should be reflected in the research sample.

¹In my previous works I have referred to this measure as “Democratic potential of planning” (see for example Damurski, 2014).

Figure 1. Polish Regions selected for further Research and their Characteristics



Source: based on (Kondracki, 2009; BDL, 2013; Śleszyński i in., 2012)

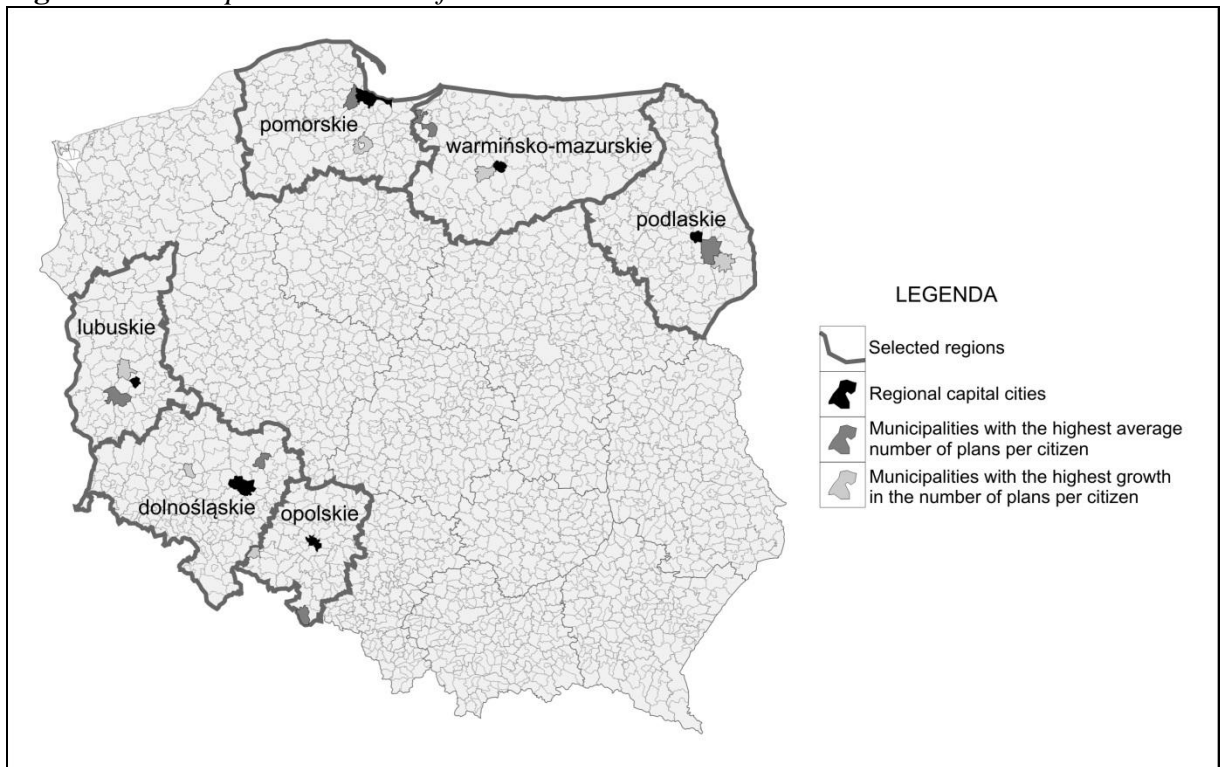
As a result 18 municipalities in 6 different regions have been selected, using the following criteria:

- regional capital city,
- *gminas* with the highest average number of plans prepared yearly divided by the population size - in the region,

- *gminas* experiencing the highest growth of the number of plans prepared yearly divided by the population size - in the region.

The geographical distribution of the municipalities with most dynamic spatial changes proves that most of them are located within the metropolitan areas of the biggest Polish cities (Figure 2). Such a sample is not statistically representative to all Polish municipalities of course. However, it is big and diverse enough to give a realistic and reliable average picture of the practice of public communication in planning.

Figure 2. *Municipalities selected for the Research.*



Research Methods

This study employs both quantitative and qualitative methods originating in social sciences. This research paradigm corresponds best with the subject of the study, oriented towards the classification of communication phenomena and understanding their roots.

Hence the research involved visits in all the selected municipalities and direct semi-structured interviews (with questionnaire) with the representatives responsible for planning procedures. The results of the surveys form the basis for the presented study.

As a complimentary method, a review of relevant planning documents and policies was undertaken, though its results are hardly interpretable due to the uneven availability of comparable documents in particular municipalities. In

the first part of the study, selected findings from another research have been used to fulfil the picture of public communication in planning.

Research Results

Attitudes towards Public Participation

In order to properly evaluate the communication practices used in Polish municipalities, I have first asked the interviewed officials about their opinion on the citizen participation in the planning process. Most of them (83,3%) have no doubt that there is a necessity for involving citizens in planning procedures and the rest (16,7%) is not sure about that. The justification of their answers is shown in Table 2.

Table 2. *Justification of the answers to the question „Is citizen participation in the spatial planning process necessary?“. The numbers do not sum up to 100 as the respondents could give more than 1 answer. The table includes only the answers given by more than 10% of respondents in each group*

Justification of the answer „yes“	% of respondents in this group
plans are for the citizens	40,0
citizens have the right to influence the public decisions*	26,7
public participation enables the citizens to express their expectations, needs and ideas	20,0
citizens have an opportunity to familiarise with the project	20,0
citizens can pursue their private interests	13,3
less conflicts**	13,3
Justification of the answer „hard to say“	% of respondents in this group
lack of civic awareness, focus on private interests, no acknowledgement for public interests	66,7
plans are for the citizens	33,3
urban planning by definition is public***	33,3
the need to educate the society	33,3

Source: author's own research

* the local assembly members, representatives, clerks, planners

** on the planning stage and on the implementation stage

*** it is a statutory requirement

Among the main reasons for citizen participation the most numerous are general arguments for democracy and transparency in public decision-making.

And the problems listed by those who have some doubts about citizen participation point to one of the most important faults of the Polish planning system (and Polish local democracy in general): the lack of social capital in the society (see Sulek 2009, OECD 2011). How can this barrier be overcome? The interviewed municipal workers seem to have an answer: they are aware of their role in promoting civic values, they want to take advantage of the planning procedures to educate the citizens about their democratic rights. Let us now take a closer look at the communication practices in planning in Poland.

Channels of Communication

Communication channel is a way of conveying the message from the source to the audience. Channels in planning can be listed as follows:

- noticeboard – located usually near the municipality office as a traditional way of communicating public decisions in Polish administration;
- paper press – short, official and highly formalised announcements published in a local or regional newspaper;
- public discussion – an open meeting organised at the final stage of the planning procedure;
- internet – information presented on the official websites of municipalities, particularly in the Public Information Bulletin (*Ustawa...*, 2003).

Those forms of communication form a kind of national standard for public communication in planning and guarantee the minimum level of democratic participation. And of course they are used in all the researched municipalities to provide the legal correctness of administrative procedures.

Much more interesting are however the emerging semi-formal (and informal) channels of communication. Therefore in the questionnaire I have included a question “What methods of involving citizens in the planning process are used in your municipality?”. Table 3 shows the main results of the survey among the interviewed municipality officials.

Table 3. *Non-obligatory methods of involving citizens in the planning process used in the municipalities. The numbers do not sum up to 100 as the respondents could give more than 1 answer. The table includes only the answers given by more than 10% of respondents. Sample size: 18 respondents.*

Answer	% of respondents
cooperation with the village mayors and district assemblies*	55,6
additional meetings in the municipality office	27,8
additional advertisements on noticeboards in villages and planned areas	22,2

advertisements in churches	16,7
additional meetings in villages or planned areas	11,1
local newspaper**	11,1
activating local community by various actions***	11,1

Source: author's own research

* reviewing the plans, direct informing of the citizens, presenting the projects publically

** additional advertisements in newspapers and intentional selection of newspapers read by the citizens

*** e. g. informative actions in schools, in public spaces etc.

It is noteworthy that all of the 18 studied municipalities introduce some additional, non-obligatory practices in this field: 38,9% of them do it always and the rest use them depending on the planned area, especially for bigger and more difficult plans (conflict areas, whole villages, dense population areas). In an average municipality there occur 1,9 facultative channels of communication.

But how will those additional channels of communication manage in the flood (overload) of information in the contemporary society (Golka, 2008)? Will they bring a higher awareness of public decision-making process among various actors? Will it finally result in a higher quality of communication and further democratisation of public decisions? These questions would need further research and so far they remain unanswered.

Actors of the Planning Process

From the theoretical point of view the following 6 groups of actors may be found in the planning procedures:

- citizens;
- public authorities;
- landlords;
- developers and investors;
- planners;
- NGO's (after Pawłowska, 2008).

This study is expected to show what is the importance of particular groups in planning practice, how often they participate in this process and how can they be classified in terms of formal / informal division.

Table 4 presents the main answers to the question "Who predominately participates in the land-use design process?". The list of actors is strongly affected by the method applied in this research: the respondents (officials in selected municipalities) treat some actors as just obvious and they mention them only marginally or even do not mention them at all. This is especially the case of local authorities and planners, who undoubtedly do participate in the planning process but almost do not appear in the table.

Table 4. *The most usual participants of the planning process. The numbers do not sum up to 100 as the respondents could give more than 1 answer. The table includes only the answers given by more than 10% of respondents. Sample size: 18 respondents*

Answer	% of respondents
landlords interested in land-use of their properties	72,2
local community leaders representing wider groups or NGOs	38,9
developers, entrepreneurs	27,8
citizens*	27,8
neighbourhood assemblies / village mayors	16,7
local authorities, clerks and other people connected with the municipality office**	16,7

Source: author's own research

* citizens who are not landlords or developers

** e.g. members of the local assembly, local planning commission etc.

If we interpret these results in the light of the deliberative macro, mixed and micro spheres proposed by Jarenko (Jarenko, 2013), we may notice that some of those actors (namely local community leaders and NGOs) belong to the informal sphere. It proves that those actors are also present in the process of local spatial policy formulation and that they are perceived by the municipality as one of the most active groups, even though the contact with them takes place mainly in the informal arenas (see Falleth, Hansen, 2011).

Another observation is about the distribution of the particular groups: the list of actors taking part in the planning process is dominated by landlords, developers and entrepreneurs (46,1% of all answers). Such proportions bring a serious threat of controlling the final decision by economical reasoning instead of the common, public good of the whole community and its future generations. This situation is quite typical for the neo-liberal reality in planning, where patterns of planning policy favour developer interests with limited regard for quality of life issues (Sager, 2009; Falleth, Hansen, 2011; Scott, Redmond, Russell 2012).

Finally there remains the question of the role of the planner. Surprisingly, in the table above there is no urban planner. The reasons for such situation may be twofold. First, as it was already mentioned, the municipality officials omit this group as simply obvious participant of the planning procedure. Another one would be that the role of the planner is not important and therefore was forgotten by all the respondents. To solve this dilemma an additional question was included in the survey: „What is the role of the planner in the communication between the local authorities and citizens?“ (Table 5).

Table 5. *The roles of the planner in the communication between the local authorities and citizens. The numbers do not sum up to 100 as the respondents could give more than 1 answer. The table includes only the answers given by more than 10% of respondents. Sample size: 18 respondents*

Answer	% of respondents
advising the local authorities*	38,9
conducting public discussions	38,9
advising citizens**	27,8
minuscule role***	27,8
mediating and negotiating	16,7
balancing public and private interests****	16,7

Source: author's own research

* participation in the meetings of the local assembly and its commissions etc.

** informing about the planning procedures

*** citizens communicate directly with the municipality officials, there is no need to involve planners in this process

**** planner does not represent the municipality (or at least he/she should not do it)

As in previous questions, also here the most interesting are the direct communicative activities: 47,1% of all roles exercised by the planners are public discussions, consultations, mediations and negotiations. It seems to be a relatively low result if we take into account that planners should strive to create arenas that facilitate and encourage public discourse (Albrechts, Denayer, 2001), and that they are inclined to be in favour of public involvement and open processes.

This observation is further strengthened by the most popular answer “advising local authorities” which suggests a very close relationship between the planner and the municipality. Juxtaposed with the answer “minuscule” it may prove that the whole planning process is dominated by the local government and that the planner simply obeys the municipality’s views and decisions. The cross pressure from conflicting values of communicative planning and the neo-liberal public management (Sager, 2009) experienced by planners is explicitly visible here.

Conclusions

In European countries planning power is exercised by the elected authorities who are supposed to provide the spatial order and well-being of their citizens (for Poland see *Ustawa...*, 1990; *Ustawa*, 2003). Just like in all other spheres of public policy, the authorities are responsible for the dissemination of information related to planning. The contemporary decision-making standards require that each significant change in the local landscape should be co-decided by the citizens in a transparent process of public

communication. This applies especially to the rapidly changing areas, experiencing strong development pressures, where the correlation between spatial planning and public communication gains a very high importance.

In this paper I have tried to present the relationship between the spatial development and the way it is communicated in 18 Polish municipalities. The sample selected for the research has been characterised with a relatively fast growth in urban planning in the recent years. The results of the interviews with the officials responsible for planning issues reveal a two-fold nature of the communication patterns.

On one hand the change in the administrative culture is under way: the awareness of the need for citizen participation is high, there is a growing number of actors included in the process and more and more channels of communication are introduced. On the other hand, the distribution of particular activities and parties involved in the process suggests that Poland is still quite far from the ideals of communicative planning. Some of the channels are interactive and indeed imply the involvement of the interested parties, though the rest remains simply informative. The range of the communicative actions is quite limited and accidental, almost none of the studied municipalities adopts any comprehensive communication policy. The list of actors is dominated by the stakeholders with commercial goals. The planners are bound by their contracts with municipalities which strongly limits their potential to become independent experts.

What pattern will finally prevail in the planning practice? Contemporary planning is not governance for participants anymore, but rather an endeavour that involves various discursive spheres. In the West of Europe this way of seeing planning supersedes the traditional approach in which the focus is on the formal aspects; it also makes the informal communication more and more important (see Falleth, Hansen, 2011; Scott, Redmond, Russell, 2012; Horelli, Wallin, 2013). The CEE countries are still reshaping their planning procedures after the period of system transformation. They need to develop their own good practices of communication, providing an appropriate volume and quality of democracy. In Poland this process seems to be already well advanced, though still not complete.

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