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**THE ACTIVITY OF LOCAL AUTHORITIES AND COMMUNITIES
IN POLISH, ITALIAN, AND SLOVENIAN MUNICIPALITIES
IN THE OPINION OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS —
AN EXAMPLE OF ECOLOGY** <https://doi.org/10.2478/ppsr-2026-0002>

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The purpose of the paper is to analyse the type, scope, and periods of activity of stakeholders from Polish, Italian, and Slovenian municipalities in terms of environmental protection, climate change, and ecology. It is an attempt to determine: How much influence do the authorities and the social actors have on the local decision-making process? In what situations does the local community become active? What examples of pro-ecological solutions at the municipal level are considered important by local government officials? The article uses the institutional-legal comparative method and behavioural approach (research using the online survey technique). The study shows that the lower the sense of local agency, the greater the stagnation of municipal stakeholders. Their actions result from activities forced by legal requirements or the negative effects of local decisions. The greatest sense of agency occurs among local government officials who belong to the group forming the ruling majority (the mayor and some councillors). In such a situation, the opposition minority is marginalised, which they feel during the decision-making process. Municipal authorities tend to take illusory actions in matters of the natural environment, i.e., those forced by law, which do not bring the expected results (e.g., air quality improvement) and are sometimes influenced by investors. Members of the local community most often become active when a problem, often of an ecological nature, directly affects them (protest participation), aiming at their own well-being and not environmental protection.

Keywords

municipality, ecology, apparent actions, Poland, Italy, Slovenia

Introduction

Transferring the burden of, broadly understood environmental, protection and climate change prevention is decentralised. It manifests itself in the implementation of the provisions of the strategy from the EU and state level by local governments (Gendźwiłł, 2017, pp. 30–49). Public authorities must ensure ecological safety (Trzcińska & Kierzkowska, 2020, p. 27) and introduce a green economy (Tutaj & Rutkowska, 2023, p. 17). The tasks of European local governments, including Poland, Italy, and Slovenia, include environmental protection, which is to the greatest extent at the municipal level. Adapting to the new legal and climatic situation, the authorities of local government units implement plans and programs, e.g., thermal insulation, replacement of furnaces, photovoltaics, reducing car traffic in city centres, preparing municipalities for the effects of floods or droughts, and also issuing permits for the construction of biogas plants (Wasil & Sidor, 2024, p. 21). At the same time, the municipal authorities carry out several other activities and tasks, e.g., in the economic, educational, or cultural spheres. The local community expects the improvement of living standards in the municipality through, e.g., additional investment and development of infrastructure such as roads and sewage systems or enriching the local entertainment offer. It protests when an investment, even one that is supposed to be pro-ecological, e.g., a biogas plant, directly affects its interests, i.e., the NIMBY syndrome (not in my backyard) (Łucki, 2011, p. 221; Bartłomiejski, 2015, pp. 75–76).

Local government officials from Poland, Italy, and Slovenia were selected for the study. Judging by the number and types of environmental policy approaches in various publications (government documents and scientific texts) in Poland, Italy, and Slovenia, this is a critical topic, at least in a declarative context, both at the national and local levels. Moreover, the interest in environmental policy was more noticeable in Italy than in Poland or Slovenia, which is related to the timing of each of these countries' accession to the EU. What these countries have in common is EU membership, which enables the use of structural funds, and obliges them to adapt their activities to the principles and objectives, including the climate objectives, of the EU. Municipalities from selected countries are responsible for creating, approving, and implementing budgets, as well as strategic and spatial planning, environmental protection, and incorporating social consultations into the decision-making process. In terms of the political system, the executive body is elected in direct elections. At the same time, there are differences between the indicated countries. Local government officials' activities are deeply embedded in the specificity of a given country in the following respects: geographical location and the resulting climatic aspects, tourism, economic and industrial attractiveness, civic activity, and political culture. For this paper, the definition of stakeholder activity is assumed to include the activity of local government officials (the executive body, coalition, and opposition councillors), the local community (residents, local activists, non-governmental organisations, and local investors – i.e., all entities that can take part in social consultations, e.g., to the spatial development plan). Their activity depends on, firstly, the function they perform in the local community (local government officials are statutorily involved in the local decision-making process from designing solutions to implementation). Secondly, legal regulations, e.g., social consultations, allow for the inclusion of people outside the formal group in the local decision-making process (residents, activists, entrepreneurs). Stakeholder activity

may include actions that do not fall within legal regulations or formal stages of the local decision-making process, e.g., investor pressure and residents' protests.

The paper's primary goal is to analyse the type, scope, and periods of activity of stakeholders from Polish, Italian, and Slovenian municipalities in the context of environmental protection, climate change, and ecology, based on the opinions of local government officials. For the paper, the following research questions were asked: How much influence do the authorities and the social actors have on the local decision-making process? In what situations does the local community become active? What examples of pro-ecological solutions at the municipal level were considered important by local government officials? The research questions posed in this way were aimed at verifying the hypothesis: The smaller the sense of local influence, the greater the stagnation of municipal stakeholders and the actions taken to result from activity forced by legal requirements or negative effects of local decisions. To achieve the main objective and verify the research hypothesis, the institutional-legal comparative method, and behavioural approach were used (which are important in analysing empirical material collected during the study using the Internet survey technique – quantitative analysis). The survey was conducted among municipal authorities (mayors, board members, councillors) in rural, urban-rural, and urban municipalities in Poland, Italy, and Slovenia between 2022 and 2023. The survey subject was local government officials' opinions and attitudes towards pro-ecological activities undertaken by local governments (paper based on research financed by: National Science Centre, Miniature 5, contract no. 2021/05/X/HS5/01432, "Between an ecological disaster and everyday life in the municipality: Attitudes of local leaders towards implementation of pro-ecological activities in Poland, Slovenia, and Italy").

Theoretical approach

The paper is embedded in neo-institutional theory and at the interface of several research approaches. The first is related to local policy (Piasecki, 2009) as the entirety of activities conducted by local authorities and public policy (Lasswell, 1971; Adolino & Blake, 2001; Szarfenberg, 2016; Zybała, 2015), understood as the implementation of assumptions in individual areas of community life and its evaluation at the municipal government level. The implementation of public policies determines the activity of local government authorities and the social actors. This is clearly visible in the case of the executive and legislative-control bodies of the municipality because they are limited by the scope of granted competencies and statutorily designated to carry out local government tasks. The implementation of public policy and local policy has a weaker impact on the activity of residents of the municipality, local activists, and ecologists. The stakeholders mentioned above take action in a specific matter due to the implementation of a given policy, or the failure of local authorities to act. It is visible, especially when the effects harm the particular interests of members of the municipal community. Considering the above factors, the theory of institutional frameworks of rational choice in conditions of limited resources is important for the paper's subject (Szarfenberg, 2016, p. 47) and the agency category – studies the problems and solutions linked to delegation of tasks from principals to agents in the context of conflicting interests between the parties (Kiser, 1999, pp. 146–170). E. Ostrom (2007, pp. 26–28) pointed out that public policies are a complex social phenomenon dependent on the context and the type of interaction between actors in public activities. In local public

life, it is easy to create network structures (Zybała, 2015, p. 32), for which the functions of the mayor and councillor are the basis. At the municipal level, it is also possible to observe the implementation of the stadial model created by H. Lasswell in the 1950s (based on the decision-making process) (Ronit, Porter & Lasswell, 2015, p. 56). It shows the use of internal potential to create a local community in the traditional sense (a long-term and continuous experience of co-residence in a given territory) and in the “new” which is based on a more or less conscious and lasting (usually less than more) sense of belonging detached from the place (Klekotko, 2024, p. 13), e.g., ecological activists.

In the second approach, the system and organisation of local government are essential. Municipalities from the countries covered by the study are united by the functioning of two local authorities – the council and the mayor, both elected in direct elections. They are responsible for creating, approving, and implementing the budget, strategic and spatial planning, and environmental protection (Bukowski, Jędrzejewski & Rączka, 2013, pp. 185–188). In Poland and in Italy, there is a 3-level local government with a 5-year term (Dolnicki, 2019, pp. 124–125; Bokszczanin, 2010, p. 70; Vandelli, 2012, p. 341, 345;), in contrast to Slovenia, where only municipalities operate, and local authorities are elected every 4 years (Kukovič, 2014, p. 21; Radzik-Maruszak, 2019, pp. 125–127). In terms of the functioning of the executive body, there are also differences: while in Poland and in Slovenia, it is the mayor with deputies (Dolnicki, 2019, p. 124–125; Radzik-Maruszak, 2019, p. 125–127), in Italy, the mayor is supported by the board in the local executive (Bokszczanin, 2010, p. 70). With the presidential model of power in the municipalities from the countries selected for the study, cohabitation may occur, i.e., when the executive body, as a result of local elections, does not introduce a sufficient number of councillors from its committee to the legislative and control body. In such a case, conflictual cohabitation (opposition majority) or consensual cohabitation (built coalition) may form (Sidor, Kuć-Czajkowska & Wasil, 2017). In the opposite situation, i.e., the dominance of the executive body, the role of the opposition minority in the local decision-making process is marginalised.

In another research approach, local government authorities tend to undertake apparent actions (Arnstein, 1969; Lutyński, 1977), especially in complex problems such as environmental protection and ecology. These actions are of a façade nature and are an intentional simulation – despite their implementation, they do not achieve the assumptions. They are perceived as important for achieving a socially important goal, although it is common knowledge that they do not contribute to its achievement. Knowledge about the illusory nature of such actions is common, but this fact is not made public. They serve no purpose except to create appearances and are undertaken due to top-down coercion (Ziętek, 2023, p. 72). Apparent actions are visible in the strategic programming of local government units. Mandatory participatory tools, e.g., social consultations, are adapted into the local decision-making procedure, the results of which don't impact the final decision. In the short term, apparent actions may also multiply political capital and image strategies.

The last research approach refers to civic activity, i.e., individual and collective actions of residents to influence the local decision-making process and spatial planning. On the one hand, in the municipal governments of selected countries, there are similar legal solutions enabling members of the local community to engage in the affairs of the municipality, including, for example, social consultations, participatory budgeting, local referendums (Rakar, Kozjek & Bencina, 2016, pp. 297–310; Bartoletti & Faccioli, 2016, p. 2; Kołomycew,

2023; Glinka, 2023; Węglarz, 2023, pp. 145–160). On the other hand, residents of municipalities, in addition to situations in which they are encouraged to participate in creating the communal reality, can also take advantage of the so-called protest participation. In European countries, also selected for the study, it is expressed as legally sanctioned public gatherings (Sidor, 2022, pp. 37–59). At the same time, there is a lack of willingness of residents to engage in local public life (Poprawski, 2016, p. 228, 230) until a given issue directly threatens the interests of a specific group or individual, e.g., the NIMBY (Not-In-My-Backyard) syndrome (Kraft & Clary, 1991, pp. 299–328), which ultimately manifests itself in various forms of protest.

Methodology and characteristics of the study

The paper uses several research methods and techniques. The institutional-legal method was used to present the systemic thread, including determining the strength of influence on the local decision-making process of two groups of local government officials (the executive and the legislative-control body) elected in direct elections. The second comparative method was used: firstly, to show similarities and differences concerning municipal governments from selected countries in systemic and organisational terms; secondly, to compare the survey results with a division into local government officials from Poland, Italy, and Slovenia. The behavioural approach was also used, which is important in analysing empirical material collected during the research stage using the Internet survey technique (quantitative study).

Research (survey) was conducted between 2022 and 2023 among municipal authorities (mayors, board members, and councillors) in rural, urban-rural, and urban municipalities in Poland, Italy, and Slovenia. In each country, the survey questionnaire was sent to at least 10 purposefully selected municipalities (four small-rural, three small and medium-sized towns, and three large cities due to experiences such as floods, mine construction, and developer activity, which were determined based on, e.g., media reports.) – the study was not representative. Based on availability, it was planned to obtain 100 completed questionnaires (300 in total) – 113 were received in Poland, 109 in Italy, and 104 in Slovenia. The return rate was 25% in Italy, 24% in Poland, and 15% in Slovenia (it was calculated based on the number of people who opened the link with the form). The survey questionnaire contained 20 questions (closed, semi-open, and open). The subject of the study focused on the opinions and attitudes of local government officials towards pro-ecological activities undertaken by local governments (e.g., motivation when applying for the position, the respondents' interest in ecological issues, their sense of influence on the decision-making process, and the level of activity of members of the local community).

Local government officials from Poland accounted for 35% of all respondents, from Italy 33%, and Slovenia 32%. Councillors accounted for 69% of respondents (in Poland 82%, in Slovenia 75%, and in Italy only 48%), and the executive body (village head, mayor, county administrator, trustee) for 18% (in Italy 22%, in Poland 18%, and in Slovenia 14%). More than half (55%) of the respondents represented rural municipalities (in Slovenia 78%, in Poland 62%, and in Italy only 24%), urban-rural municipalities 2% (all from Poland), urban municipalities 43% (in Italy 76%, in Poland 31%, and in Slovenia 22%) (Table 1). It resulted from a character in each country, i.e., a small number of urban munic-

palities in Slovenia and vice versa in Italy, as well as many small towns and, thus, urban municipalities.

Table 1. Basic information about respondents

Analysed category		Poland %	Italy %	Slovenia %	Average %
Gender	Female	31	24	38	30
	Male	66	74	58	67
	No gender declaration	3	2	4	3
Type of municipality	rural	62	24	78	55
	urban	31	76	22	43
	urban-rural	7	–	–	2
Function	Councillor	82	48	75	69
	Mayor	18	22	14	18
	Other function	–	30	11	13
Term of office	First	41	49	51	47
	Second	27	32	28	30
	Third and more	32	19	21	23

Source: Wasil, J. (2024). Postawy samorządowców gminnych wobec problemów ekologicznych. Przykład Polski, Włoch i Słowenii. *Polityka i Społeczeństwo*, 4(22), p. 298.

Men comprised 67% of the respondents (74% in Italy, 66% in Poland, 58% in Slovenia), and women 30% (38% in Slovenia, 31% in Poland, 24% in Italy). Differences in the gender of respondents by country were related to the function performed – the more local government officials taking part in the survey within the executive body, the fewer women. For 47% of the respondents, the term of office in which they filled in the survey was the first, for 30% the second, and 23% the third or more. The most significant number of local government officials performing the function for the first time came from Slovenia 51%, the second from Italy 32%, and the third or more from Poland 32% (Table 1).

Results and discussion

To demonstrate activity in the local public sphere, a sense of agency is important, i.e., feeling an influence on decision-making and how a matter is implemented. It is evident in the context of municipal authorities and is conditioned by cohabitation. According to research conducted in Poland (Sidor, Kuć-Czajkowska & Wasil, 2017), in about half of the municipalities, the executive body has a majority in the council, as a result of which it fully controls the local decision-making process without taking into account the opposition's ideas. It is also confirmed by the research presented in the article. Slightly more than half of the respondents – 58% declared that they felt an influence on decisions made in the municipality. It is justified because 31% of the respondents represented the executive body, and some of the councillors who completed the survey belonged to the ruling majority. Among the respondents, 11% indicated that they had no influence on decision-making in the municipality. The respondents from this group justified that they were in the opposi-

tion minority. As many as 31% of the respondents could not assess their influence on the decision-making process. The most frequent declaration of the indicated influence was made by local government officials from Italy 64% (because, as already indicated, a large group of respondents were representatives of the executive body), less frequently from Slovenia 57%, and from Poland 53%. The local government officials surveyed also assessed the influence of the social actors on the local decision-making process. Considering the competence disproportions between local government officials and other stakeholders, including members of the local community, only 22% of respondents stated that this influence was large, as many as 42% described it as medium, and 26% as small. No influence was observed by 4% of respondents, and another 6% did not undertake the assessment. Comparing the results from the three countries, in Poland, respondents (25%) more often noticed a significant influence of the social actors on the decision-making process than in Italy, 21%, and in Slovenia, 17% (Table 2).

Table 2. The influence of local government officials and the social actors on the local decision-making process in the opinion of respondents

Analysed category		Poland %	Italy %	Slovenia %	Average %
Sense of (own) influence	Yes	53	64	57	58
	No	10	11	11	11
	Difficult to say	31	25	33	31
Assessment of the influence of the social actors	Significant	25	21	17	22
	Average	42	44	40	42
	Negligible	20	25	35	26
	No influence	6	3	4	4
	Difficult to say	7	7	4	6

Source: Authors' own work.

When analysing the category of influence of local government officials on the local decision-making process, two types of this influence can be distinguished (felt by the respondents – declarations from the semi-open question): 1. Institutional influence related to: financing the activities of local government: “I am a councillor, when adopting the city budget I have an impact on its shape during voting” (A6MYC); functions performed: “Yes, because I am the mayor, I have the final word” (S8WYM); “I am the chairwoman of the GKiOŚ Commission of the City Council [name]” (A13MXC); exposing the decision-making process: “own local legislative initiatives, ecological projects” (A20MXC); “spatial development plan of the municipality” (L33WYC), displaying procedures: “Approval of service regulations, infrastructure construction projects (bicycle paths, parks, water and sewage networks, etc.), purchase and installation of devices (public water supply, public water distribution fountains in public buildings, distribution of water bottles, etc.), civic and ecological education projects, ecological awareness days and cleaning days,

etc.” (S48WYM); “We take care of the implementation of decisions in the field of energy, combating climate change, achieving CO2 reduction targets, waste management and sustainable mobility” (S26MYA). 2. Social impact related to: combining public function with local activity: “I am the president of an ecological association” (A55WYC); counteracting undesirable investments: “Yes, we are organised as a civic initiative that fights against the construction of an expressway through the municipality of [name]” (L6WYC); exerting social pressure: “I publicly and permanently warn about this and ask the local government what they intend to do. I talk about it in the media and to people. I exert public pressure...” (L86WYC).

The justification for the lack of influence felt by local government officials on the local decision-making process can be characterised within the scope of:

1. The position of municipal authorities resulting from the system of local governments: “the presidential system, the weak position of the council and councillors – advisory and control” (A107MYC), and more precisely, from belonging to the group of opposition councillors: “Because I am in the opposition, almost all solutions proposed by me are rejected” (S91MYC), the actual dominance of the executive body: “Despite the opposition of residents and the council, the mayor circumvents the regulations with the help of the starost or governor” (A29WYC).
2. The position of local authorities in the structure of power in the country, i.e., political game: “thoughtless politics at the central level, forcing local politicians to be absolutely loyal to the central office” (A19MYC).
3. The position of power concerning the private sector, i.e., lobbying: “Large business and corporations and the power of capital still have the advantage...” (L21WYC).

Among the pro-ecological activities carried out in the municipalities, and therefore, thanks to local government officials, we can distinguish projects that were implemented because they were part of broader initiatives for environmental protection (central, EU): “Installation of photovoltaic installations and solar collectors co-financed from European Union Funds, the Clean Air Program. Many residents took advantage of this type of facility” (A22WXC). Some examples can be classified as local innovations, such as “Creating a bio district with new activities that express respect for the earth” (S32WYC). Among the initiatives concerning nature protection and ecology indicated by the respondents, some can be classified as apparent activities (in the context of the mandatory tasks of the municipality): “Theoretically, green bus stops would qualify, but with three such stops with a negligible amount of vegetation, it is difficult to talk about pro-ecological solutions” (A40MWYC); “many small initiatives (from installing containers for used cooking oil to distributing water bottles in schools, installing unusual containers for cigarette butts)” (S54MYC).

The respondents’ assessment of the municipality members’ civic activity was important for the discussed topic. According to 13% of respondents, residents of the municipality are always active, regardless of the topic, to a similar extent. This type of assessment was most often characterised by respondents from Italy 15%, then from Slovenia 15%, and least frequently from Poland – only 8%. A large group of respondents (42%) stated that local community members are relatively active, especially when encouraged (with no significant differences in answers by country: Italy 44%, Poland 42%, and Slovenia 39%). Also, 42% of respondents indicated that the local community is rarely active when its direct interest is threatened. This type of activity was most often noticed by local government officials

from Poland 45%, then from Slovenia 42%, and least often from Italy 38%. A small group of respondents (1%) believed that the discussed activity did not occur, and 2% of respondents indicated other examples (Table 3).

Table 3. Situations in which the residents of the municipality are very active – the opinion of the respondents

Analysed category	Poland %	Italy %	Slovenia %	Average %
Yes, always (regardless of the subject of the decision being made) to a similar extent	8	17	15	13
Rarely, especially when residents are encouraged to get involved	42	44	39	42
Rarely, when the direct interests of residents are at risk	45	38	42	42
Other	5	0	1	2
No	0	1	2	1

Source: Authors' own work.

Examples of situations (other – Table 3) in which residents engage in the local decision-making process or demonstrate civic activity include: 1. Self-interest: e.g., particular interests: “When, and only when, it concerns them” (A111MWYC); when in the opinion of community members their well-being may be threatened: “When winter approaches and during it, this is related to the smog that appears then” (A26MXC); “Especially when residents complain about the noticeable effects of biogas plant operation” (A79WYC); “In connection with local decisions on environmental matters” (S21WYA). 2. Civic attitude: “When they are motivated by the situation, residents engage for various reasons, political and social, especially in terms of helping the wronged Ukrainians and supporting charities” (A31MXC). 3. Political issues: Residents are also sometimes used/engaged in political games: “This is a graceful and convenient topic during an election campaign” (A36MYC); “Before local or parliamentary elections” (A38MYC); “The mayor’s opponents are activated” (L86WYC).

Analysis of the respondents’ opinions on the activity of the local community (open question), the following topics activating residents can be indicated: 1. Ecology (with particular emphasis on the protection of greenery): “Defence of cut trees” (A2MYC); “Protection of the coast and seabed and endangered species...” (S4MXA). Some pro-ecological initiatives were assessed negatively by respondents: “Idiotic, mindless adoration of the wolf in the environment and failure to notice the threats resulting from the disappearance of the population of roe deer, fallow deer, and red deer in the forest” (A19MYC). Typically, ecological activities were attributed to activists who were not necessarily residents of a given municipality (new commonality): “The local community is not active in this sense. Activists work mainly in defence of greenery and rivers: (S14WYA). 2. Matters of their neighbourhood, often of a cultural and recreational nature: “Harvest festivals, festivals, educational meetings” (A78WYC); “Generally at the level of social activity (fire brigade, tourism...)” (L25WYC); “In celebrations or tourist initiatives” (S68MYC), and the context

of current functioning: "Distribution of village fund resources" (A47WYC). 3. Social matters: "Senior care, children's and youth sports, residents' safety (Volunteer Fire Departments)" (A39MWYC). 4. Infrastructure: "Construction of new housing estates, changes to the local spatial development plan" (A17MYC). 5. Forms of protest against decisions of local authorities and investments (a combination of the above-mentioned examples) are the largest group of local community activities: "Social opposition: fight against smog, cutting down trees" (A26MXC); "Construction of biogas plants, coal mines" (A29WYC); "Threats related to the construction of industrial plants" (A65WYC); "Opposition to the construction of a hydroelectric power plant" (L29WXC); "Construction of new buildings interfering with nature" (L56WYC); "Actions against shopping centres and large retailers" (S43MYM).

The analysed material also included examples of opportunities for participation (which could be considered innovations) in the local decision-making process created by the municipal authorities: "As the municipal board, we established an environmental group involving citizens and attempting to solve local problems" (S45WYA); "The urban municipality [name] adopted a participatory model, assuming the participation of local stakeholders, associations and citizens, at every stage of the decision-making process, on any issue. Protocols and agreements regulate this process. It includes specific methods of involvement (climate issues, industrial issues, waste cycle, port, mobility, infrastructure, districts, sports and cultural events, health care, and social care)" (S101MYA).

Residents' activity was raised in the content of other questions included in the survey questionnaire, e.g., in the context of social protests. Based on the analysed material, they can be divided into several groups, most of which can be linked to environmental protection. The first group includes protests directly focused on the issue of environmental protection and ecology, e.g., against road construction plans: "The road project in a valuable ecological and the landscape context was met with strong opposition from a large part of citizens and ecology associations" (S80MYC); landfills: "In the past, some investors tried to create a unique waste landfill, but they failed due to protests from the population (supported by environmental committees) and local authorities" (S48WYM); or disturbing the ecosystem to create a seemingly ecological solution for residents, e.g., bicycle paths: "Building 'immeasurable' numbers of bicycle paths and so-called respite places, the effect – scaring away animals" (A19MYC). The second group of protests were those concerning spatial development: "In the past, there was a project to build an underground car park on the main square, hundreds of cars would have entered the city centre" (S68MYC); "The spatial development plan of the municipality in the interest of the investor (L26WXC). The respondents also indicated protests (third group) against investors: "Interventions by private companies, waste incinerators, quarries" (S60MYA); "New industrial plants or real estate" (S32WYC); "Construction of a larger residential complex 14 years ago. There was a referendum and protests. However, they implemented it, and now we feel the consequences" (L68WYC); "Construction of a poultry farm" (A64WYC).

The fourth group of situations that activated municipal communities to protest were related to specific decisions of local government authorities: "Changing the study of conditions and directions of spatial development and the referendum on the park, but really on the development [name]" (A109MYC); "Closing the railway section reaching the city centre (sea station), serving commuters. Now, only by road transport" (S69MXC); "They concerned consent to constructing a sewage treatment plant and degrading hazardous

substances in the city centre" (A36MYC). In this context, the respondents emphasised the active opposition of residents to burdensome investments: "Plans to build an aggregate mine" (A85WXC); "Construction of a biogas plant and expansion of a poultry farm" (A29WYC). Notably, some of the indicated investments may be desirable in the context of ecology, e.g., biogas plants, but burdensome for residents. The last (fifth) group, identified based on the analysis of examples provided by respondents, were local protests regarding decisions of supra-municipal authorities: "A concession for the spatial location of new hydroelectric power plants on the middle [name]" (L29WXC); "Planned construction of the [name] expressway, construction of dry water reservoirs in the entire [name] valley due to the flood threat of [city name] and [city name]" (L6WYC); "Plans to build a high-speed railway line that is to pass through the middle of the municipality. The investment is unfavourable for the ecosystem, and interferes with areas of natural and tourist value, oxbow lakes, and a reservoir. In connection with this, there were social protests" (A58WYC). The collected material did not record protests against the authorities aimed at removing, for example, the mayor from office or dismissing both local authorities.

Hypothesis: The smaller the sense of local influence, the greater the stagnation of municipal stakeholders and the actions taken to result from activity forced by legal requirements or negative effects of local decisions. The research presented in the article shows that local government authorities that function in cooperation (the executive body and the majority in the council) have a decisive influence on the initiation, course, and implementation of the effects of the local decision-making process. The opposition minority is marginalised. In the case of cohabitation at the municipal level, the actual possibilities of the executive body are limited by the opposition councillors. The subject of the actions, including environmental protection, is irrelevant; the only thing that counts is the shaping of relations between the representative bodies of local government, i.e., those who actually have power. Slightly more than half of the respondents declared that they felt an influence on decisions made in the municipality (1/3 of the respondents represented the executive body, and some of the councillors who completed the survey belonged to the ruling majority). The feeling of the indicated influence was often declared by local government officials from Italy because most respondents from that country represented the executive body. Based on the analysis of the empirical material, several categories of this influence can be distinguished: institutional related to: financing the activities of local government (budget), performed functions, exposure of the decision-making process and social influence (combining public function with local activity and exerting social pressure). In the context of the marginalised minority opposition, the reasons for the lack of a sense of influence were considered to be: firstly, the position of the municipal authorities resulting from the local government system, more precisely, from belonging to the group of opposition councillors, the actual dominance of the executive body; secondly, the position of local authorities in the structure of power in the state (political game); thirdly, the position of the authorities in relation to the private sector (lobbying and pressure from investors). The social actors, especially in Italy and Slovenia, are considered by local government officials to be weaker in relation to shaping the reality of the municipality. To demonstrate activity in the local public sphere, a sense of agency, i.e., feeling the influence on decision-making, is important. The weakness of the social actors is determined by, firstly, legal conditions that provide tools for participation in local decision-making (social consultations, participatory budget, petitions, local referenda). Still, they are not as

significant as the competencies of local government officials. Secondly, in the context of nature protection, the local community is active not for the sake of the common good or lofty ideas but rather in defence of its own interests, even against pro-ecological solutions.

The results of the presented study have some limitations. The study is based on self-reporting, which can lead to bias. It does not directly take into account the views of residents, but only the perception of civil servants about the activities of residents. The study was not representative. Based on availability, only 326 questionnaires were completed. The return rate was 25% in Italy, 24% in Poland, and 15% in Slovenia (it was calculated based on the number of people who opened the link with the form). In some municipalities to which an invitation to the online survey was sent, it was not forwarded to local government officials due to being considered spam, digital exclusion, and a ban on opening links from unknown sources. The survey could also probably be ignored in municipalities with a conflict between authorities or residents opposing the investment and local government supporting the investor's aspirations. As a result, ecological issues could have been of greater importance than those described in the paper.

Conclusions

According to local government officials, residents become involved in the local decision-making process or demonstrate civic activity when their interests are threatened. They are also sometimes motivated by the situation, e.g., social, and the desire to help those in need, as well as political issues (using them for political purposes). Residents of Polish, Italian, and Slovenian municipalities are activated by the following topics: ecology (with particular emphasis on the protection of greenery); matters of their local area, often of a cultural and recreational nature, in the context of current functioning; and social issues and infrastructure. Local government officials notice the activity of members of the municipal community when they protest against the decisions of local authorities and investments. Based on the analysed material, protests can be divided into several groups, most of which are related to environmental protection. The protests were directly focused on the issues of environmental protection and ecology, e.g., against plans to build roads and landfills, disturbing the ecosystem to create a seemingly ecological solution for residents (bicycle paths). The respondents also indicated protests against investors, often in the context of specific decisions made by local government authorities. Local protests concerned the decisions of supra-municipal authorities, which influenced the local sphere regarding land development (roads, mines).

Among the pro-ecological activities carried out in municipalities considered important by local government officials, one can distinguish projects implemented because they were part of broader initiatives for environmental protection (central, EU). These were investments related to, among others, thermal insulation, and photovoltaics. Some examples can be classified as local innovations, e.g., creating a bio district in the city. Among the initiatives concerning nature protection and ecology indicated by the respondents, some can be assigned to the category of apparent activities (in the context of mandatory tasks of the municipality). Although implemented, they did not bring the expected results, e.g., green bus stops.

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