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Direct Participation in Poland Compared with Other European Countries

Abstract: The author analyses the process of direct participation in Poland compared with other European countries. The analysis includes a review of the subject literature and a new qualitative study carried out as part of the *DIRECT* project (2017–2018) co-financed by the European Commission. The article aims to examine new trends in direct participation and outline the various components of the process. The author defines direct participation (DP) as the conferral upon subordinates of tasks that they are expected to perform more or less autonomously. A complex picture is offered on the basis of data gathered from various research, although there is a concurrence between the results of quantitative research pursued to date and new data from qualitative research. Of note is the lack of continuity of direct participation in many dimensions, such as work organisation, instruments applied in practice, and differences between management ideas and actual day-to-day practice, including in terms of official and formal mechanisms versus unofficial and informal ones.

Keywords: public policy, employee participation, industrial relations, economic sociology

JEL Classification Codes: A14, Z18, D20

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Partycypacja bezpośrednia w Polsce w porównaniu z innymi krajami europejskimi

Streszczenie: Autor analizuje zjawisko partycypacji bezpośrednią w Polsce w kontekście europejskim. Opiera się na przeglądzie literatury przedmiotu, a także na nowych badaniach jakościowych zrealizowanych w ramach finansowanego przez Komisję Europejską projektu „DIRECT” (2017–2018). Artykuł ma na celu analizę nowych zjawisk w podjętej dziedzinie, jak i skonfrontowanie różnorodnych jej elementów. Autor definiuje partycypację bezpośrednią (BP) jako delegowanie podwładnym zadań do autonomicznego wykonania i konsultowanie z nimi. Wskazuje na jej złożony obraz, na podstawie zgromadzonych danych z różnych badań. Stwierdza zasadniczą zgodność między wynikami dotyczącymi różnych badań ilościowych a nowymi danymi z badań jakościowych. Zwraca uwagę na brak ciągłości w jej praktykowaniu w wielu wymiarach, np. w sferze organizacji pracy, stosowanych instrumentów jej praktykowania, między partycypacją postrzeganą w kategoriach ideałów zarządzania i codziennej praktyki czy między tym, co w jej mechanizmach oficjalne/formalne a nieoficjalne/nieformalne.

Słowa kluczowe: polityka publiczna, partycypacja pracownicza, stosunki przemysłowe, socjologia ekonomiczna

Kody klasyfikacji JEL: A14, Z18, D20

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Introduction

In the text below, I explore the issue of direct participation (DP) in the following order. First, I present the theoretical assumptions and specific features of the process as well as the means of study and the origin of the data. I then go on to highlight the factors considered to be the determinants of the process by the subject literature. I then outline empirical research and conclusions drawn to date before detailing my own qualitative research and conclusions. Finally, I go on to point to barriers to the development of DP in the context of organisational culture and culture in general.

The article focuses on the role of DP in the competitiveness of companies and general economic development at the country level. I underline the significance of DP for efforts to modernise work organisation and the challenges for enterprises to introduce a high-performance work system.

Throughout this work, I proceed from the assumption that direct participation is a complex process that needs to be regarded as non-linear from the perspective of systems theory. It is characterised by many feedback processes between its various components, and the models underpinning these are both variable and dynamic. The ultimate shape of DP in a given business or public-sector organisation depends on the processes by which a workplace regime develops. This last term is understood as defined by H. Knudsen [1995: 23]. On the basis of this concept, the scale and depth of participation reflect the relationship between the superior and the subordinate, along with the tendency

of the former to be unilateral in decision-making and the capacity of the latter to co-decide (being empowered and seeking to safeguard group interests). Another important factor is the intensity of ongoing conflicts, the content of collective agreements at work, and domestic laws regulating employees' rights in their place of work. As a result, the workplace regime may, to a varying extent, be saturated with unilateralism of action on the part of employers and the level of activeness among employees.

Participation at the level of an individual workplace may be of different kinds [Wilkinson, 2010]. These include indirect (representative) participation whereby employees are represented by intermediate bodies such as trade unions and works councils. S. Rudolf observes that indirect participation is especially widespread where time is of the essence [Rudolf, 2012]. Moreover, employees can participate in the decision-making process through their representatives on the company's supervisory board. Financial participation is yet another option, implying employee participation in the profits of the firm.

Literature review

DP at the workplace level is addressed by different disciplines of knowledge, ranging from the study of work organisation and sociology, through industrial relations to management science and economics. The greatest relevant output has appeared in the industrial-relations and HRM (Human Resources Management) contexts. In line with the theory of industrial relations, participation is regarded as an employee's right, and is believed to reflect a striving for a certain degree of empowerment. Being employed under a contract of employment does not mean total dependence on the employer. Participation in this case aims to ensure a somewhat closer matching of the bargaining power between the two parties to labour relations. A further assumption is that relations at a place of employment are founded primarily on conflict, inequality and power [Edwards, 2007: 27].

In the case of human resources management, academics – especially those hailing from the social sciences in the United States – proceed on the assumption that company managers are the shapers of labour relations, while participation is seen as a management instrument whereby bosses can motivate their employees to work more efficiently. It is emphasised that participation is basically inherent to the very nature of work, given that work is done on the basis of being employed [Boxall, Purcell, 2010: 32]. This, in turn, denotes a community of interest between the employees, on the one hand, and the employers and managers, on the other.

In Poland, research on DP chiefly comes from specialists in management, institutional economics and entrepreneurship, with only a limited input from sociologists and specialists in industrial relations. This fits in with the assessment of M. Gold and C. Rees, who show how direct participation has recently become a matter of interest to HRM sciences in the UK [Gold, Rees, 2018; Marchington, Wilkinson, 2005: 389].

Theoretical disputes over participation largely focus on the nature and conditions of the process in labour relations. The literature on the subject features three main thrusts (Ackers et al., 1992: 268–269). First, unitarians assume that the two parties to the labour relationship share values and interests. Meanwhile, pluralists feel that there are two sides of a divide characterised by conflict, albeit with certain mollifying factors, including an awareness that solutions can be brought in to encourage cooperation and compromise. And then there is a third, radical approach that assumes (in line with Marxist thinking) that a structural conflict pertains to the two sides of labour relations and that – inevitably, by the very nature of the capitalist system – labour and capital have antagonistic interests and ideologies, with the latter always (irrespective of circumstances) seeking to gain as much unpaid work as possible in order to increase profits [Ackers et al., 1992: 270]. Within this stance, it is possible to distinguish the orthodox approach formulated by H. Braverman and revisionist approaches, including that of H. Ramsay [Ackers et al., 1992].

There is nevertheless clear acceptance among academics that DP is gaining significance amid a departure from the Fordian model of work organisation and the realisation that employees represent the capital that can influence the competitiveness of firms [Król, Ludwiczyński, 2006: 97]. Another important contributing factor is changes in the qualifications structure. As workers improve their qualifications, a growing proportion of the staff aspires to develop professionally. As a consequence, “the stereotype of the primitive worker gave way steadily to one of the thinking employee that is capable of creativity and entrepreneurship” [Rudolf, 2014: 50]. There is also an increased expectation among employees to experience job satisfaction, along with a degree of emancipation of labour [Rudolf, 2012: 201].

In the past, there was a time when various social reformers started making efforts to ease the tensions between managers and those they were managing. Before World War I, the employer often “assumed the role of Army General, or Absolute Monarch, or at least Master of the House – which is to say a person of great power and authority whose orders had to be complied with without question of comment, and someone who had at his disposal severe punishments deemed to encourage adherence to ideas about order and control” [Kaufman, 2013: 13]. Ideas thus emerged whereby antagonisms might be eased somewhat, not least thanks to programmes providing for possible profit-sharing [Strauss, 2006; Wilkinson, Dundon, 2010]. A group of labour-relations reformers also appeared, putting forward ideas of so-called “industrial democracy” (as described in an 1897 book of that title authored by Beatrice and Sidney Webb).

Another significant trend was a school of thought known as “human relations” in English-speaking countries in the 1940 s and 1950 s. Of special note was the research of American sociologist Elton Mayo (1880–1949), who inspired a whole movement seeking to “humanise” work conditions [Martel, Dupuis, 2006]. Meanwhile, the 1960 s saw a growing focus on “job enrich-

ment”¹, an idea that the work of those in employment had to be enriched by factors exceeding these workers’ main or directly conferred tasks. Job enrichment was also about working to increase the workers’ feeling of responsibility and motivation as well as autonomy.

In the 1960s and 1970s, a research approach that G. Strauss termed “job redesign” gained prominence among psychologists and sociologists. It proposed mechanisms to add a more human dimension to the process of work, while meeting the demands of employees in the context of “human growth needs”. Yet another concept was the *Quality of Working Life* (QWL), which emphasised the significance of new projects for the organisation of work, ones based on greater empowerment for employees.

Quantitative research in Poland

In Poland, a series of quantitative studies of direct participation have been carried out using various methods. This work points to different forms of participation of varying intensity. These include co-decision and the proposing of new solutions, alongside consultation, meetings and being informed. The largest quantitative study on the subject in Poland dates from 2011 and takes in some 254 enterprises². The authors make use of methodologies developed to meet the needs of research done in 1997 in 10 EU member states [EPOC Research Group, 1997]³. A distinction was drawn between the following types of participation:

- individual consultations of the face-to-face kind,
- “arms-length” consultations,
- permanent consultative groups,
- temporary consultative groups,
- individual delegation of tasks to an employee,
- delegation of tasks to a group of employees.

The study showed that DP was practised in 79.9% of Polish enterprises, where at least one of the six forms of participation was in evidence. In this sense, the Polish result was only slightly lower than the EU-wide average of 82% obtained in the European research. However, it was markedly worse

¹ The concept was ushered in by F. Herzberg in 1950.

² Research carried out as part of a Ministry of Science and Higher Education-funded project called *Rodzaje, zasięg i ekonomiczna efektywność bezpośrednich form partycipacji pracowniczej w Polsce na tle starych krajów UE*. It concerned the types, scope and economic effectiveness of direct forms of participation in Poland, as compared against “old” EU member states).

³ Work done as part of an international project concerning direct employee participation in organisational change, with funding from the European Commission. As part of the project, the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions carried out empirical, quantitative research in 10 EU member states. The work was based on a questionnaire for managers sent out to almost 33,500 firms in total. Almost 5,800 questionnaires were received back. EPOC Research Group. 1997. *New Forms of Work Organisation – Can Europe Realise its Potential?* European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, Dublin.

than in the top-ranked countries, given that the EU average is lowered by poor results from Portugal (61%) and Spain (65%). The best results were 90% and 87% in the Netherlands and France respectively. The Polish research was carried out 14 years after the European study.

The co-author of the work concluded that “the result points to quite broad resort to participation, albeit at low-intensity (given that organisations most often applied just two forms of participation at the same time)” [Skorupińska, 2013: 323]. In only 7% of the entities was participation found to be in effect in all the identified forms. That said, the figure for the 10 EU member states was even lower, at just 4% of enterprises making use of all the forms. Moreover, while 38% of the entities in Poland practise group forms of participation, in the EU overall that figure is lower, at 36%. Again, this may in part be due to poor results achieved by Spain and Portugal.

The research showed that the participating employees were far more likely to be dealing with more complex tasks (i.e. specialists) rather than simple production, distribution, transport or warehousing processes. What's more, DP was more often embraced in workplaces requiring higher staff qualifications. In both Poland and across the EU, there has been a correlation between the level of qualifications and the scale of participation.

Table 1. Poland and other EU member states – level of involvement in at least one form of direct participation

Country	% of workplaces with direct participation
Poland	80
EU	82
France	87
Germany	81
Italy	85
Ireland	82
Netherlands	90
Portugal	61
Spain	65
Sweden	89
United Kingdom	83

Source: Skorupińska, Rudolf [2012].

In Poland, individual consultation most commonly focuses on training and the quality of products and services, while being less often concerned with health and safety, contacts with clients and work organisation. Meanwhile, European research found that work organisation was the most frequent subject of consultation. S. Rudolf observes that the focus on training points to a limited scope of participation in Poland, especially as other research shows that training programmes were often not organised at all for employees

[Rudolf, 2014: 56]. The results of work on the nature of group consultation were similar, though in this case work organisation was a more frequent subject of participation.

A further point of interest is that studies show better results of participation in the 10 EU countries studied by *EPOC* than in Poland. Eight effects of DP were analysed, and in Poland only two of these yielded comparable results (i.e. an increase in the efficiency of labour and improved quality). As far as other effects are concerned, these were shown to be far more limited than in Europe-wide research.

As S. Rudolf put it, “the effects of direct participation in Poland are in fact limited. It does not prove possible to note that – as a consequence of participation – output has risen, absenteeism has declined, or layoffs among employees or managerial staff have gone down” [2014: 62].

Recent years have brought a series of other studies, with the data leading to similar conclusions. The picture is a mixed one, but more detailed information permits some cautious optimism about the extent to which DP is being put into practice. For example, the *Pracujacy Polacy (Working Poles)*⁴ series of studies yields data on the scope of consultations and informational meetings with employees, and hence on the degree of employee empowerment. In the research, 55% of employees say their firms organise informational meetings at which it is possible to both ask questions and put forward ideas [Czarzasty, 2009: 398]. Meanwhile, 75% of employees declare they play a part in consultations at the workplace level. At the same time, respondents claim that consultations usually focus on matters of minor importance rather than essential ones. They are also more likely to take place in state-owned firms and those with foreign ownership than among private Polish-owned companies [Gardawski et al., 2010].

Forty six percent of employees claim they have an influence on decisions affecting their position at work [Gardawski, 2007: 31]. Meanwhile, 64% say there is support within their firms for freedom, originality and innovation. At the same time, 76% feel there is support in their workplace for “subordination to superiors” and precise following of instructions and orders. In the largest enterprises, more than 90% of employees subscribe to this view [Czarzasty 2009: 398].

Another work by J. Gardawski, focusing on SMEs⁵, reports that 28% of employees declare they have an influence on the way work is organised in their workplaces [Gardawski 2001: 210]. At the same time, 81% of employers studied said that the influence of employee participation on the management of a firm would be detrimental (with 47.5% voicing the opinion that manage-

⁴ The research began in 2005; the results were published in *Polacy pracujacy 2006*. The study took in a sample of 1,021 working Polish adults aged from 18 to 65. Follow-up research was carried out a year later: http://konfederacjalewiatan.pl/upload/File/2007_09/Pracujacy%20Polacy%202007%20-%20raport%20do%20druku.pdf

⁵ The research participants were owners of firms employing up to 250 workers.

ment would be made markedly worse) [Gardawski, 2001a]. Forty percent of employees share this view. Meanwhile, 45% of business owners say employees are not interested in participation, and if they are, then their interest is mainly in their earnings and/or direct responsibilities. Research shows that employees expect to receive clear instructions from their bosses rather than being involved in any way in the decision-making process.

Table 2. Employees and employers on participation (percentage data)

Issues			Entrepreneurs on employees' influence on decision-making in the firm
	Ought to have	Actually do have	
Promotion to supervisory posts	53.4	7.0	8.8
Laying off of employees	32.3	6.0	15.1
Deciding on production plans	29.8	7.0	8.8
Deciding on firm's directions of development	27.6	4.5	5.0
Deciding on remuneration rules	52.7	7.1	21.3
Team social issues	83.0	28.1	56.3
H&S conditions at work	87.4	39.0	66.3
Work organisation	71.9	27.8	45.1

Source: Gardawski [2001: 211].

Two studies by Dorota Łochnicka⁶ indicate that the researched firms⁷ most often pursued simple forms of participation, such as regular meetings with employees (63.9%), delegating new responsibilities to them to broaden their tasks (51.8%), and job rotation (50.6%). Forty percent of firms were involved in forms of participation such as setting up project groups to resolve specific problems. Autonomous groups were founded in 8.4% of firms. Research showed how the management of firms sought the opinion of employees (individually or via groups), mainly with a view to raising the quality of products and services (66.3%), improving contacts with clients (61.4%) and enhancing work safety (54.2%). Only to a limited extent does participation entail decision-making on investment (26.5%). Furthermore, few entrepreneurs offer a strongly positive assessment of participation, with a clear majority tending to give an only lukewarm assessment of effectiveness.

⁶ The author published some of her work under the name Pałubská.

⁷ The first study yielded 58 questionnaires from enterprises operating in the voivodeship (province/region) of Łódź. The second, based on questionnaires received from 83 respondents (from 2012 to 2013), involved a widened scope of three voivodeships (i.e. those of Łódź and Lublin as well as Świętokrzyskie voivodeship in the south-central part of the country). The questions asked in the second case concerned issues including the attitude of managers to participatory management, the degree to which supervision was exercised over the completion of tasks, the inclusion of employees in decision-making, the motives for the introduction or non-introduction of participatory methods, and the results achieved.

As Łochnicka writes, the discussed forms of DP are designed to avert monotony and boredom at work rather than serve the interests of co-decision. Few firms applied methods described as job enrichment, denoting the conferment of entitlements upon employees in the planning and coordination of their work, with a consequent raising of the level of responsibility for the tasks pursued [Łochnicka, 2013: 163].

Table 3. Forms of participation

Form of participation	Percentage of firms applying it
Regular meetings between employees and their immediate supervisors	63.9
Broadening the range of tasks performed	51.8
Job rotation	50.6
Problem-solving teams	39.8
Project groups	38.6
Job enrichment	36.1
Polling of employees' opinions	21.7
Autonomous groups	8.4
Quality circles	3.6

Source: Pałubska [2013: 164].

It is also worth citing international research contained in the OECD Employment Report 2017 [2017: 158]. This concerns the quality of cooperation via employee-employer relationships, as assessed by senior business executives. From this point of view, Poland was ranked in 31st place among 38 countries⁸.

Also of relevance is research on employee engagement. M. Juchnowicz presented the results of a study covering almost 4,000 people employed in firms and organisations in which more than half the staff are involved in specialist tasks. Sixty-three percent of the employees could be described as "engaged" because they replied "yes" or "on the whole, yes" to 80% of the questions included in the questionnaire [2010: 58–59]. Meanwhile, international research made it clear that 2017 saw a two-percentage-point decline, from 50% in 2016, in the proportion of employees capable of being regarded as committed to/engaged at workplace level. The corresponding share of such committed people across Europe was up by 4% [Aon Report, 2018]⁹.

⁸ The research made use of a 1–7 scale, with descriptions ranging from the "generally confrontational" to "generally cooperative". The data derive from the World Economic Forum's *Global Competitiveness Index Historical Dataset*, the *Eurobarometer* study (for European countries other than Norway and Switzerland), and the *World Values Survey* (in the case of data for remaining countries).

⁹ The research also found a decline (from 59% to 55%) in the likelihood that employees would feel loyalty, accompanied by a drop in the proportion of those surveyed thinking and speaking positively about their firm (from 59% to 56%), and a decrease (from 51% to 48%) in the percentage of those willing to act and develop within the firm.

Outlined below are takeaways from several further studies. Most of the work done on large samples is that of J. Hryniwicz from 2001. This was concerned with the approach of employees to the prospect of new workplace initiatives and styles of management. A clear majority of employees exhibited an unwillingness to engage in the development of decisions or a search for new methods of working. Many employees are basically unwilling to react when managers encourage them to take the initiative [Hryniwicz, 2012: 88]. Sixty percent of respondents (both superiors and subordinates) suggest that employees avoid taking responsibility, while almost 50% accept the claim that employees do not react willingly to managers' encouragement to take the initiative [2007: 134]. Moreover, almost 65% of respondents would prefer a manager who tells them exactly what they should be doing and does not therefore require that they reveal their own opinions on specific issues [Hryniwicz, 2007: 136].

The lack of readiness to become involved is both intellectual and behavioural in nature [2012: 89]. The author of the research points to two possible explanations, considering that the unwillingness is to an extent the result of experience with an authoritarian style of management pursued by managers. This is said to apply to some 17% to 18% of the latter group [2007: 164]¹⁰. However, this is not the only reason employees lack enthusiasm for participation, and it may only exert an impact on a small group of employees. The research does not reveal a direct and statistically significant relationship between experience with a given style of management and a readiness to play an active role in decision-making.

Further key data worthy of consideration can be found in research arising from the Third European Company Survey 2015, as carried out by the EU-funded Dublin Foundation¹¹. The results of the research show that the participation in Polish firms and organisations is of low-intensity, especially compared with findings from other EU member states. Only Italy and Portugal report a lower level of participation for the most advanced forms. Around 30% of firms and organisations are shown to engage in this kind of participation [Eurofound, 2015a: 41]. The greatest scope of participation is in evidence in Scandinavian countries (e.g. Sweden, with 80%). The Czech Republic also stands out for its high level of participation, at almost 60%.

Some other work by the Dublin Foundation¹² shows that Poland ranks low among EU member states in terms of participation. In Poland, partic-

¹⁰ The authoritarian style of management was reflected by the statement that "the manager very often acts on his/her own discretion, giving orders (as regards what is to be done and how) without offering any justification". Seventeen percent of managers make frequent use of their position of power more than is necessary, while 7% do that very frequently; and 23% often discourage employees from seeking better methods of providing their labour and from putting their own ideas forward (Hryniwicz 2007: 164).

¹¹ The respondents were more than 30,000 managers from EU member states.

¹² Based on a sample of more than 24,000 entities and almost 7,000 managers and employees in all EU member states (Third European Company Survey – Overview Report: Workplace Practices – Patterns, Performance and Well-Being).

ipation in the most intensive form is present in less than 50% of firms and organisations; only two of the 29 studied states have similar or worse results [Eurofound, 2015b: 94]. The study finds that Polish managers resemble those from Bulgaria in being least inclined to see a plus side to participation, e.g. as regards raising competitiveness, reducing levels of staff turnover, etc. [Eurofound, 2015b: 90].

Cultural factors and management

Work by many researchers demonstrates that superiors and subordinates are well separated from each other in Poland, where there is a tendency to engage in directive forms of management [Vroom, Yetton, Jago, Moczulska, 2011: 32–33, 44–46; Mączyński, 1996, Daniecki, 1998: 80; Szelągowska-Rudzka, 2014; Jankowicz, Pettitt, 1993]. Polish managers differ from their Western counterparts in being more inclined to adopt an authoritarian approach to decision-making as opposed to pro-participation [Jankowicz, Pettitt, 1993; Jankowicz 1999, Mączyński, 1991; Czarzasty, 2009: 402; Hryniwicz, 2007].

Cultural factors received particular attention in the literature after 1990 as CEEC economies went through a process of far-reaching adaptation in line with Western practices, in particular in privatised, formerly state-owned firms [Jankowicz, 1994; Jankowicz, Pettitt, 1993; Yanouzas, Boukis, 1993]. In the conclusions of one of the empirical studies, the authors note that, while managers in Germany, Austria and Switzerland are very much inclined towards participation, their counterparts in Poland and the Czech Republic display a preference for an autocratic approach. Research results thus portray Polish managers as interested in participation only in regard to minor issues, with autocratic activity prevailing in other areas [Jago et al., cited in House et al., 2004: 61].

As they seek to arrive at diagnoses, some researchers draw on results from Dutch academic Geert Hofstede, who was interested in cross-cultural studies and comparative research into organisations. This kind of work was continued by American Robert House and Israeli academic Shalom H. Schwartz.

Research undertaken by G. Hofstede assumed that management styles were shaped by components of national culture which he called “cultural orientation.” This was thought to explain why some managers tended to engage in specific kinds of behaviour¹³. Hofstede pursued questionnaire-based research that was designed to provide a description of cultural orientation in relation to specific behaviours or attitudes present in the studied countries. This orientation was believed to influence relationships between superiors and subordinates. In fact, the inclination to behave in particular ways was evaluated

¹³ Hofstede defined culture and its values as collective programming of the mind that distinguishes members of one group of people from another [Hofstede, 2001]. In line with this approach, “countries create individual orientations towards values like psychological profiles” [Kuipers, 2012: 31].

in several dimensions, including power distance (separating the bosses from the employees), as rooted in a given society's acceptance or non-acceptance of the unequal division of power within firms and different organisations.

Further dimensions researched include the extent to which collectivism and individualism influence what people strive for, as well as the level of acceptance for strong rivalry between people, assertiveness, and the use of "hard" instruments (femininity or masculinity) to have an impact on others. The work also examined the dimension to behaviour that relates to uncertainty and risk (tolerance or avoidance).

Of key importance for management is the first dimension to the culture of behaviour, i.e. power distance. Hofstede asserts that a low level of power distance correlates with an inclination to engage in participation [House et al., 2004: 61; Hayes, Prakasam, 1989]. Similar conclusions can be reached from other large-scale research carried out as part of the Globe Project and based on similar methodology [House et al., 2004: 45]¹⁴. In turn, Wood [2010] reports that a high level of power distance gives rise to an autocratic style of management and tends to work to strengthen the centralisation of power (2010).

Table 4. Index Score Estimates

Country and Part	Power Distance Index	Uncertainty Avoidance Index	Individualism Index	Masculinity Index	Long-Term Orientation Index
Poland	68	93	60	64	38
Hungary	46	82	80	88	58
Czech Republic	57	74	58	57	70
Slovakia	100	51	52	100	77
Germany	35	65	67	66	85
Netherlands	38	53	80	14	67
France	68	86	71	46	63
Sweden	31	29	71	5	52
United Kingdom	35	35	89	66	51
United States	40	46	91	62	26

Source: Kolman et al. [2003].

The results of research involving Hofstede's methodology show that Poland resembles other Visegrad Group countries in its relatively high level of power

¹⁴ GLOBE (the *Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness Research Program*) involved survey results obtained from more than 17,000 middle managers in 59 countries and 951 organisations. The research encompassed several assumed dimensions to culture, i.e. avoidance of uncertainty, power distance, institutional and internal collectivism, assertiveness, future-orientation, results-orientation, and human-orientation. Respondents answered questions about the assessment of specific dimensions in real life as well as about their significance in the future (the extent to which they are desirable).

distance. On a scale from 1 to 110, Poland scores 68, compared with Slovakia's 100, the Czech Republic's 57 and Hungary's 46¹⁵. Meanwhile, the scores for Germany and Austria are 35 and 11 respectively [Kolman et al., 2003]¹⁶. Later studies conducted in Poland and Germany found a smaller power distance [Komor, Schumann, 2015: 95]. Additionally, Nasierowski and Mikuła [1998] reported on comparative research involving Poles and Canadians (young managers and students). In Poland, the value of the distance index was much higher, at 72, compared with 39 for Canada).

Other academics studied inclinations to engage in specific types of behaviour. Inglehart and Welzel used empirical data from their *World Values Survey* to categorise national culture in line with an axis with traditional values at one end and secular-rational values at the other. Their second (x) axis sets the so-called "survival values" against those associated with self-expression (as also taken to denote egoism vs. altruism and collectivism vs individualism¹⁷.

Like Hungary and Slovakia, Poland takes a relatively high position on the axis denoting traditional values, with this meaning lesser development of the so-called secular-rational values (Inglehart, Welzel, 2005). This links up with the management sphere to the extent that researchers have found a link between the upholding of traditional values and authoritarian tendencies. In societies of this kind, there is a perception as to the greater degree of male dominance in political and economic life, and a preference for respect for authority wherever this is developed [Inglehart, Baker, 2000: 23].

German academic Christian Welzel founded his emancipative values index¹⁸ (2013: 2), in order to measure preference when it comes to the value of freedom of choice as linked with an emphasis on equality of opportunity, autonomy and regard for people's opinions. Poland resembles Slovakia and Hungary in occupying a low position in terms of this index. In line with Welzel's emancipation theory, this means that Central European culture displays considerable inherent reluctance when it comes to worker participation [2013: 87]. Welzel sees this as reflecting insufficient advancement of the cultural-change process. If this process progresses, it will make it easier to introduce solutions regarding decision-making allowing the voices of employees to be heard.

The research mentioned above seems to justify the opinion of some researchers. A translated version of Katarzyna Skorupińska's assessment would be as follows: "The period of economic transformation did not bring the development of a participatory style of management, and Polish employers did not develop

¹⁵ The 2013 research showed that the power distance was not as considerable as previous studies had suggested [Bašnáková, Brezina, Masaryk, 2016].

¹⁶ Hofstede's work on Poland and other CEECs was done in 1998, using the same methodology (scenario scripts), albeit with students as the respondents, rather than IBM employees, as was the case in Hofstede's preliminary research from the 1970 s and 1980 s [Kolman et al., 2003].

¹⁷ The concept was tested on data deriving from the *World Values Survey*, which takes in many elements of national cultures [Minkov, 2013: 262].

¹⁸ Reminiscent of "self-expression values".

an awareness of the benefits accruing from new forms of work organisation". For his part, J. Czarzasty argued that an authoritarian style of management is practised in Poland: "the organisational culture of firms operating in Poland bears the clear stamp of authoritarianism" [Czarzasty, 2009: 402]. Moreover, some research tends to show that subordinates actually anticipate such a management style, and expect it to be exercised [Mączyński, 1991: 502].

Direct participation in Poland: DIRECT project

In what follows I proceed to analyse qualitative research carried out as part of the *DIRECT*¹⁹ project funded by the European Commission. In Poland, this was pursued in the banking and food sectors and involved enhanced interviewing as well as case studies. The interviews in question concerned selected aspects of participation, notably the ways in which it takes place, its scale and forms, the underlying reasons, mitigating factors, and the relationship between direct and indirect (i.e. representative) participation.

In-depth interviews were carried out with employees and managers in the banking and food sectors. The entities involved included *Bank Zachodni WBK SA* (now *Santander Bank Polska*), *Bank Millennium*, *Credit Agricole*, *Kaliszanka* (today a part of *Colian Holding*), *Agros Nova* (*Maspex Group*), *Heinz Poland*, *Mokate Group* and *Pernod Ricard*. The interviews took place with a consultant from the finance sector as well as a representative from the Federation of Food Industry Employees²⁰ (part of the *OPZZ* trade union). Employees were mainly trade-union activists, but also people holding blue-collar jobs. Two case studies were carried out (of a "Big 5" Polish bank and a food-industry firm). An experts' seminar was also run, targeting employees, managers and academics. All of this activity took place in 2018.

The data accumulated quite a complex picture of participation. And there are several regularities to this, which very much correlate with the data from quantitative research to date. There is a lack of continuity in various dimensions, including work organisation, instruments of co-participation, and time. And the lower an employee is in the hierarchy through which work is organised, the worse is usually the experience gained by that employee. It is generally at the managerial level that it is possible to come across the opinion that participation is practised in a broader dimension. This is linked with a lack of continuity in another sphere – that of instrumentation in the practice of participation. There is a prevalence of simple instruments associated with consultations with individual employees. Instruments related to more far-reaching engagement in the performance of work are used less often, and the same is true of instruments that would allow co-decision by employees at the strate-

¹⁹ The full name of the project is Development of Direct Workers Participation and its Impact on Industrial Relations at Company Level (2017–2018) (VS/2016/0305). The project consortium brings together researchers from Bulgaria, Cyprus, Ireland, Italy, Poland, and the United Kingdom.

²⁰ The Polish name is Federacja Pracowników Przemysłu Spożywczego.

gic level. It is also possible to recognise manifestations of a lack of continuity between participation viewed in terms of ideals of management and the development of strategy, on the one hand, and participation in terms of the way work is carried out from day to day, on the other. This further denotes a lack of continuity between the official-and-formal and the unofficial-and-informal. There is no shortage of declarations about the significance of participation in the workplace, but these opinions are not adequately reflected by respondents' actual experience with their work.

Respondents also point to a lack of continuity over time. Those with a work experience of 10 to 20 years tend to speak of a positive change, while highlighting low standards at the outset. Those in employment feel that they lack a sense of generational continuity. Some respondents associate participation with more junior employees to whom they ascribe greater openness. At the same time, they perceive a psychological attachment to authoritarian forms of management among older workers. Some respondents point to a lack of continuity between forms of ownership in the economy. Enterprises with Western capital are said to offer more propitious conditions for participation.

Respondents quite clearly list factors that encourage or curtail participation. In the first category, they maintain that participation is made easier by tasks entailing people facing up to various challenges, for example in steadily improving productivity and competitiveness. This facilitates the modernisation of the way in which work is organised, and also favours an improvement in people-to-people relations.

Bank managers emphasise that participation is favoured where there is a successful passage through the ongoing mobility revolution in the sector. They stress that operations continued in the traditional, hierarchical manner would be doomed to failure. The same situation would apply to innovation, which requires employees to become more deeply involved, denoting an ever-wider sphere available to co-decision. The win-win principle is at work here because both sides in labour relations draw benefits from DP.

One interviewee said that banking was becoming a great design field. Employees are searching for new financial products for their ever more demanding clients, and for new forms through which these could be made available. New ideas are also needed for communication and marketing, especially to reach young consumers. "Bank boards know that they must act, not by using power on account of their being bosses, but through joint action, innovation and partnership. But the attempts at this do not always come off".

A readiness to pursue participation is also encouraged by the increasingly stiffer competition that banks have to face up to. Firms from other sectors are also starting to offer financial services more widely, leading to "a convergence of branches". Traditional banking as symbolised by "the branch on the street" is disappearing, and those who hang on to the old practices may find themselves forced out of the market.

Respondents are aware that an evolution is taking place in business management methods. DP is regarded as a factor enabling an increase in

competitiveness. Respondents stress that the hierarchical culture in banking represents a kind of trap. It does have its successes, but only when simple products such as consumer credit are sold, while “if a bank is to devise a more advanced offering, it needs to base itself around a culture of joint participation”.

Also of significance is the existence of a fashion for participation. This encourages managers to build a model of supportive leadership that aims to ensure that employees “want to want”. From the perspective of the boss, there has to be an opening up of people to make better use of their talents. There should also be a capacity to explain and account for the decisions taken. The youngest generation in particular expects such an approach of themselves.

Managers in the food sector also seem to have a sense of participation, which makes it easier to face a business’s challenges. In this sector, employee engagement is necessary for a firm to master the ability to react rapidly to the changing tastes of consumers. The challenge is to meet requirements as regards ongoing capital consolidation, with a skilful use of ever more modern production technologies.

In the view of a manager, long-standing, more-intensive forms of participation may be embraced by firms with a longer tradition. Meanwhile, a union activist in one of the larger firms said that the management of his firm had on many occasions stressed a management style known as *kaizen*, meaning a philosophy of involvement in a constant search for ideas by which to streamline and improve a firm’s whole organisation. This denotes participation by all employees irrespective of their level. The firm had set up a special unit to deal with training and promote engagement practices among employees.

Barriers hindering participation

Factors listed by respondents as hindering participation can be classified into the following sub-groups:

- historical (attachment to a hierarchical style of management, power distance between the parties to labour relations and a “feudal” type of interactions between bosses and their workers);
- structural (relating to the nature of a given sector or type of work);
- financial (relating to the financial potential of the workplace).

Participants in the discussion from both sectors point to discontinuities in the practice and experience of participation. DP is gaining significance as a management instrument, although many employees continue to highlight a number of limiting factors. As emphasised earlier, many barriers are present where employees engage in routine activities, such as automated manufacturing processes [Rudolf, 2014: 56]. The food sector exemplifies this kind of experience, with only routine work left to be done by people in many cases. This limits the possible space for interaction with bosses. One employee said that managers provide top-down descriptions of who is supposed to do what and how. Employees are expected to conform to specifications and timetables even when unpredictable events arise. “All that remains for us as inde-

pendent human beings is responsibility – and in fact that is also the subject of a detailed description”.

In banking, a large proportion of the jobs are now characterised by a highly routine approach to client services. Employees seek to sell bank products in line with tried and tested techniques, hence the description of this kind of work as “McDonaldisation”. Moreover, this line of work is often associated with considerable pressure to achieve quantitative targets related to the sale of products, gaining new clients and so on. One employee suggested that local branches where there was no co-decision power and limited consultation were in the worst situation.

Most people surveyed were inclined to regard banking as a sector in which participation was “tough going”. After all, banking is known for its hierarchical work organisation. Obviously, confidentiality has always been a key feature in the sector, given the large amounts of money involved. Abuses of power are always feared, but so is loss of know-how. Moreover, managers see banking as a business that relies on numerous regulations issued in a top-down manner.

As a consequence, a rather old-fashioned hands-on style of management is deeply rooted in certain banks, based on directives and sometimes an imperious and domineering manner of behaviour. The feeling is that decisions are the privilege of the few, notably the CEO and the Board, while level n-1²¹ is immediately involved in carrying out instructions, with no part to be played by rank-and-file employees in generating ideas about how the company is supposed to operate. “The higher-ups are used to the idea that they come up with strategies that others then put into effect”.

In the view of employees, there is a tangible influence of managers who hold on to more authoritarian methods of management. One respondent said that Polish bankers possess many technical and professional skills, but are often lacking in soft skills, such as managing by motivating. “80% to 90% of the managers do not listen”. And it is sales-related goals that usually come first for banks.

Many respondents emphasise that, in theory, bank managers encourage participation, co-decision, inclusion and the sharing of information. However, in many cases these are only slogans, they say, and the practice is vastly different. The director of a bank’s HR department said there was pressure on managerial staff to develop an awareness of the significance of participation, but some fared poorly when it came to creating conditions supportive of DP. Another respondent said: “During my 16 years on the job, I have seen increasing support for participation and soft motivation. But that has not led to adequate changes in styles of management”. Another interviewee pointed to changes over the last several decades: “When I started out in the early ‘90s, there was this basic principle that directors were those whose job it was to require things of others and give orders; but after 15 years or so, now is finally the time for participation”.

²¹ Level n-1 means one level below the management board level (board of directors).

The bank HR director said there was a general willingness to engage in participation, but problems appeared when efforts had to be made to make that reality in day-to-day operations. The barriers kicking in at that point included a low level of trust – a familiar problem throughout the Polish economy and public life.

Meanwhile, a respondent from the food sector pointed to structural difficulties with participation. They said: "What has been established in Poland is local empires whose owners have become notorious for their ways of dealing with the people they take on to work for them." One example often cited in this context is Henryk Stokłosa, the owner of a farming-and-food conglomerate operating in the Piła area of northern Poland, and a man who faced many accusations of abuse of one kind or another. The fact is that some of these owners – in the early 1990s in particular – founded and developed firms despite lacking much in the way of human capital – particularly from the point of view of the capacity to manage large groups of employees. Instead, they had other skills and were also favoured by circumstances. They knew how to react quickly to increasing market demand for new products, while the actual *modus operandi* was far less important to them. High unemployment helped things along because finding people ready to work did not prove difficult. Simple HRM methods could be used, and most of the production process in food firms did not require highly qualified employees.

Union activists were inclined to suggest that middle managers were the ones to block participation in many cases. This lack of willingness was thought to reflect insecurity and a person's desire to hold on to their own prestige. Some managers are afraid that subordinates coming to play a greater role in a plant will eventually expect higher wages and promotion.

Another respondent holding a managerial post emphasised that participation in Poland was at best narrow in scope. This reflects a strong tradition of the "feudal" type, whereby it is possible to maintain the kind of work organisation that prevailed several centuries ago on large farms and landed estates belonging to the gentry and nobility. One specific feature of that system was that peasants lacked either civil or economic rights. They were tied to the land and forced to work on the farms they "belonged" to. In today's terms, we would see this tradition as characterised by a large "power distance" between the managers and the managed, with all the confrontational relationships and conflicts that this involves.

According to that manager, too much distance in a workplace environment implies ongoing, unresolved problems in business operations. Thus, managers go on lacking the basic skills to organise labour in such a way that the employees' scope of obligations and responsibilities would be better known. In this way, an objective assessment of the outcome of work is difficult. The respondent went on to add that managers in these kinds of circumstances depend greatly on what they already know and feel no need for dialogue with others at the workplace.

Conclusions

The above-mentioned research studies show the complex nature of DP in Poland. There are many determinants of employee engagement and many barriers to it. The data accumulated left few doubts that matured forms of DP were rare, especially in the two analysed sectors. There is ample evidence to support the claim by S. Rudolf that “the effects of direct participation in Poland are in fact limited” or the argument of D. Łochnicka that the real level of participation in Poland remains low, even though there is now an awareness of the economic benefits that may accrue. K. Skorupińska writes that “the period of economic transition has not resulted in the development of a participatory style of management as Polish employers did not realize the benefits of these new forms of work organisation in companies”.

It seems that all this can be explained by a range of complex factors including historical, structural, and financial hindrances linked to some components of cultural orientation. Of note is research undertaken by G. Hofstede and other types of cross-cultural studies and comparative research into work organisation. One of the main obstacles is a high level of power distance coupled with a lack of inclination to engage in participation.

The qualitative survey explains the data from quantitative research. The respondents highlight a lack of continuity in various dimensions related work organisation, instruments of co-participation, time, and so on. Another problem is that the lower a given employee is in the hierarchy, the worse the experience that the employee gains. Mainly at the managerial level, one can hear the opinion that participation is pursued in a broader dimension. In small and medium-sized enterprises, 81% of the employers say employee participation could have a detrimental effect on the management of their firms (with 47.5% arguing that management could become markedly worse) [Gardawski, 2001a].

The data on the low level of DP pose a key challenge for most companies in Poland when it comes to the modernisation of work organisation. Employee engagement (participation) in the decision-making process is usually regarded as an important component of DP. Most companies strive to introduce innovative forms of work organisation that are often a matter of survival in increasingly competitive markets. Many developed countries in the late 1960 s and early 1970 s started to promote DP. It was seen as a means of “humanising” work and reducing industrial conflict [Lansbury, Wailes, 2008: 434]. Later governments sought economic benefits as a result of promoting a model of high-performance work organisation. It provided a higher level of adaptability to changing market reality through processes including employee engagement.

The essential point is the style of management, worker-supervisor relations and finally the dynamics between the unions and the management. The challenge is to understand on a deeper level that, from the point of view of an employee, participation is by no means the only option available at the workplace. A. Hirschman reports a situation in which it is not in an employee’s interest to share information with the bosses as part of the decision-making

process. The boss could be tempted to use such information to burden the employee with more work or even find a justification for laying people off. An employee is only interested in participating in situations characterised by trust and a belief that the supply of information will provide something of benefit in return. As Hirschman pointed out, an employee may speak up or "desert" the workplace, both figuratively and literally. The employee may also elect to remain passive on the sidelines and not become involved at all [Hirschman, 1970].

All of the above points to potential difficulties in enhancing DP and having systemic significance conferred upon it. Many researchers claim that factors inherent in national culture play a key role here. They are responsible for most of the major hindrances and obstacles. This results from the fact that DP is a large extent based on the perception of human relations.

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