


Implementation of Citizens' Budgets in Poland – Analysis of Selected Experiences of Local Government Units

Wdrażanie budżetów obywatelskich w Polsce – analiza wybranych doświadczeń jednostek samorządu terytorialnego

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Abstract: The citizens' budget, also known as the participatory budget, has been implemented in Poland since 2011, when it was first introduced in the city of Sopot. Since then, this mechanism has gained considerable popularity and has been adopted by numerous local government units. In 2018, there was a significant legal change, as a result of which the citizens' budget became an obligatory element of management in cities with county rights, losing its hitherto optional character. This article attempts to analyse the differences in the organisation and implementation of citizens' budgets in selected local government units in Poland. Both procedural and structural differences that affect the effectiveness of this instrument of social participation are under consideration. Factors determining different implementation practices resulting from local conditions and the specifics of individual local government units are indicated.

Keywords: citizens' budget, local government, social participation, implementation, local legislation, local government units, public administration

Streszczenie: Budżet obywatelski – określany również jako budżet partycypacyjny – jest realizowany w Polsce od 2011 r., kiedy to po raz pierwszy został wprowadzony w mieście Sopot. Od tamtej pory mechanizm ten zyskał znaczną popularność i został zaadaptowany przez liczne jednostki samorządu terytorialnego. W 2018 r. nastąpiła istotna zmiana prawna, w wyniku której budżet obywatelski stał się obowiązkowym elementem zarządzania w miastach na prawach powiatu, tracąc swój dotychczas fakultatywny charakter. Niniejszy artykuł podejmuje próbę analizy zróżnicowania w organizacji i wdrażaniu budżetów obywatelskich w wybranych jednostkach samorządowych w Polsce. Przedmiot rozważań stanowią zarówno różnice proceduralne, jak i strukturalne, które wpływają na efektywność funkcjonowania tego instrumentu partycypacji społecznej. Wskazane zostaną czynniki determinujące odmienne praktyki implementacyjne, wynikające z uwarunkowań lokalnych oraz specyfiki poszczególnych jednostek samorządu terytorialnego.

Słowa kluczowe: budżet obywatelski, samorząd terytorialny, partycypacja społeczna, implementacja, legislacja lokalna, jednostki samorządowe, zarządzanie publiczne

Citizens' budget is defined as a process in which residents of a specific area, such as a city or village, actively participate in decisions regarding the allocation of public funds. The concept of involving citizens in decision-making processes – known today as the Citizens' Budget – was initiated in 1989 in Porto Alegre and it was an innovative solution back then. This instrument appeared in Europe at the beginning of the 21st century, where it began to be implemented in Spain, Germany, France, Portugal, and Switzerland, among others. The idea of participatory budgeting has also been implemented in some African countries, including Cameroon (Sintomer, Röcke, Herzberg 2016). According to Daria Rybińska, the term "citizens' budget" does not have a single, generally accepted definition (Rybińska 2018: 53–55). In Poland, it is seen as a form of innovation in local management.

An important element of the functioning of the citizens' budget is systematic monitoring, which enables the control and evaluation of gradually introduced modifications. The involvement of residents in participatory processes is an important indicator of the positive assessment of local authorities. It should be emphasised that the citizens' budget is not only an effective instrument of social participation, but also promotes the growth of citizens' activity, which is one of its fundamental goals. The citizens' budget provides ample opportunities for initiators and social activists who can actively participate in local policy-making. Residents of a given area gain a certain level of autonomy of action by being able to submit their own projects, which are then put to the vote of the local community, which decides whether to accept or reject them. However, the implementation of the proposed initiatives is limited by a certain financial limit, established on the basis of the regulations in force in the local government unit. The principles of the functioning of the citizens' budget are determined individually by individual cities and villages and are based on the experience and practices developed in previous editions (Jurek 2023: 54–55).

The aim of the article is to analyse the process of implementation of citizens' budgets in selected local government units in Poland as a form of social participation, with particular attention to the factors affecting their course and effectiveness. The article answers the research questions: What factors influence the way of implementation of citizens' budgets in local government units in Poland and their effectiveness as a mechanism of social participation? The analysis is based on a review of the literature on the subject, strategic documents, and data, including reports on the functioning of citizens' budgets, as well as their varieties in the form of youth and green

budgets, which are alternative participatory practices in many cities. The article refers to selected examples of cities introducing citizens' budgets, varying in terms of population size, year of implementation, and geographical location. These cases were treated as illustrative case studies, without in-depth analysis. They serve to show different approaches to the implementation of the citizens' budget in Poland and to indicate specific organisational, social and institutional solutions.

1. Definitional Approach

At the beginning, selected definitions of participatory budgeting formulated by Polish and foreign researchers are presented. The most frequently cited are:

1. Participatory budgeting is a cyclical process in which residents of a given local government unit actively co-decide on the allocation of part of public funds, in cooperation with local authorities, in order to increase participation and transparency of spending (Sintomer et al. 2012).
2. Participatory budgeting is a process of direct, universal and voluntary democracy through which the public can discuss and co-determine the public budget (Cabannes 2004).
3. Participatory budgeting is a decision-making process in which citizens debate and negotiate the allocation of public resources (Wampler 2012).
4. Participatory budgeting is understood as a democratic procedure that allows residents to decide on the allocation of part of the public funds allocated for this purpose from the budget of a given administrative unit (Rytel-Warzocha 2010).
5. Participatory budgeting is defined as an instrument of citizen participation. It is understood as a decision-making process in which residents co-create the city's budget and co-decide on the distribution of a certain pool of public funds (see Michalska-Żyła, Brzeziński 2017: 210).
6. The citizens' budget is a participatory mechanism that allows residents of a given local government to co-decide on the allocation of part of public funds, with the assumption of strengthening their civic position, developing democratic competencies and increasing the influence of citizens on financial decisions of a local government unit (Podgórska-Rykała, Grygienieć 2025).

7. The citizens' budget is the process of citizens' co-decision in the implementation of their current needs, which is manifested in the vote on projects corresponding to their interests. Participation in this process reflects both the willingness and the need of citizens to co-shape the allocation of public funds through democratic mechanisms for project selection (Jurek 2025).

The citizens' budget since its introduction has enjoyed great popularity among the population. The reasons can be seen in the natural need of local communities to actively influence the shaping of public space and decide on investments financed from public funds. Nevertheless, the implementation of the citizens' budget faces a number of obstacles, among which are: (a) the fear of government representatives from limiting their role in the budget allocation process; (b) the need for increased involvement of both politicians and administration officials; and (c) the requirement to prepare budget plans more in advance (Sorychta-Wojczyk 2015: 424).

The nature of the use of citizens' budgets has been well defined by Agnieszka Sobol, who stresses that the citizens' budget is part of the coordination mechanism (*governance*), understood as a management process conducted in ongoing cooperation with a variety of social partners. According to the author, the citizens' budget acts as an invitation addressed by local authorities to residents, encouraging them to actively participate in decisions on the distribution of local budget funds. It is thus an instrument of civil dialogue, a process that is gaining importance both in social science analysis and in political practice (Sobol 2017: 177). It should be emphasised that the citizens' budget requires the active involvement of residents of a given local government unit. As a consultation process, it enables dialogue between the administration and the local community, which facilitates mutual recognition of needs and expectations.

It is also worth mentioning the citizens' school budget (SBO – *szkolny budżet obywatelski*), which is a participatory mechanism designed for primary and secondary school students (Bartlett, Schugurensky 2024). This is a separate form of citizens' budget, aimed at introducing young people to the practice of participatory democracy. This mechanism allows students to actively participate in the decision-making process regarding the expenditure of part of the funds allocated to the needs of the school, both in the sphere of infrastructure, equipment, as well as cultural, educational or social initiatives (Bartlett, Schugurensky 2021). The main objective of the SBO is not only to enable young people to have a real impact on the functioning of

their educational environment, but also to develop key civic competences such as social responsibility, the ability to argue and negotiate, the ability to cooperate and the awareness of the importance of democratic procedures. Through the process of submitting projects, their substantive evaluation and democratic voting, students learn to make decisions in a thoughtful and fair way. In addition, SBO has an educational function – it serves as a “practical school of democracy,” where young people gain experience in social participation, planning and control of public spending (Shybalkina, Nabatchi 2024). Consequently, SBO can contribute to building a sense of community responsibility, raising awareness of the needs of other members of the school community, and developing pro-social and proactive attitudes, preparing students for active participation in local and democratic life in adulthood.

2. The Process of Implementing Citizens' Budgets

In the literature of the subject you can find numerous doubts about the date of introduction of the citizens' budget in Poland. As noted by Bogusław Pytlik, there are difficulties in clearly establishing the beginning of participatory practices related to the citizens' budget. One of the first experiences in this area is considered to be an innovative, as for those times, Grant Fund project, which was implemented in Płock in the years 2003–2005 (Pytlik 2017: 108–109). However, the Grant Fund does not fully meet the criteria specific to the citizens' budget. Therefore, the moment of application of this instrument in Poland is only considered to be its implementation in Sopot. Citizens' budgets are distinguished, among other things, by the fact that the funds for the implementation of projects submitted and selected by residents come exclusively from the cities' own budgets, which excludes the participation of other entities, such as non-governmental organisations.

It can therefore be argued that one of the key factors in the development of the citizens' budget in Poland was and remains the unwillingness of society to actively participate in public life and social activities (Krześ 2014: 98). The first local government unit that decided to implement this mechanism was the already mentioned Sopot. In 2011, 3 million PLN was allocated for the implementation of the citizens' budget, which accounted for more than 1% of the total city budget. The uniqueness of the Sopot citizens' budget

was primarily due to the fact that the initiative to implement it came from grassroots social activities. In contrast to most Polish cities, where decisions on launching the citizens' budget were made at the level of local authorities, in Sopot this process was initiated by the Sopot Development Initiative, an informal group of residents established in 2008. The main goal of this organisation was to promote civic activity and involve residents in decision-making processes at the local level (Podgórska-Rykała 2019: 228–229). Thus, the citizens' budget of Sopot became an example of a grassroots initiative, which was a significant difference compared to the practices observed in other local government units.

The citizens' budget enables citizens to participate in decisions regarding the allocation of part of the municipality's financial resources, acts as a legitimizing local authority and promotes innovation and entrepreneurship. It is also an instrument supporting the decentralisation process and responding to the growing gap between authorities and the local community. Therefore, the citizens' budget should be considered as a mechanism to serve both residents and local governments (Jaśkowiec 2021: 147). However, the question arises as to its actual functioning in practice. In the literature of the subject, you can find data indicating that in 2014, the participatory budget mechanism was implemented in 35 cities (Kraszewski, Mojkowski 2014: 20). Two years later, it was reported that the number of administrative units that introduced the participatory budget mechanism increased to 210. In 2019, Paweł Pistelok pointed out that the civic budget procedure was implemented in 320 cities (Pistelok 2019: 19). This represents a very strong interest of the inhabitants in local participation and participation in the decision-making process.

In the literature of the subject, there are many studies that discuss the existence of one universal or many diverse models of the citizens' budget. Wojciech Kębłowski is a proponent of the first approach. He notes differences in specific solutions, but at the same time emphasises that in the vast majority of cases, very similar principles are applied, which allows for the identification of a Polish model of participatory budgeting (Kębłowski 2014). However, more often there are opinions to the contrary, according to which the lack of unambiguous regulations in the act on municipal local government makes individual local government units adapt the mechanism of the civic budget to local needs. These options differ in terms of criteria such as how the funds are allocated to specific categories (e.g., city-wide and zone/district projects), the presence of the so-called green budget and

the voting method, including both the number of votes per category and the form of voting – traditional paper or electronic.

3. Successes and Failures of the Citizens' Budget

Since the implementation of the participatory budget in Sopot, there have been both successes and failures related to this model of allocating public funds at the local level. In his study *Budżet obywatelski w praktyce samorządów* [Citizens' Budget in Local Government Practice], Adrian Misiejko emphasises that experiences with citizens' budgets vary. In addition to well-organized mechanisms, procedures have emerged that can be considered inadequate to the assumptions of the citizens' budget (Misiejko 2020: 142). In practice, there were difficulties in accurately defining the competences of individual local government units, which affected the scope of tasks that could be financed. Projects of a similar nature often won, such as funding for public educational institutions, mobilising active groups of residents, e.g., parents. In addition, it was noted that some initiatives, despite complying with the applicable law, were not implemented for a long time because the results of the public consultation were not binding on local authorities.

The characteristics of the submitted projects serve an important diagnostic function, since the proposals addressed to the administration responsible for the implementation of the citizens' budget mechanism are an indicator of the level of involvement of the local community. The process of submitting projects involves a high barrier to participation, resulting from the need to devote considerable effort to the preparation of relevant documentation. According to A. Misiejko, the initiators of the projects are a key factor in the functioning of Polish citizens' budgets, and excessive or unjustified formal requirements run counter to the principles of the functioning of this mechanism. In addition, he notes that the increase in restrictions in the process of the citizens' budget may reduce the motivation of residents to actively participate, especially in the preparation of their own proposals.

Until 2018, there was a lack of detailed legal regulations on the organisation of citizens' budgets in Poland. The literature emphasizes that the lack of statutory regulations resulted in a significant variety of solutions functioning in local government units, both in formal and substantive terms. There were significant differences concerning, among other

things, funding limits, project submission procedures, voting methods and vote counting, as well as age requirements for both applicants and those eligible to vote. The terms and method of division of units into constituencies also differed (Podgórska-Rykała 2019: 230). The introduction of appropriate legislative changes by the legislator contributed to the relative unification of the mechanism of the citizens' budget in cities on the rights of the district, which forced the need to modify the existing formulas known to residents. Until 2019, citizens' budgets functioned on the basis of Article 5a of the act on municipal local government (Ustawa 1990/16/95), where they were treated as one of the forms of public consultation. The detailed rules for their implementation were determined by the relevant resolutions of the municipal councils.

The municipal local government act stipulates that the municipal council is responsible for determining, among other things, the formal requirements for projects, the minimum number of signatures required to submit an initiative, and the rules for their evaluation (Mucha 2018). Another important provision specifies the way of organization of citizens' budgets in the context of the division of financial resources into individual categories, providing for the possibility of dividing funds into pools covering both the entire municipality and its parts, represented by auxiliary units or groups of such units. Ewa Serzysko emphasizes that the citizens' budget should be understood primarily as a process, and not a single incident. The individual stages of this process are closely related to each other, and the results of the previous stages influence the shape of the subsequent ones, forming a coherent whole. The participatory budget should not be a one-time event, but should function cyclically, following the standard rhythm of local government work – from the discussion of needs and priorities for the next year, through the selection of projects and their inclusion in the budget, until the completion of the implementation of approved initiatives (Serzysko 2014). In light of these observations, it is important that legislative changes and administrative decisions are introduced with care, so as to support the activity of the population instead of limiting it. An excessive number of modifications and poor communication can reduce the interest of residents in both voting and submitting applications.

4. Diversity of Mechanisms of Citizens' Budgets

This paragraph deals not only with classic citizens' budgets, but also with other forms of budgetary participation, such as the youth budget and the green budget. Despite the convergence with the idea of a participatory budget, the literature of the subject treats them as separate variants, which most often function in parallel with traditional civic budgets. Their specifics and goals often differ from the goals of classical citizens' budgets.

In recent years, municipalities have taken numerous actions to introduce amenities and innovative solutions within citizens' budgets, in order to increase the involvement of residents both in the submission of projects and in the voting process. One widely used tool to facilitate access to the citizens' budget mechanism was the implementation of electronic voting. In some local government units, the decision on its application was made already at the implementation stage, e.g., in Wrocław (Radzioch 2020), while other municipalities introduced this form of voting in subsequent editions, e.g., in Konin.

An interesting example of innovation in the field of participation is the creation of youth civic budgets, which took place in Malbork in 2017, where part of the funds was allocated to the Malbork Junior Citizens' Budget (MBOJ), which allows students over 13 to vote. A similar solution has been in place in Wrocław since 2016. It is also worth noting the specific nature of Dąbrowa Górnicza, where two separate forms of social participation operate in parallel – the citizens' budget and the participatory budget. This unique solution was the result of many years of cooperation between officials and residents to develop an optimal model for public consultation. However, since 2018, an amendment to the municipal local government act has forced the maintenance of two parallel systems (Podgórska-Rykała 2019: 230–231).

One of the significant innovations in citizens' budgets was the introduction of so-called green citizens' budgets, first implemented in Lublin in 2016 (Kociuba, Rabczewska 2019: 92). This model gained popularity and was subsequently adapted by other cities, including Poznań (Zielony Budżet 21.05.2020) and Gdańsk. This solution has also been implemented in smaller municipalities, e.g., in Bieruń, where green citizens' budgets function independently or in combination with the standard citizens' budget procedure (Zarządzenie Nr B.0050.7.2024). In cities such as Poznań, Gdańsk, and Szczecin, residents who vote within the citizens' budget have

an additional vote intended only for projects from the green category. These projects usually involve activities related to green areas, such as planting and maintaining vegetation, creating new green spaces, building rain gardens, and renovating and upgrading existing areas. They also include educational, cultural, and information activities and infrastructure investments of a green nature.

An example of the differences in the categorisation of projects within citizens' budgets can be found in Świebodzin, where four categories were distinguished: large investment tasks, small investment tasks, soft projects, and green projects. The category of soft projects includes non-investment tasks of a pro-social, cultural, educational, or sports nature (Uchwała Nr XIX/277/2020: § 5). This category therefore refers to projects with an educational or learning dimension. In Poznań, however, there was no separate category for such projects, but a public availability requirement was introduced, which imposes an obligation to ensure free use of the results of project implementation by all residents. A similar solution was adopted in Zielona Góra, where the documents specify that the project must be located in the urban area and accessible to every resident without restrictions. As a result, among other things, the purchase of sports equipment for physical education classes, the purchase of books for the school library, and the renovation of toilets and classrooms were excluded from the pool of tasks to be carried out.

Another issue that differentiates individual cities is how to verify the votes cast by residents. In Krakow, the condition for casting a vote is to provide a PESEL number, and in case of its absence – a special identification code given by the city of Krakow. In the case of electronic voting, it is also necessary to provide a mobile phone number that is used to confirm the vote by SMS (Uchwała 2020/1560: § 22). Such a solution raises doubts about the transparency of the voting process, since it is difficult to imagine that a child at the age of one year or younger will independently cast his vote and fully understand its meaning and the consequences of his choices. This situation may give rise to concerns about abuses, such as parental voting on behalf of children.

The problem related to the age of persons entitled to vote within the framework of the citizens' budget was described in the report of the Supreme Audit Office "Funkcjonowanie budżetów partycypacyjnych (obywatelskich)" [Functioning of Participatory (Citizens') Budgets]. The study showed that 130 out of 187 cities had introduced formal restrictions on who

could vote, most often between the ages of 13 and 18. In the remaining 57 cities surveyed, such restrictions did not function. The Supreme Audit Office examined cases in which resolutions establishing a lower limit on the voting age were contrary to the provisions of the act on municipal local government, which does not provide for any age restrictions. As a result, restricting the right to vote on the grounds of age may be considered illegal (Najwyższa Izba Kontroli 2019).

Public access is an important element of the citizens' budget, but it is advisable to introduce some restrictions, e.g., on the age of persons entitled to vote. In Poznań, the provision of a PESEL number is not mandatory – a mobile phone number is sufficient, to which a verification code is sent to allow voting through the website of the Poznań Citizens' Budget (Uchwała 2023/3539: § 5). In Lublin, on the other hand, residents can confirm their vote both with a code sent by SMS and by e-mail (Regulamin Budżetu Obywatelskiego 2025).

Conclusions

The citizens' budget in Poland should be analysed according to certain criteria that take into account its potential not only as a tool for introducing small, pro-social changes, but above all as an element of a broader local government reform. Over time, the mechanisms of the citizens' budget in different municipalities have evolved, giving residents new opportunities for participation. It is worth noting that the variety of solutions operating within the framework of citizens' budgets should not be treated only critically. They are often the result of cooperation between local authorities and residents, which underlines the local character of this instrument. In turn, legislative changes in the act on municipal local government, aimed at unifying the principles of organising citizens' budgets, may contribute to limiting this locality. An example is Dąbrowa Górnicza, where two separate budgets – citizens' and participatory – operate in parallel, and the number of such cases may increase. The changes introduced were aimed at increasing the transparency of citizens' budget procedures, which, however, entailed the need for numerous modifications to existing solutions, and sometimes even abandonment of existing practices. It can be argued that the legislator should focus on unifying more universal aspects of the citizens' budget,

such as the verification of votes or the participation of educational, cultural, and care institutions in the voting process, rather than regulating in detail individual solutions, such as support lists or requirements for soft projects.

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