

Territorial Policy Agenda Revised: Public Perceptions on Local Non-Electoral Participation Capacities in Lithuania

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Since the 1990s Lithuania has experienced a few territorial reform initiatives aiming for more effective and sustainable local governance; however, the current situation demonstrates an increase in tendencies towards more consolidated local government structures. This paper contributes to the extensive discussion on the relationship between the size of municipalities and citizen non-electoral

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participation at the local level, using Lithuanian population survey data. In contrast to previous research on the direct effects of municipality size on citizen engagement, our conclusions drawn from population survey data highlight the significant problem of existing normative barriers in new-democracy countries, which limit the potential of citizens to engage with local agendas. The findings indicate that citizens in large municipalities are more likely to establish local contact activities and have better perceptions of municipal problem-solving capacities compared to those in small municipalities.

Keywords: municipality size, territorial reforms, local government, Lithuania, local non-electoral participation

1. Introduction^{***}

Discussions of optimal municipality size and citizen involvement in local agendas are significant in so-called new democracies, with relatively new traditions of local government systems. In recent decades, Eastern and Central European countries have undergone several local governance territorial reforms. The variation in territorial differentiation in the region is quite substantial.¹ Adverse as well as beneficial side effects have been experienced by different Central Eastern European (CEE) countries, including the Baltic States. However, the various side effects of these reforms on local service delivery, redistribution of local resources, optimisation of administrative burdens, voting in local elections, citizen inclusion in local decision-making, political competence, and responsiveness remain undetermined, mostly because of a lack of reliable empirical evidence. The choice of Lithuania as a single case study is based on two main reasons. First, the three decades of Lithuanian post-Soviet experience have demonstrated political tensions between long-standing territorial consolidation traditions and scarcity of politically sensitive territorial fragmentation initiatives (Daugirdas & Mačiulyte, 2006, pp. 91–93). Second, the shifting political agenda on territorial consoli-

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¹ For more detailed discussions of territorial fragmentation and municipal amalgamation reforms in the CEE region, see research by Swianiewicz & Herbst, 2002; Swianiewicz, 2010; Ilnet, 2010.

dation approaches has illustrated the different perceptions of local government and local democracy. In some ways, the impact and importance of local democratic political participation and civic engagement with regard to the local agenda remain ignored. Thus the arguments of economies of scale and financial optimisation remain the main political drivers of territorial rescaling initiatives (Guogis, Gudelis & Stasinkynas, 2007; Nefas, 2012).

From a theoretical point of view, an abundant body of work has already analysed the outcomes of territorial rescaling reforms in local government systems, for example, testing the scale effects (Boyne, 1995; Keating, 1995; Baldersheim & Rose, 2010). On the other hand, empirical and theoretical contributions have emphasized aspects of various forms of citizen engagement, ranging from representative involvement to non-electoral participation; citizen perceptions of local government responsiveness, competence and accountability; and citizen evaluations of local government performance (Denters et al., 1990; Denters, 2002; Frandsen, 2002; Carr & Tavares, 2014; Lassen & Serritzlew, 2011; Mouritzen 1989; Newton 1982; Rose, 2002). The impact of municipal size on political and citizen participation varies from admiring the communal spirit of small municipalities to emphasizing the advantages of economies of scale in large municipalities. Many national studies have demonstrated the ambiguity of the relationships between citizen involvement, satisfaction with municipal performance, and level of participation with municipal size (Denters et al., 2014, Rose, 2002, Oliver, 2000). Therefore, our theoretical contribution refers to the discussion of the relationship between municipal size and citizen engagement in local agendas by focusing on non-electoral participation indicators in local democracies.² In addition, we have also included the relevant dimension on the satisfaction with municipal performance referring to “system capacity” and citizen control (Dahl & Tufte, 1973).

The main research problem addressed by this paper assumes that the size of local municipalities plays a crucial role in defining local government ca-

² Our assumption relies on the forms of non-electoral participation developed by Lawrence E. Rose in his study of the relationship between optimal municipal size and citizen participation in Denmark, the Netherlands, and Norway (Rose, 2002). The author referred to the main forms of non-electoral participation, including attending meetings on local issues, contacting local authorities or politicians, and participating in other related activities on local agendas (Rose, 2002, p. 831). Indicators of non-electoral participation help to evaluate democratic performance practices at the local level, referring to accountability and responsiveness of citizen control over local authorities. The measurement of non-electoral participation also considers the density of social interaction and proximity to the decision-making arena (Denters et al., 2014, pp. 247–252).

capacities. The ways in which citizens are included in local decision-making and agendas can influence local democracy as well. Moreover, the higher level of connectivity between local authorities enables a more effective municipal performance assessment. Our research questions explore two issues. First, referring to Rose's (2002) findings on non-electoral participation and municipal size, we assume that the existing territorial configuration of local municipalities can shape the non-electoral participatory capacities of local citizens, including their overall satisfaction with municipal performance and contact intensity. We hypothesize that local non-electoral participation practices vary mostly because of the indicators of accessibility to local authorities, contact, and satisfaction with municipal performance, rather than municipal size. Citizens in small municipalities have a better perception of municipal problem-solving capacities and accessibility compared to large ones. Second, an exploration of local non-electoral participation determinants helps to generate a broader discussion of the consequences and side effects of territorial rescaling reforms in small countries with a tradition of strong territorial consolidation. More empirical evidence is needed to discover a possible relationship between municipal size and citizen perceptions of local government accessibility and problem-solving capacities.

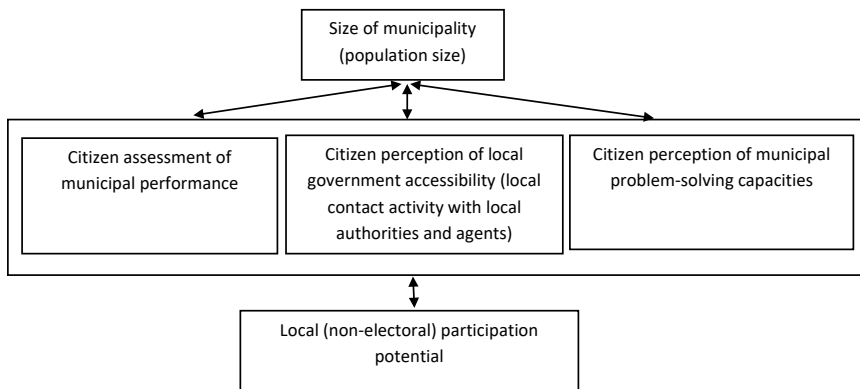
In the second section, we provide theoretical insights into the optimal size of municipalities and citizen engagement in local decision-making. The third section of the article addresses the main aspects of the current discussion on optimal municipal size and territorial rescaling policy agendas in Lithuania. Sections four and five present empirical evidence from a representative population survey in Lithuania, which generates a broader discussion of whether and how municipalities of different size create thresholds for greater citizen impact on local agendas and municipal performance assessment. The final section draws some conclusions with regard to the side effects of recent territorial initiatives which have changed citizen inclusion in local agendas and which offer better connectivity with local authorities.

2. Analytical Approach to the Relationship Between Municipal Size and Local Participation

In this section, we rely on a theoretical model to justify our arguments about different municipality sizes and forms of non-electoral citizen participation. Our analytical framework includes the main constructs that

enable empirical investigation of the relationships between local citizen participation potential and municipal size (Figure 1). We consider the question of whether the size of local municipalities might lead to greater public interest in local issues and greater citizen satisfaction with municipal performance. Another question attempts to discover whether different types of local non-electoral participation practices, including indicators of accessibility to local authorities, contact, and satisfaction with municipal performance, might vary in municipalities of different size. The variables were drawn from previous studies revealing the relationships between municipal size and different citizen participation characteristics, focusing on non-electoral citizen participation and satisfaction with local government performance dimensions (Mouritzen, 1989; Rose, 2002; Oliver, 2000; Pettersen & Rose, 1996; Denters, 2002; Denters et al., 2014; Van Ryzin, 2004, 2007; James, 2007).

Figure 1. Analytical framework for investigating the relationships between citizen participation capacities and municipal size



Source: (Mouritzen, 1989; Rose, 2002; Oliver, 2000; Pettersen & Rose, 1996; Denters, 2002; Denters et al., 2014; Van Ryzin, 2004, 2007; James, 2007); authors' elaboration

The theoretical discussion starts with the question of what has already been discovered with regard to optimal municipality size and citizen participation determinants. Most of these studies have focused strongly on the specificity of local government systems and ongoing public policy debates over territorial rescaling initiatives. According to Keating, four main dimensions summarise the current discussion of which size is most relevant for specific local government systems. The first is related to economic efficiency and deals with minimising the costs of local service delivery.

The second dimension includes the enactment of democratic institutions, which allow citizens to control local governmental institutions and apply the principles of accountability. The last two dimensions focus on the principles of effective redistribution of services and taxes, as well as on fostering economic growth in municipal territories (Keating, 1995, pp. 118–125). The pioneering vision of Robert A. Dahl and Tufte (1973) regarding optimal local government size in democratic states opened up the discussion of positive and contradictory effects of territorial amalgamation and/or fragmentation reforms. It is almost impossible to define the optimal scope for democracy, mainly because of the thresholds in determining “citizen effectiveness” and “system capacity” (Dahl & Tufte, 1973).³

Explanations of the causes of citizen participation in municipalities of different size have taken two distinct directions: emphasizing efficiency and quality of democracy on the one hand, and satisfaction with municipal performance and local service delivery on the other hand. As stated before, this paper mainly focuses on the dimension of non-electoral local participation potential, which has predominantly been used in many local government studies. For example, Poul Eric Mouritzen (1989) found that resident satisfaction differs significantly between small and large jurisdictions when it comes to broader political arena fragmentation. In small municipalities, local inhabitants are more inclined to look favourably on local democratic participation and local municipal performance, leading to more positive evaluations of public services. In contrast, the complex political arena in large municipal jurisdictions allows local inhabitants to participate effectively in local decision-making and local politics (Mouritzen 1989). The majority of empirical evidence comes from Western European countries with strong traditions of territorial reforms. For example, empirical findings presented by Denters (2002) and Rose (2002) on Denmark, the Netherlands, Norway, and the United Kingdom demonstrated that the level of political trust is higher at the local level than at the national level. Citizens in small municipalities tend to be more satisfied with municipal performance, mainly because of intensive personal relations or dense community organisations (Denters 2002, pp. 808–809). However, the evidence of the level of non-electoral participation in municipalities of different size lends a certain

³ One of the approaches develops a broader concept of participatory democracy and participatory governance, which has been discussed in various studies (Haus, Heinelt & Stewart, 2005; Heinelt 2014; Kersting & Vetter, 2013). This concept explores the emergence of new forms of local participation and local engagement in public policy-making. Greater involvement might lead to a need for accountability and mutual trust between citizens and governmental authorities.

ambiguity to the conclusion that municipal size does not significantly affect the level of local non-electoral participation (Rose, 2002, pp. 844–845). More specifically, the case study of Denmark demonstrated that municipal size has no significant effect on local inhabitants' knowledge of and interest in local politics, nor does it affect their trust in local political decision-making. The determinant of proximity in this case is not always seen as an essential precondition of the quality of the local democracy (Larsen, 2002, pp.329–330). The arguments supporting the hypothesis on the small size of municipality and stronger local engagement are relatively weak and the effects are not strongly pronounced.

Moreover, we have also incorporated criterion on citizen satisfaction with municipal performance. Numerous empirical studies on public management have provided evidence for the relationship between citizen perceptions of municipal performance and different public service indicators in different amalgamations (Kelly & Swindell, 2002; Van Ryzin, 2004, 2007; Roch et al., 2006; James, 2007; Roch & Poister, 2006). Studies have emphasized customer satisfaction with services and municipal performance measurement indicators such as efficiency, input, and outcomes. Nevertheless, the variety of empirical findings has not addressed the puzzle of optimal municipality size and citizen satisfaction with local government performance. One of the critical dimensions is how accessible local municipal authorities are to the citizens, which also means differences in perceptions of public good and local agendas. The municipal capacity of high-quality service provision ensures positive effects of higher levels of citizen satisfaction and multidimensional participation in local politics. Satisfaction tends to be relatively higher in small municipalities regarding personal services but not problem-solving capacities (Denters et al. 2014, pp. 247–252). Other empirical findings in Denmark have suggested that large municipalities with highly consolidated municipal structures are more effective in terms of service provision, but can exert adverse effects on citizen satisfaction with municipal performance (Hansen, 2015, p. 387).

Finally, research on the relationship between size and local democracy indicators in the context of CEE countries has mostly focused on the analysis of specific functional capacities and local government performance evaluations. A mismatch between economic efficiency and local democratic traditions has been observed in most CEE countries with “weak democratic traditions” and different traditions of decentralisation and local autonomy. For example, evidence from Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria, and the Czech Republic underlines the argument regarding economies of scale, indicating that municipal service provision is more efficient in

large local jurisdictions (Swianiewicz, 2002; Swianiewicz & Herbst, 2002; Borecky & Prudky, 2001; Pop, 2005; Ryšavý & Bernard, 2013). However, the relationship between municipal size and local democracy indicators lacks robust and reliable empirical evidence that would outweigh the logic of economic rationality.

3. Debates on Territorial Policy in Lithuania: Optimal Municipal Size as Soviet Legacy or Modern Turn?

The problem discussed in this paper reveals the broader context of territorial rescaling initiatives and discussions of optimal municipality size. The institutional framework of local territorial reorganisation is usually perceived as a “two-way street” with different levels of reform intensity, success, and political support (Mouritzen, 1989; Swianiewicz, 2010; Denters et al., 2014). The main arguments for territorial reforms include the efficient provision of public services, optimisation of public functions, sustainable planning of local development and economic policies, sufficient revenues, and spending allocation. One of the research directions implies a managerial approach to evaluating the possible outcomes and consequences of national decentralisation policies, including the maximisation of effectiveness, the implications of cost-benefit analysis, the quality of public services, or fiscal optimisation plans. In discussing these topics, researchers have focused on the conception of financial resource planning, performance, and quality management in local government institutions, concentrating on the implementation of broader public-sector reforms (Pollitt & Bouckaert 2004; Kuhlmann & Wollmann, 2014). Discussions of demand for public sector reforms have overlapped with the broader understanding of institutional modernisation regarding a variety of concepts, practices, techniques, and organisational design layers (Schmidt, 2010).

Lithuania has 60 municipalities with an average population of 49,058 inhabitants. The municipal size varies considerably, from 545,280 inhabitants in the city municipality of the capital of Vilnius to 3,097 residents in the resort area of Neringa municipality (Lithuania Statistics, 2018). The discussion of the optimal size of municipalities in Lithuania has been modified by arguments to reconcile the Soviet territorial planning system with the new requirements and challenges of European local government planning systems. The discussion of optimal municipality size varies con-

siderably across countries. The objective of this article is not a thorough discussion regarding the advantages or disadvantages of territorial consolidation policies and practices among Eastern European countries. Rather, our focus is on providing some contextual implications of the ongoing discourse on territorial policies in Lithuania, which has also become an essential backdrop for empirical data interpretation of the relationship between municipal size and citizen perceptions of local government accessibility and problem-solving capacities.

Since the country's independence was restored, the pre-existing Soviet territorial administration system has functioned as a two-level local governance system. This system included cities, districts, settlements, and smaller neighbourhoods. The lower level of municipal governance included 80 district towns (*rajonas*), 19 "town type" settlements (*miesto tipo gyvenvietė*), and 427 smaller neighbourhoods (*apylinkė*). In the early years of independence, the upper level of the municipal governance system was composed of 44 town districts and the 12 largest cities of the country. Signs of local administration reforms began to appear in 1994, when the discussion of the need for new post-Soviet practices in territorial policies grew vibrant. The most significant structural local governance reform was implemented in 1994–1995 and it enabled a single-tier self-governance system in Lithuania.

Consequently, all smaller neighbourhoods (*apylinkė*), including district towns and settlements, were abolished. The former district towns became the main actors at the local territorial government level, taking away all responsibilities for local resource allocation and public service delivery from smaller territorial units. However, the territorial reform could not prevent the willingness of political interests to remove the smallest territorial units (*apylinkė*) from the self-governance system. In the early 1990s, 55 newly re-established municipalities became large territorial units in terms of population size and territory, with an average of 57,000 inhabitants in 1991 (Lithuania Statistics, 2018). Today Lithuania is one of the most consolidated countries in Europe, compared to neighbouring CEE and Scandinavian countries (Swianiewicz, 2002; 2010).

In 1995 two government work groups were formed to discuss the question of municipal rescaling in Lithuania's territorial administration system. One of the proposals included a total number of 94 municipalities. Another suggestion supported further intensive decentralisation and fragmentation reform, with an outcome of 112 municipalities in total. Consequently, five new municipalities were established in 2000, raising the total number to 60. The political discourse on territorial fragmentation has remained vibrant, supporting arguments for the reduction of the negative

impact of economies of scale on local services, increasing local citizen participation, and strengthening community ties and public trust. However, in practice, the arguments regarding economic efficiency and the need to minimise the burden of the bureaucratic system and support top-down infrastructural projects have remained essential in supporting the existing, strongly consolidated, municipal structure in Lithuania. Some opposing cases have contradicted central government support of strongly consolidated municipal structures, emphasizing the negative outcomes of the distance between local governmental institutions and citizens, which somehow limit local democratic participation forms in smaller villages or towns. Another counterargument pointed out that the significant geographical distance in large municipal jurisdictions creates tensions between rural localities and municipal centres concerning the equal distribution of local services provided to residents, threatening sustainable infrastructure development and ignoring local communities' needs (Mačiulytė & Ragauskas 2007; Lazauskiene, 2008, pp. 92–95). In some local jurisdictions, municipal administration is far from rural settlements and cannot provide high-quality public services, consequently leading to lower non-electoral citizen participation levels in local decision-making.

In 2003 the central government approved a new conception and *The Action Plan on the Improvement of the Territorial Administration System of the Republic of Lithuania*. The main tasks defined in the action plan included the need to revise the existing territorial administration system and optimal municipal size, leading to a more fragmented local government system (Action plan, 2003). The guiding argument of the new political initiative was to implement a procedural cycle that would enable the establishment of new administrative self-governance units. According to the new regulation, five highly urbanised municipalities should be abolished, allowing for the establishment of 12 newly structured municipalities instead. To some extent, support for this argument has remained highly fragmented. At the political level, the Ministry of the Interior of the Republic of Lithuania has firmly prioritised the argument that the optimal municipality number for the country should range from 61 to 67.

The new conception of *The Action Plan on the Improvement of the Territorial Administration System of the Republic of Lithuania* also provided specific criteria characterising the role and functions of the newly established municipalities in the self-governance system. The main provisions of the action plan stipulated the need for high municipal administrative and financial capacities to implement various self-governance functions (Action plan, 2003). The four main criteria for municipalities of optimal size included popu-

lation size in a total municipal area (no fewer than 15,000 inhabitants), the number of inhabitants in the municipal administrative centre (no fewer than 3,000), geographical distance between the centres of neighbourhood municipalities (no less than 20 km), and an index of financial independence capability. To some extent, the most significant forces driving the idea of territorial fragmentation were stimulated by a need to balance the central government's financial obligations with territorial interests. The principles of economic efficiency and economies of scale regarding the optimal bureaucratic apparatus in local municipal administrations, optimisation of local governance expenses, a balanced budget, and efficient delivery of local services defeated the argument of a correlation between optimal municipal size and active local community participation.

The policy agenda support for the municipal fragmentation process can be considered a delayed political reaction to territorial fragmentation initiatives and policies in other European countries, despite the criticism that fragmentation creates barriers to the adequate functioning of local government systems (Swianiewicz, 2010; Illner, 2010; Houlberg, 2010). The state government rationality was driven mostly by the economic efficiency and economy of scale criteria.⁴ The territorial administration reform relied meaningfully only on exceptional indicators, such as state budget expenditures and evaluation of the economic performance of new local government units (Civinskas & Tolvaišis, 2006; Davulis, 2006; Lazauskienė, 2008). According to advocates of administrative reform, the financial autonomy of municipalities should correlate significantly with the size of local government. The importance of democratic performance was not considered a reasonable argument. However, one of the provisions of the act suggested an obligation to organise a survey of local inhabitants within the geographical borders of new municipalities (Act of Methodology of Economic Justification of Newly Established Municipalities, 2005).⁵

⁴ The new principles of budgetary capacities for new municipalities were defined in the Act of Methodology of Economic Justification of Newly Established Municipalities by the Ministry of the Interior (2005). The central objective of the methodology was to specify the economic rationality of the criteria for the establishment of new municipalities. The optimal geographical distance between the municipal centre (city or town) and its peripheries is considered a reasonable basis for sustainable economic development in local jurisdictions (Act of Methodology of Economic Justification of Newly Established Municipalities, 2005).

⁵ In 2007 several population studies were conducted in different Lithuanian regions concerning reform initiatives. The central objective of the polls was to discover if local inhabitants in municipalities supported the establishment of 12 new municipalities in Lithuania. The main results of the studies were disappointing, with the majority of the population negatively evaluating territorial fragmentation reform initiatives. Another part of the local

Finally, in 2009 the main principles of the territorial fragmentation criteria (splitting up of municipalities) for newly established municipalities were approved in the Amendments to the Law of Territorial Administration Units and Their Borders, including the minimum municipality size of 10,000 inhabitants (amendments to the Law on Territorial Administration Units, 2009). Despite the development of national legislation regulating changes in optimal municipal size, the main controversies regarding the adaptation of the most relevant territorial policy approaches have remained unresolved in Lithuania. Since 2012, the question of the most suitable territorial jurisdiction size has been almost eliminated from the political agenda, except for recent attempts to propose a new option for an even more consolidated structure for municipal jurisdictions, based on an argument for centralised municipal service provision (White Papers on Lithuanian Regional Policy 2017–2030). The political discussion supporting municipal fragmentation was suspended mostly due to the mismatch between debates over local democracy and economic efficiency. Recent initiatives support a local participatory democracy model, which could foster the participation of local communities and elderships⁶ in local politics and decision-making (Patapas & Maciulevič, 2011, pp. 409–410). Significant differences in social and political participation indicators are essential for Lithuanian municipalities (Table 1), which stipulate the revival of public policy discussions about optimal municipal size. The level of electoral turnout in local council elections demonstrates the different political activation levels of local inhabitants, as well as various local political interests in small and large municipalities.

Table 1. *Distribution and profile of municipalities in Lithuania, 2018*

Indicators/population size categories (number of inhabitants)	1,000–5,000	5,001–10,000	10,001–50,000	50001–100,000	More than 100,000	Total in country
Number of municipalities in terms of population size	2	2	45	7	4	60
Percentage of total municipalities	3.3	3.3	75.00	11.7	6.7	100

community simply ignored the invitation to answer survey questions (Association of Local Authorities in Lithuania, 2007).

⁶ Elderships are smaller local administrative units of municipalities in Lithuania, without any financial or functional independence.

Average population size, number of inhabitants, 2014	3,561	8,592	29,128	71,683	276,659	49,058
Average population size, number of inhabitants, 2017	3,676	7,911	27,547	70,662	272,624	47,456
Change in average population size, 2014–2017	+3.2	-7.9	-5.4	-1.4	-1.5	-4.57
Employment rate, 16–64 age group, 2017, per cent	73.3	65.0	63.6	69.9	76.6	65.5
Average turnout in local council elections, 2007	61.32	61.71	60.05	61.32	61.71	44.77
Average turnout in local council elections, 2011	57.48	56.41	55.2	57.48	56.41	47.40
Average turnout in local council elections, 2015*	45.27	48.08	49.94	45.27	48.08	49.21

Source: Authors based on Statistics Lithuania, 2018; Central Electoral Commission of the Republic of Lithuania, 2018; * – together with the first direct mayoral elections.

In Lithuania, intermunicipal variation regarding population size is quite significant. The largest proportion of Lithuanian municipalities (75 per cent) account for relatively small municipalities with an average of 27,457 inhabitants in 2017 (Statistics Lithuania, 2018). Predominantly urban municipalities comprise only approximately 6.7 per cent of the total number of municipalities (4 municipalities in total), but the average population size was 272,624 inhabitants in 2017. Large urban municipalities experienced minimal impact concerning long-term population decline (only -1.5 per cent in the period 2014–2017) compared to small municipalities. However, the difference in the electoral participation rate is also significant in local jurisdictions of different size. In contrast to theoretical arguments about higher democratic engagement in small jurisdictions, average turnout in local elections is relatively higher in medium and large urban municipalities compared to the smallest municipalities.

Finally, the political agenda arguments regarding economic efficiency and optimal public spending are not sufficiently convincing to determine the most sustainable local government reform direction in the case of Lithuania. Contrary to the North Western European tradition of reducing the number of municipalities (Baldersheim & Rose, 2010), the national political discourse relies on the argument that effective decentralisation processes are costly and difficult to implement in newly democratic countries with weak institutional trust and low political participation. Due to significant depopulation rates in Lithuanian municipalities, debates over territorial reforms have little political effect, except for fragmented local

democracy arguments. In most cases, the political agenda emphasizes the need to strengthen local authorities in their political decision-making power and to increase the level of local autonomy, especially financial and functional discretion.

4. Methodological Remarks and Data

As has already been noted, theoretical arguments about the democratic effects of citizen participation and municipality size led to methodological considerations regarding the measurement of the correlation between municipal size and citizen engagement in local issues. In other words, we sought to identify the main empirically constructed types of citizens in municipalities of different size, emphasizing the indicators of their perceptions of municipal problem-solving capacities, assessments of municipal performance, and local contact activities with authorities.

Two methodological problems are important considering the size and citizen perceptions of municipal problem-solving capacities, contact intensity, and municipal performance measurement indicators. The first problem is how to interpret the size of municipality indicators, which could be interpreted as population size, density, geographical size, and the development of economic indicators (Denters et al., 2014). We consider the indicator of the subjective perception of place of residence used in European ESS surveys, which mostly refers to the size-related factor of a municipality.

The second methodological challenge is related to the question of how to measure the degree to which local governmental structures provide effective channels for fostering local contact activity. In this sense, we follow the theoretical assumption of the normative principles of democratic performance, arguing that the specific institutional arrangements are responsive and provide more elaborate and effective channels for citizens to express their preferences and expectations (Ostrom, 1989). Another classical conceptual argument suggests that, because large local municipalities can perform a greater number of public functions, it is more likely that citizens will participate actively in the local agenda (Dahl & Tufte, 1973; Dahl, 1994).

Following these methodological considerations, three empirical expectations were formulated. First, we assume that the assessment of local government performance could differ significantly in municipalities of different size. Second, we expect there to be a significant correlation between local inhabitants' assessments of municipal performance, local gov-

ernment accessibility (local contacting activity), and citizen perceptions of municipal problem-solving capacities. Third, we suggest that different citizen types reflect the variety of the perceptions of local agents' decision-making power, which also differ in small and large municipalities.

The statistical analysis is based on a dataset from a representative population survey, *Evaluation of the Self-Governance System in Lithuania*, which was conducted from January to March 2016 (n=1006) by a public opinion research company.⁷ A stratified, multistage, random sampling method was used to gather empirical evidence, with an overall response rate of 57 per cent (confidence level 0.95). All interviews were conducted in the households of the respondents. The main objective of the survey was to evaluate public opinion about local governance reforms and challenges, including evaluations of mayorship and citizen participation in local decision-making, identification of main local issues, and assessments of the main strategies used to maintain contact with local municipal authorities.

To test our empirical questions, we used two stages of statistical analysis. The first stage included the construction of abstract types (clusters) of citizens, which were essential for the identification of the appropriate form of local activism. However, previous research suggested the importance of measuring the impact of socio-economic background on the subjective perceptions of different characteristics of local democracy (e.g., gender, education, occupation, household income, and population size of place of residence) (Denters et al., 2014, p. 14). We included the variable of municipality size (the respondents' place of residence) to construct our theoretical model. A two-step cluster analysis was used as an analytical tool to construct the statistical classification of citizen participation types using these variables⁸:

1. *Municipality size variable.* For the statistical analysis framework, we constructed two distinct items of independent variables referring to the ESPON 2007 project classification for functional urban areas (FUAs) and poly-FUAs. The classification of functional urban areas

⁷ The empirical basis for the analysis is a dataset from a representative population survey, *Evaluation of the Self-Governance System in Lithuania*, which aimed to assess citizen expectations with regard to local political leadership, the roles of mayor and mayorship in municipalities, and citizen participation in decision-making. The survey is part of the research project *Mayors in Lithuania: Political Leadership in Local Government* (No. MIP-031/2015).

⁸ The two-step cluster analysis is useful as an exploratory analytical method to identify homogenous, meaningful groups of cases in which the grouping principles are not known in advance (Fonseca 2012, pp. 403, 404). A cluster analysis helps to segment the different types of citizen participation capacities in small and large municipalities.

is based on population size, population density, commuting network, and other dimensions (ESPON 1.1.1., 2007). Considering municipality size variables, one item was constructed from aggregated survey data on the respondents' indicated places of residence in metropolises (Kaunas, Vilnius municipalities), large cities (Klaipėda municipality), medium cities (Šiauliai, Panevėžys municipalities), and small cities (Alytus municipality), accounting for more than 50,000 inhabitants on average (*large municipality* item). The other item which refers to the place of residence of the respondents concerns small municipalities, accounting for fewer than 50,000 inhabitants on average in one jurisdiction (*small municipality* item).

2. *The variable of local contacting activity* includes the intensity of contacts with local authorities (agents), indicating whether citizens have contacted local agents to resolve their issues over the past year. We used the following survey item: *Imagine that you have a local issue that concerns the public interest. Have you ever contacted any of these local authorities or agents over the past year to resolve the problem?* A scale of eight different local agents was included, specifically a list of items: *Yourself, Average inhabitant, Junior elder, Elder* (the head of municipal subunit), *Head of municipality administration, Member of municipality council, Mayor, and MP elected in the jurisdiction.*
3. *The variable of municipal performance assessment* refers to the citizens' level of satisfaction with local government. The item was constructed using a scale from 1 for *poor assessment* to 10 for *excellent assessment*.

The second stage of analysis assessed the statistical significance between five statistically constructed clusters and local agents, revealing the intensity of power assessments in local decision-making. For this reason, we performed a one-way ANOVA with five clusters of respondents, referring to their local activation type and eight various local agents/authorities. The statistical analysis allowed us to distinguish between five different citizen types based on their place of residence and local contacting activity, namely *Proactive moderates* (Type 1), *Passive pessimists* (Type 2), and *Passive optimists* (Type 3) in *small municipalities* and *Passive moderates* (Type 4) and *Proactive moderates* (Type 5) in *large municipalities*. Basic data-cleaning procedures were performed using an outliers analysis. The Games-Howell test⁹ was used to show the significant differences in power perceptions

⁹ In statistical analysis, the Games-Howell test is typically used as a post hoc all-pairs comparison test with unequal between-groups variances.

between local agents/authorities and five clusters of local citizens. A detailed interpretation of the empirical data analysis is presented in the next section.

5. Empirical Evidence: Municipal Size Effects on Citizen Participation at the Municipal Level

In the previous sections we discussed the theoretical and political considerations regarding the optimal size of municipalities in Lithuania, emphasizing the dimensions of citizen participation in local issues and active levels of engagement. Our survey data reveal the differences in local non-electoral participation practice types, which depend on the indicators of accessibility to local authorities, contact and satisfaction with municipal performance, and municipal size.

Turning to a cluster analysis of local contact activity levels, we shall first highlight the general assessment of the self-governance system in the country. Table 2 provides descriptive results of the statistical correlation between the evaluation of Lithuanian self-governance system and municipality size. Respondents from large municipalities assessed the performance of the self-governance system in Lithuania more positively (41.6 per cent of respondents evaluated it as “excellent”) compared to those from small municipalities. Respondents living in small municipalities tended to give a poor assessment (28.9 per cent) of the self-governance system compared to large municipalities, where only 15.1 per cent gave a negative evaluation. Previous studies of Eastern European and Central European countries have indicated that citizens from small municipalities should be more satisfied with local government performance (Swianiewicz & Herbst, 2002), except for municipalities with fewer than 1,000 inhabitants (for example, a Hungarian case study by Hajnal, 2001). In contrast, the results of our empirical research demonstrate the ambiguity in different perceptions of self-governance performance. The descriptive results contradict the argument that the link between municipal authorities and local inhabitants is much closer in small municipalities. In the case of Lithuania, the negative assessment of local government performance could be explained using indicators of limited functional and financial capacities of small municipalities with few resources for public service delivery.

Table 2. *Evaluation of the self-governance system in Lithuania (N=974)*

	Local inhabitant living in ...		Cramer's V (Pearson's Chi-square)
	Large municipalities (metropolitan and suburban)	Small municipalities	
Poor	15.1% (59)	28.9% (141)	0.166*** (24.274***)
Average	43.4% (170)	38.3% (187)	
Excellent	41.6% (163)	32.8% (160)	
Total	100% (392)	100% (488)	

Notes: *** p<0.001, N=974

Source: Representative population survey data, *Evaluation of self-governance in Lithuania*, 2016, authors' calculations.

To develop the hypothesis on social contact activity, we included the variable of citizen contact with local authorities or agents. Is it possible to construct different types of citizens who suggest different practices of interaction with local authorities in municipalities of different size? As presented in the methodology section, we used a two-step cluster analysis. This statistical model helped construct the different types of local citizen practices in small and large municipalities (Table 3). The different statistical clusters built a predictive model that allowed us to identify the variation in active or/and passive citizens with different attitudes towards municipal performance and perceptions of municipal problem-solving capacities. The set of these factors demonstrates the heterogeneity of local participation practices.

Table 3. *Cluster analysis of citizen types in municipalities of different size*

Variable	Cluster 1 (Proactive moderates in small municipalities)	Cluster 2 (Passive pessimists in small municipalities)	Cluster 3 (Passive optimists in small municipalities)	Cluster 4 (Passive moderates in large municipalities)	Cluster 5 (Proactive moderates in large municipalities)
Citizen's place of residence (size of municipality)	Small	Small	Small	Large	Large

Citizen's contacts with municipal authorities to resolve local issues	Contacted at least once over the last year	Not contacted at all	Not contacted at all	Not contacted at all	Contacted at least once over the last year
Assessment of municipal performance (1 – poor; 10 – excellent)	Average assessment (M=5.50)	Poor assessment (M=3.74)	Good assessment (M=7.04)	Average assessment (M=5.98)	Average assessment (M=5.76)
N (% of total sample)	147 (17.2%)	161 (18.8%)	168 (19.6%)	286 (33.5%)	93 (10.9%)

Notes: Silhouette measure of cohesion and separation is greater than 0.7. The ratio of the largest to the smallest clusters is 3.08.

Source: Representative population survey data, *Evaluation of self-governance in Lithuania*, 2016; authors' calculations.

Our data indicate significant variation between clusters of local participation practices. *Proactive moderates in small and large municipalities* (Type 1 and Type 5) display similar characteristics of being active with regard to local issues and establishing social contacts with local authorities. A statistical cluster defined as *passive optimists in a small municipality* is characterised by a high level of municipal performance assessment (the statistical mean is 7.04 out of 10) but indicates lack of any contact with municipal authorities. The *passive pessimists in small municipalities* type is exceptional, concerning relatively negative attitudes towards municipal performance (the statistical mean is 3.74 out of 10) and scarce social proximity to a municipality. This type of citizen needs greater attention in terms of analysis in order to consider the relationship between municipal size and citizen effectiveness in local decision-making.

Another analytical question considers the subjective perception of municipal problem-solving capacities in assessing the power of various local agents/authorities. The survey question “*Consider and evaluate local agents who have the power to solve local issues*” was used for purposes of statistical analysis. Our analysis aims to explore subjective perceptions of municipal problem-solving capacities, referring to the power positions of different local authorities (agents) (Table 4).

Table 4. *Evaluation of municipal problem-solving capacities (“Consider the local agents who have the power to resolve local issues”), one-way ANOVA results*

Clusters of citizens (independent variable)	Types of local authorities (agents)							
	Yourself	Average inhabitant	Junior elder	Elder	Head of municipal administration	Council of municipality	Mayor	MP elected in jurisdiction
Mean of total sample (Any power (1) ↔ Maximum power (10))	3.11	3.29	6.62	7.56	8.11	8.56	8.71	8.42
Proactive moderates living in small municipalities (Cluster 1)	3.68	3.51	6.27	7.40	8.12	8.55	8.59	8.33
Passive pessimists living in small municipalities (Cluster 2)	2.01	2.09	5.38	6.55	7.30	7.83	8.51	7.58
Passive optimists living in small municipalities (Cluster 3)	3.27	3.46	6.80	8.06	8.85	9.08	9.21	8.77
Passive moderates living in large municipalities (Cluster 4)	3.13	3.46	6.99	7.75	8.05	8.65	8.68	8.46
Proactive moderates living in large municipalities (Cluster 5)	3.19	3.40	7.35	8.18	8.35	9.12	9.30	8.99
F-test (between groups; within groups)	F (4. 830) = 12.634***	F (4. 836) = 15.178***	F (4. 797) = 17.008***	F (4. 821) = 18.657***	F (4. 831) = 14.994***	F (4. 837) = 14.351***	F (4.835) = 8.516***	F (4. 821) = 11.727***
η^2	0.057	0.067	0.078	0.098	0.067	0.064	0.039	0.054

Note: *** $p < 0.000$, statistically significant difference.

Source: Representative population survey data, *Evaluation of self-governance in Lithuania*, 2016; authors' calculations.

Citizen perceptions of municipal problem-solving capacities are relatively different, if we look at heterogeneous clusters of citizen types. The statistical analysis summarises the significant differences in the subjective assessments of local agents' power positions in resolving issues. Among the five types of citizens, the *passive pessimist in a small municipality* type (Type 2) represents exceptionally negative attitudes considering the problem-solving capacities of local agents. Our statistical measurement shows

that the characteristics of relatively weak social connectivity and weak municipal performance evaluation define this type of citizen. In other words, residents from small municipalities, characterised by weak social contact with local authorities are the most critical group with regard to participation capacities in small jurisdictions. The type demonstrates the greatest distrust in administrative units of municipalities, as well as other local democratic representative bodies, such as mayoral institutions or local councils. We also assume that the poor assessment of local agents' decision-making capacities could be partly explained by the low levels of social contact and proximity. Nevertheless, all citizen types included in the analysis demonstrate high levels of distrust in themselves and in average citizens, shaping the understanding of democratic participation in localities with weak mobilisation resources. The general tendency of low public trust and weak local communities is typical in transitional CEE countries, which struggle to adapt to the participatory democracy model in which social proximity is essential (Van Oorschot, Arts & Gelissen, 2006). The main findings of comparative studies of social capital in European countries suggest that the pattern in Eastern European and Baltic countries demonstrates low levels of formal social capital and the increasing importance of informal networks (Pichler & Wallace, 2005). Moreover, the *proactive moderates from large municipalities* type (Type 5) evaluates representative local authorities, such as the council of the municipality or mayoral institutions, more positively. In contrast, the problem-solving capacities of local executive authorities, specifically the head of municipal administration or the head of the municipal administration unit (elder), are viewed more negatively. Empirical data indicate that the most powerful local institutions are the council of the municipality and the mayor who represents local political interests.

In contrast to our expectations, large municipalities provide an adequate arena for local activism and citizen participation with higher levels of public trust in local authorities. In accordance with previous research on the relationship between municipal size and citizen perceptions of local democratic capacities, large jurisdictions are characterised by more diverse and heterogeneous social capital, which increases citizen competence and knowledge of local politics (Mouritzen, 1989). In all cases, the explanatory power of municipal size concerning citizen perceptions of local agents' problem-solving capacities and social contact levels demonstrates the ambiguity of local non-electoral participation indicators. Our statistical input illustrates the need for more thorough explanations related to the variety of normative conceptions of local participation in general.

6. Discussion and Conclusions

One of the main challenges is how to find reliable empirical evidence to measure the correlation between municipality size and the quality of local participation potential. Empirical evidence contributes to the long-standing discussions of territorial reforms, concerning different aspects of non-electoral participation and citizen engagement in local issues. What types of measures should be used in the case of transitional countries with weak democratic traditions, little public trust in political actors, and continually shifting territorial reform initiatives? The focus of this paper has been on investigating the relationship between municipality size and citizen non-electoral participation effects in local municipal agendas, using population survey data. The recent debates over territorial reforms in Lithuania indicate the disparity between municipal authorities and local inhabitants' expectations of local participation channels. The summary of political discussions on territorial reshaping initiatives provides a specific context for understanding the dynamics of the political agenda over the past 25 years. The case of Lithuania demonstrates that the most significant part of the political narrative emphasizes the economic efficiency of individual municipalities, rather than supporting systematic changes in optimal municipality size, especially taking into account the negative consequences of depopulation trends. Most of the options concerning territorial rescaling initiatives were rejected as unrealistic for a country with limited economic resources and relatively weak democratic participation traditions. The theoretical framework for local non-electoral participation assumes that citizen activation practices could play a significant role in municipal jurisdictions of different sizes. Native expectations of local inhabitants regarding their satisfaction with municipal performance can vary between small and large jurisdictions. Selected non-electoral participation indicators, including the intensity of local contact activities, evaluation of self-governance performance, and municipal problem-solving capacities were used to test our empirical hypothesis on the variances in the types of local participation practices. The theoretical approach suggests that in small municipalities residents establish more intense and dense social contacts with local authorities. The level of satisfaction with municipal performance is also higher in small local jurisdictions because of community closeness and a higher level of accountability (Tavares & Carr, 2013). Our empirical results demonstrate that the overall picture of citizen perceptions of municipal problem-solving capacity, municipal performance, and proximity to local authorities is a multi-dimensional phenomenon.

Our empirical findings partially support the hypothesis regarding the correlation between citizen assessments of municipal performance and participation levels in local issues in municipalities of different size. The results demonstrate that the various citizen types can have different perceptions of municipal problem-solving capacities depending on their contact level, engagement in the local agenda, and place of residence. Representative democratic institutions, such as the mayor, the council of the municipality, and parliament members, are viewed as having more decision-making power than average residents or administrative units of municipalities (elderships). In general, the so-called *active* citizen types are more likely to evaluate the decision-making capacities of different local agents positively compared to *passive* citizen types. Moreover, the variations in active and passive citizen types within different evaluations of municipal participation capacities highlight the relationship with the indicator of municipality size. In our case, the empirical results partly support the previous research argument regarding the relationship between municipal size and citizen satisfaction (Mouritzen, 1989; Hansen, 2015). The findings confirm our hypothesis by demonstrating that citizen satisfaction with overall municipal performance is relatively higher in small municipal jurisdictions. However, the indicators of non-electoral participation are more important in defining the level of citizen engagement in localities than the size indicator itself. Our study indicates that other contextual and socio-demographic indicators must be considered to continue a comprehensive analysis of the side effects on small and large municipalities in Lithuania.

In conclusion, what can we learn from our empirical results regarding citizen perceptions of the different sizes of municipalities and municipal performance? Are there any innovative practices that could define new and emerging forms of local participatory governance? What sort of recommendation could we provide regarding territorial rescaling reforms in the country? First, we can summarise that there has been a significant shift from individual responsibility to the power of representative democratic institutions in so-called new democracy countries such as Lithuania. The importance of having a strong mayoral institution and other local representative bodies (for example, municipality councils) demonstrates the “classic” free-rider problem of switching the logic of collective action. Who takes on the risk and responsibility in local decision-making? The findings emphasize the need for collaborative efforts of local municipal authorities and citizens, who could attempt to solve the puzzle of optimal municipal size. Second, the dilemma of citizen satisfaction and

political competence in municipal jurisdictions of different size remains unanswered. Our empirical evidence demonstrates that the frequency of contact with municipal authorities can reveal the broader context of citizen activism and decision-making power perceptions. It also creates symbolic power thresholds that can burden non-electoral citizen participation in local issues. Political decision-makers in territorial rescaling agendas should focus on expanding participatory channels, rather than leveraging the advantages of long-term cost efficiency and economy of scale benefits.

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TERRITORIAL POLICY AGENDA REVISED: PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF LOCAL NON-ELECTORAL PARTICIPATION CAPACITIES IN LITHUANIA

Summary

This paper contributes to the ongoing debates on the relationship between municipality size and non-electoral citizen participation at the local level. We use the data from Lithuania as a case of strongly consolidated local government structures. We discuss three main points. First, our focus is on the limited question of how municipality size affects the intensity of citizens' non-electoral participation in local decision-making, taking into account citizens' participatory capacities, contact with municipal authorities and local agents, and municipal performance evaluations. Second, we consider the specificity of the territorial rescaling policy agenda in Lithuania, which is characterised by the long-term direction of the territorial consolidation process. Third, representative population survey data serve as a reasonable platform for testing the hypothesis on the relationship between different citizen participatory practices and municipality size. We assumed that citizen perceptions of municipal problem-solving capacities, local government accessibility, and assessment of local government performance could vary in municipalities of different size. We also expected to find significant correlation between citizen assessment of municipal performance, local government accessibility (varying by local contact activity), and citizen perception of municipal problem-solving capacities by producing statistical clusters of citizen participatory capacity types. The limitations of quantitative statistical approaches constitute a barrier to explaining the subjective perceptions of local citizens hold about their non-electoral participatory behaviour. Our conclusions demonstrate that the perceived potential of non-electoral democratic participation capacities is relatively limited in both small and large Lithuanian municipalities. Nevertheless, the findings indicate that citizens in large municipalities are more likely to establish local contact activity and have better perceptions of municipal problem-solving capacities than those in small municipalities.

Keywords: municipality size, territorial reforms, local government, Lithuania, local non-electoral participation

IZMJENE U TERITORIJALNOJ POLITICI: JAVNA PERCEPCIJA LOKALNIH KAPACITETA ZA SUDJELOVANJE U NEIZBORNIM AKTIVNOSTIMA U LITVI

Sažetak

Rad predstavlja doprinos aktualnoj raspravi o odnosu između veličine općina i participaciji u neizbornim aktivnostima na lokalnoj razini. Podaci o Litvi govore o snažnom okrupnjavanju struktura lokalne uprave. Autori se u radu bave trima pitanjima. Za početak, nastoje odgovoriti na ograničeno pitanje kako veličina općina utječe na intenzitet sudjelovanja građana u neizbornim aktivnostima vezanima za donošenje odluka na lokalnoj razini, i to iz perspektive kapaciteta građana za sudjelovanje, kontakata koje ostvaruju s općinskim vlastima i lokalnim dionicima, te procjene učinka općina. Nadalje, razmatraju specifičnosti litavske politike teritorijalnog restrukturiranja, prepoznatljive po dugoročnom trendu okrupnjavanja. Konačno, rezultati ankete provedene na reprezentativnom uzorku nude pouzdan način provjere pretpostavki o odnosu između različitih načina participacije građana i veličine općina. Pretpostavka autora bila je da će u općinama različite veličine građani drukčije gledati na kapacitete općina za rješavanje problema i na pristupačnost lokalne uprave, te drukčije procjenjivati njen učinak. Također se očekivala značajna korelacija između procjene učinka općina, pristupačnosti lokalne uprave (s razlikama u skladu s ostvarenim kontaktima na lokalnoj razini), te percepcije građana što se tiče kapaciteta općina za rješavanje problema. Očekivalo se da će navedenu značajnu korelaciju potvrditi klasterska analiza, tj. grupiranje ispitanika prema tipu kapaciteta za participiranje, no tu se javljaju ograničenja kvantitativnih statističkih metod, te se teže može objasniti subjektivan pogled građana u lokalnim sredinama na svoje postupke sudjelovanja u neizbornim aktivnostima. Zaključak je rada da građani percipiraju mogućnost demokratskog sudjelovanja u neizbornim aktivnostima kao relativno ograničenu bez obzira na to radilo se o malim ili velikim litavskim općinama. No ipak, rezultati upućuju na veću vjerojatnost da će građani u velikim općinama ostvariti kontakt na lokalnoj razini i da će imati bolju percepciju kapaciteta općina za rješavanje problema. Ključne riječi: veličina općina, teritorijalne reforme, lokalna uprava, Litva, participacija u neizbornim aktivnostima na lokalnoj razini