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Country chapter on participatory journalism

## 1. Introduction: The Polish national public sphere and political communication.

### Public sphere in Poland

Politics in public sphere plays a key role in transformative periods, when society polarises and order is destabilised. Politics becomes a crucial element, especially in unstable or in the process of stabilising societies. In functioning democracy, communication is a key issue, as without it basic functions of this system cannot be realised. In the current world political communication on a mass scale has become appropriated by electronic media, which augments the tendency to perceive only what the media present (Skarżyński 2006:33-34). Public sphere is a process of forming of public opinion, in which the media hold a privileged position. Together with their development, their impact increases, and thus their influence on public life in general. It is assumed that creation of mature public sphere requires democracy with its two attributes – civil society and free media (Dobek-Ostrowska 2006: 73), as in this way we get the linkage between the media and processes occurring in modern societies. I will come back to this issue in the following parts of the present paper to discuss the way the media influence public sphere.

The other attribute of democracy – civil society – can be defined as such, in which there is a set of institutions and spontaneous, independent from nation-state organisations, associations, which gather citizens on a voluntary basis (Dziubka 1996: 373). These citizen-created institutions are to serve development of individuals and communities, fulfilment of their needs, and also constitute a proof of their activity and initiative. Public opinion becomes thus a society-induced response to political action (Ryszka 1984). Public opinion can also be regarded as subject of activity; according to Sartori public opinion is nothing but community, whose dispersed states of mind interact with the rush of information on the state of public affairs (Sartori 1998). Polish researchers also emphasise that modern democracy is not so much of sovereignty of a nation, but more of the rule of public opinion (Młyniec and Antoszewski 1998).

The state of knowledge and interest in public opinion in Poland has been influenced by the conditions in which it was formed. During the times of Soviet domination, especially since 1945 to 1956, public opinion polls were not conducted, or only carried out on an order placed by the state organs, thus their results were not popularly accessible. At the beginning of the 1960s sociological research in academic centres commenced, although they were not approved of by the contemporary authorities. The first centre of public opinion research in Poland was Ośrodek Badania Opinii Publicznej (OBOP), and the first extensive survey on political issues (electoral preferences, forecast for parties and politicians) were carried out after 1989 (Dyoniziak 1997:7). Since 1990s, public opinion polls have been conducted not only by state-owned centres, but also by numerous private companies.

In Polish public discourse the term „social opinion” is in use, which, as Mielec notes is not synonymic with the term public opinion, because refers to a broader phenomenon. According to him, social opinion refers to broader spectrum of problems, not necessarily directly associated with politics. Obviously, these problems translate into political issues when they become “manager” by parties or political groupings (Młyniec 1996:155). Thus we come back to the concept of public sphere, which Habermas posits, is such an area of social life, where by exchange of information and opinions related to public interest public opinion becomes political power (Habermas 2007). As Skarżyński notes, this sphere emerges the fastest in most technologically advanced countries (Skarżyński 2006:39), also those, where new media influence the way politics is performed and political communication. Public sphere becomes a separate part of socio-political life – this is where, according to Klimkiewicz, political will is shaped, information and opinions are exchanged, and also public opinion is created. (Klimkiewicz 2003:22). These processes are undoubtedly supported by private sphere, where opinions and values are formed. This is private sphere where the foundations of civil society are laid, which, as has been aforementioned, are perceived alongside the media as the basis of public sphere (Dobek-Ostrowska 2006:78).

Communication process is of crucial importance in the formation of public sphere. Researchers distinguish several models of communication, depending on the conditions in which they developed. The model of opinion-making press is the oldest model, around which public sphere in Europe and America in XVIII century. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century commercial press is

created as a result of industrial revolution, aimed at mass recipients and profit-oriented. It is then, as Dobek-Ostrowska notes, when journalism finally split from literature, and newspapers, depending on the ownership structure, reflected particular political options. The next breakthrough in the sphere of communication coincided with popularisation of television in the 1950s, which led to permeation of entertainment and information. With the development of the so called new media, “dialogical” communication process commenced, as new media, and the Internet particularly, made communication more effective and gave the feeling of being more interactive (Dobek-Ostrowska 2006:79). Polish researchers agree that mediatisation of politics impacted upon the development and rhetoric of politics itself, but there is no agreement as to the direction of changes. Skarżyński presents a pessimistic vision of mediatisation, claiming that in the world dominated by mass media, there is no longer a need for grand ideas, which became replaced with Simple myths. According to this vision, political philosophy is not necessary for the effective functioning of contemporary public sphere, since it has been replaced with political marketing, a basic tool for society’s activation (Skarżyński 2002:305). Although there are many supporters of such a pessimistic vision of public sphere among Polish academics, it is worth to adduce to optimists’ arguments. According to McNair’s conception, media are to help citizens comprehend the world and take decisions on the basis of information they provide. The theory posits that the core of public sphere is mass media, for they strongly influence its shape (McNair 1998:40). The sphere of politics interacts with the media in a special way, through various forms of media remittance: reportage, TV debates, talk show, and also blogs and video blogs (Ociepka 2003). At the same time, it is worth noting, that the process of media development does not unfold identically and differs in its advancement not only globally, but also in Europe. For the media to become a true core of public sphere in Poland, we need the creation of appropriate participatory political culture which in turn is determined by the quality of civil society. The process of such participatory culture, its expression (or lack thereof) will be presented in the following part of the paper.

### Internet and politics in Poland

Since 1992 US Presidential election, the Internet has been adopted as an electoral weapon by an increasing range of political actors in as diverse countries as the UK, Australia,

Germany, Italy, France, Japan and South Korea (Lusoli 2005b: 248). In the same time in Poland the Internet only began to be used and initially this privilege belonged to a very Barrow segment of society, and the first Polish website was created in 1993 (Zieliński 1998). I am providing this example in order to show the disproportion in development of communication sphere, which is visible now between the old and new member states, and which was captured by Lusoli in his research of the European parliamentary campaign in 2004. He revealed very low rates of Internet use in political communication in Poland in general, and also during elections (Lusoli, *ibid.* 258-259).

The first popular utilisation of the Internet in Polish political campaign happened before presidential election in 2000, although in a rather limited way and boiled down to the creation of candidate's website (Kaczmarek-Śliwińska 2003, 199-200). The Internet as a means of communication, exchange of opinions or political agitation is still in the making in Poland. As has been noted in the conceptual chapter, mass media are the principal forum of public opinion making, as media debates allow political actors and journalists to interpret and evaluate political affairs and express support or opposition towards government or other political concepts (Michailidou and Trenz 2010). The scope of traditional media activity in Poland is quite broad, although they undergo constant evolution and reshaping. The so called new media are developing quite expansively, although it needs be noted, that they are used by a particular segment of society – the gap between this group and those who still do not have Internet access is growing bigger. As a journalist in *Gazeta Wyborcza* noticed, *"In the 90s sociologists, political scientists and numerous technology visionaries believed that development of the Internet would bring more equality and more freedom. [...] The voice of a poor person was to be heard on an equal footing with the voice of a big country's government. The voice of anonymous blogger was to be heard just like the voice of a huge media machine [...] life is however far from this idealistic vision. The poor and badly educated – those who were excluded from the Internet to a large extent – also today do not enjoy Internet access. Those who used to be excluded back then, are still excluded nowadays"* (Leszczyński 2010). Digital divide relies in Poland on regions – the biggest gap in the use of the Internet divides the city and the countryside and this is as stable a tendency as disturbing, since despite numbers of Internet users in cities soar, the situation in the country has not changed that much (Filiciak 2009). Public Opinion Research Centre (CBOS) reveal

that currently 53 % of men and 45 % women use the Internet in Poland and average age of internet users is 35 years, although it is worth remembering that almost 90% of people aged 18-24 years use the Internet and only 6% of people older than 65. Almost all people with higher education use the Internet, and only 21% of people with elementary education. The same study shows that the interest in politics on the part of Polish internet users is quite limited – only 21% of all Internet users read political blogs, while twice as many read non-political blogs (CBOS 2009). Lack of interest or disheartenment with politics is noticeable in modest numbers of services offering political news in the Alexa ranking – in the top 100 there were only 7. This tendency is also confirmed by low quality of comments below articles on politics – there is more substantive discussion either on special websites (such as, for example, electronic edition of weekly *Polityka*), or special sections of fora, devoted solely to politics. Nevertheless, responsibility of such sites is so low, that they did not make their way to the Alexa ranking Top 100.

One should notice that a significant group of Internet users treats it as a channel to access electronic version of traditional media (mainly press), and as many as 57% read electronic editions of newspapers or magazines, with only one reservation, that often they offer abridged articles available in full form in traditional press, or the access to the full version is paid.

Polish politics on the Internet remains on the 1.0 level, which means that politicians still are not able to make use of interactivity the Internet offers. A vast majority of websites of organisations and political parties do not provide internet users with forum (Bendyk 2009), and blogs of most politicians are dull and updated only during electoral campaign. Similarly, social networking sites, underestimated by Polish politicians, whose proved effective during residential campaign of Barack Obama. Blogs, websites or profiles on social platforms are not effectively used by Polish politicians, which results from the perception of these through the prism of traditional media, namely – provision of content without entering interaction with voters – hence Internet websites or candidates' blogs are full of declarations and slogans, but lacking in encouragement to partake in the debate, attempts to enter dialogue or create a bond with the reader (Jaskowska 2009). Despite all, it is worth remembering that political parties need to use the media to promote their declarations and candidates – the changing sphere of new media enforces a change in the attitude towards such communication channels as Internet for instance, with its interactive social platforms.

## Participatory journalism in Poland.

As new media are only settling down in Poland, participatory journalism is a new phenomenon and one that is hardly visible. Still, only few Internet users comment on professional articles and even fewer write their own articles. Nonetheless, this is a fast-expanding field. Expressing one's own opinion, public display of political preferences is not very common among Polish people, which also applies to online realm, which, although anonymous and conducive to expression, is not dominated by users' opinions. This trend is also changing, for example, a percentage of people who comment on Internet articles has risen from 20% in 2005 to 37% in 2009 (Pliszka, 2009), and this is not a big number which also applies to comments in general, not particular topics (thus it is difficult to establish how many out of those 37% comment on political events). Since 2007 we have been observing in Poland an increase in the interest in participatory journalism among internauts. The most popular such services are portals wiadomości24.pl and Interia360.pl – according to research carried out by group PBI/Gemius in 2008 they have been visited by about 12% of Polish Internet users (Szpunar 2008:143). The owners of media platforms use this tendency trying in various ways to encourage users to share information. Portal Gazeta.pl enables users to easily send in news, pictures or movies. Authors of the most interesting news are offered material prizes, and service Wiadomosci24, which relies on activity of participatory journalists, pays for the best news. Research shows, every third American blogger perceives blogging as a form of journalism, and every other declares that they are trying to verify information that they post (Lenhart and Fox 2006) – in Poland, however, we can only speak of the process of making of both participatory journalism and relevant etiquette and culture.

### 2. Research questions and subsequent hypotheses

Public discourse is connected with the functioning of the media. A great part of knowledge about issues which are important to their society, people derive from the media. In this sense, the media create the systems of representation that have developed socially in order to make and circulate a coherent set of meanings regarding an important topic area. In this sense, the public discourses that are present in the media are the platforms to disseminate opinions, attitudes and values (van Dijk 1995: 107–26). Properly functioning media constitute also a pillar of liberal democracy, and thus properly functioning society – the

condition of the media and their quality are of key importance to contemporary societies. In Poland problematic is the divide among the media, divide, which overlaps with political sympathies and antipathies. This process was especially conspicuous in 2005, when Polish political scene became polarised<sup>1</sup>. The victory of PiS (Law and Justice) in parliamentary elections in 2005 for several months until the election in September of 2007, the pro-PiS sympathies were represented by the conservative *Dziennik Polska Europa Świat*, constructed on the model of German *Die Welt* as a conservative national quality newspaper, as well as by *Rzeczpospolita*, so far functioning as an independent and relatively neutral though conservative-liberal daily (Filas and Płaneta 2009:143). This is one of examples how political sympathies or antipathies influence the media in Poland, shaping thus public sphere and voters' preferences.

Predominance of politics is perceived as the main threat to Polish media, especially public media, and the public debate. As Mrozowski notes, „the real control over the public media is in the hands of a narrow group of politicians and representatives of big corporations (...) in this way the programme policy of the public media is a specific mixture of paternalistic and commercial model, while the civic model is totally ignored”(Mrozowski 2007: 156–157).

Focus on debate on domestic politics is noticeable both in traditional media and online sphere. Material gathered during study allows for the confirmation of a cyber-pessimist scenario – debate on the Union's politics or the very concept of European integration is often restricted to the level of discussion about domestic politics. What is more, it does not differ from debate in traditional media, and Internet services I investigated specialise in condensed, synthetic and descriptive news, which is not conducive to substantive discussion. The analysed Internet platforms enable discussion in the form of posted comments on the texts, however in the cases under study; most comments were merely emotional slogans and almost exclusively related to domestic politics. Hence, there is not more serious discussion about the EU-related issues than in traditional media. More substantive discussion takes place in special services and Internet fora, which are not as popular as the platforms under study. The presence of eurosceptic threads in online debate is mainly visible in comments posted under articles and discussions among the users, but the quality is so

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<sup>1</sup> Parliamentary elections in 2005 were won by PiS (Law and Justice), which announced reform of the state according to the vision of Polish solidarity. This vision was confronted with the vision of Liberal Poland, attributed to PO (Civic Platform), which won the elections in 2007.

low, that it is very difficult to assess where particular stances derive from. Knowledge about European integration is relatively low and general attitude towards politics negative – these factors and anonymity of the Internet create environment conducive to articulation of frustrations and spreading of stereotypes. It needs to be noted, that European themes in traditional media are not strongly represented and citizens are not provided with sufficient information about the functioning of the European Union or idea of integration. This tendency, present in public media, shifts to online sphere which is linked with them. Consequently, we need to focus on the media ownership structure in Poland and linkages therein.

At the beginning of the 1990s, as a result of changes connected with transformation, and lack of domestic investors, Poland became an arena for the expansion of foreign media corporations. These companies, predominantly German, provided capital and offered opportunity to gain experience – a necessary treat for Polish journalists of the time. The biggest ones include H Bauer, which invested in more than 30 titles; Verlagsgruppe Passau<sup>2</sup> (Polskapresse) or Norwegian Mecom (former Orkla Press) – both also investing in local media market. High sale levels of dailies are also recorded by their owner newspaper publishing company Axel Springer – one of its titles – „Fakt“ is the best-selling Polish tabloid (Maryniak 2009:2). The only challenge for the foreign capital in this field is Agora, the publisher of Gazeta Wyborcza. Currently both traditional media and electronic media are owned by a few big media groups, which manage not only traditional media, but also own electronic platforms. For instance, abovementioned Gazeta Wyborcza is part of AGORA SA, just like radio station TOK FM, colour monthlies and a few Internet services. What is more, big media houses also possess press agencies, which provide them with news and distribute among media of smaller reach.

Until 2004, foreign investors were only allowed to own up to 33% of shares in audiovisual sector (Maryniak 2009:6) – visibility of foreign capital in this sector is lower than in press sector. Moreover, there is public television. A curious example of a media „empire” is the case of Redemptorist Father Tadeusz Rydzyk, who founded not only Radio Maryja and Television Trwam, but also daily Nasz Dziennik, and recently has initiated the creation of a new Internet radio station – all these platforms serve to popularise national, xenophobic and

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<sup>2</sup> Polskapresse Publishing Group is part of international company Verlagsgruppe Passau, and owns one of the few portals with participatory journalism in Poland - wiadomosci24.pl



anti-European slogans, what I discussed in the chapter about euroscepticism. Centralisation of the media in Poland is especially visible in the case of big media groups, which own not only television or radio stations, but also traditional press and a number of Internet services offering professional journalism, but also solely entertainment. The Internet is still treated in Poland as additional, not main source of information. Online sphere is not a sphere of active participation – as I have presented in previous paragraphs only one in five internauts reads political blogs – interest in politics, or rather lack thereof, is also displayed by a limited number of professional topic-related blogs.

On the other hand the Internet is widespread enough in Poland to become autonomous environment for the debate on the issues the users deem important. The fast pace of the news delivery and practical „limitness” of the Internet should contribute to the creation of communication and distribution of new, also about European issues (for example during European parliamentary campaign). This is not the case in Poland – debate, even if online, in most cases does not transcend national borders, and if it is related to integration or the way the European Union is functioning, these are most often unprocessed facts with no or very little commentary. That applies to the studied, most popular Polish websites – in the case of specialist services debate is based on merits, but one need to remember that responsibility of such services is incomparably smaller. The main question remains then why, despite its all accessibility, online sphere does not play a significant role in the discussion about European issues in Poland? Also, what makes these issues not permanently present in Polish public debate?

### 3. Findings

The news about European integration available in the Internet services under study displayed one common feature – they were very descriptive and concise, limited to the form of announcement or message, sometimes with quotation of politicians or public intellectuals, and hardly ever opinions of the author. That results partly from the fact that the news come from main press services (Polish Press Agency, tvn24, Agency Gazeta) and is posted in the received form in particular service. Another issue is limited number of references to the EU or European integration in the time of the study, namely during and

immediately after European parliamentary campaign. Interesting is if small number of news is caused by the lack of interest in politics on the part of Polish people or maybe the lack of information in the media causes low interest?

#### - Website level

The analysed Internet services were selected on the basis of worldwide ranking Alexa, and these included: Wirtualna Polska, TVN24 and Gazeta.pl, and the most popular political blogs – by Janusz Korwinn Mikke and Janusz Palikot<sup>3</sup>. Initially I chose for the analysis portal Onet.pl (listed the highest in the ranking), but after two months from the election All archive entries were removed, thus disabled further work on the material. Then I chose Wirtualna Polska, because it was only two places below and has a similar profile. Interestingly enough, in the Alexa Top 100 there are only 8 websites which include professional socio-political issues. That does not mean there are so few Polish professional websites about politics - but they are visited by too few to enter the Alexa Top 100 ranking.

#### Which are they

Two out of Tyree analysed services are linked to „traditional” - TVN24.pl is affiliated with commercial television company TVN and publishes fragments of programmes realised by the station (interviews, opinions).

Gazeta.pl service is affiliated with the daily Gazeta Wyborcza, and owned by Agora. Gazeta.pl does not publish the articles of „paper” edition of Gazeta Wyborcza, but only synthetic news provided by press agencies – whereas the role of electronic edition is played by wyborcza.pl, where all editions of the daily can be purchased.

Wirtualna Polska is the only service that does not function outside of the Internet and possessing a number of thematic services such as the news, health, culture and sport, business, cinema or fashion. It is worth mentioning that it is the oldest service of this type in Poland. All the services enable to post comments under most articles; Wirtualna Polska and Gazeta.pl also offer separate thematic discussion fora. Gazeta.pl also provides space for news sent in by the readers via mobile phones (Alert24).

#### o Political profile

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<sup>3</sup> Since there were no blogs in the Top 100 of Alexa ranking, I used the ranking of one of the most popular services - Onet.pl

Gazeta.pl is an internet platform affiliated with Gazeta Wyborcza, a daily identified as centre-right, which was established in 1989 by a former dissident Adam Michnik. This newspaper, like the online service, and the whole group Agora, is identified with support for the ruling party PO (Civic Platform), and also with a strongly pro-European vision of Poland. Gazeta.pl promotes a series of action led by Gazeta Wyborcza to animate civil society.

TVN24.pl is an online platform owned by private television TVN, and its channel TVN24 devoted exclusively to the news. Formally politically independent, it can be classified as favouring the political centre.

Wirtualna Polska is an independent service, and political news it provides come from professional information agencies. Like TVN24 it is formally politically independent, but can be classified as favouring the political centre.

#### o Ownership

All of the chosen platforms are private-owned. TVN24 belongs to ITI Group, which also owns broadcasting company TVN and a chain of cinemas<sup>4</sup>. Gazeta.pl is part of AGORA Group, which was established in 1989 and owns a publishing company, Press agency and other titles of traditional press (weeklies and local dailies, including Metro, distributed free of charge in big cities). Since 1999, AGORA has been listed on the Warsaw Stock Exchange. Wirtualna Polska is the first Polish Internet portal. Established in 1995, it now belongs to Group Telekomunikacja Polska, whose shareholder of 4, 15% is the State Treasury, and the major shareholder of Telekomunikacja Polska, France Télécom, owns 49, 79% of shares (GUS 2010).

#### o Importance

TVN24 is perceived as the most Professional source of information in comparison with other services on the Alexa ranking. According to the latest survey, TVN is trusted by a majority of Poles, even though trust in television remains low and does not exceed 47%. In contrast, the EU is trusted by 60% of Poles, and traditional press by 37% (CBOS 2010). Wirtualna Polska is one of the oldest and most recognised services in Poland. Gazeta.pl is also recognised and popular, and due to affiliation with Gazeta Wyborcza it has a significant number of critics, who are easily traceable on its discussion forum.

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<sup>4</sup> ITI Group is also active in the field of film and TV production; see more: [http://www.iti.pl/\\_fl/index.htm](http://www.iti.pl/_fl/index.htm)

At the time the choice was made, in the Alexa ranking, Onet.pl occupied 3rd place, Wirtualna Polska 5<sup>th</sup>, Gazeta.pl 10th and TVN24 31st – despite some fluctuations these websites are still placed in the forefront of Polish information websites in the Alexa ranking. The ranking of European Trusted Brands reveals that Polish people declare trust in information derived from the Internet (72%), while merely 2% of the respondents believe in politicians' declarations. (Reader's Digest 2010).

#### - Thread/debate level

The selected websites were analysed and coded from May 18<sup>th</sup> to June 10<sup>th</sup> and this period was divided into three parts: the first May 18<sup>th</sup> – 28, second May 29<sup>th</sup> – June 6<sup>th</sup> and third June 7<sup>th</sup> - 10<sup>th</sup> 2009.

The greatest number of clippings, 99, I retrieved from Wirtualna Polska, while from Gazeta.pl only 18, and TVN24 23 clippings. The least information was found in the blogs – only 4 in Janusz Palikot's blog and 5 Janusz Korwin Mikke's. Most information was posted on the websites in the third studied week – this fact can be linked to the results of the elections being published and commented on. Coded articles came from the home page which included the news. While Onet.pl offered a special service devoted to European parliamentary elections, this information got removed by the Publisher, which made it impossible to carry on with the analysis. Each of the websites offered the option to comment below the main text.

In the 50 threads which I coded, I found 42 messages. Thematic scope of the threads mainly included domestic party politics (26 cases) or European party politics (16 cases), with only 5 threads about democracy. The number of threads on party politics is interesting – and it leads to be underscored at this point that in the case of European party politics there is also reference to domestic politics, as most news discussed potential coalitions in the European Parliament and Polish politicians' participation in its fractions. In total there were 8303 comments (mainly by citizens) on the coded articles, and one of the Texas received as many as 2297 comments. Unfortunately, only few of them included judgement on merits, arguments or attempt to assess European integration or the very institutions of the European Union. Most comments were emotionally involved slogans and vast majority did not reflect on European issues, even if they were posted immediately below an article on such a topic.

## Evaluation and the nature of the discussion

Majority of evaluations referring to the EU or integration were found in the comments to articles, so their authors were citizens. The articles themselves were very descriptive, their authors only provided facts and numbers, sometimes quoted politicians, sometimes referred to public opinion. When referring to public opinion, the authors pointed out to scant knowledge about mechanisms governing the European Union or functioning of its institutions, „Poles do not understand the European Parliament”<sup>5</sup>.

It needs to be emphasized that comments made by citizens had a heavy emotional load, and majority of them did not relate to European issues even if they were posted under the article dealing with such a topic. Omnipresent in the comments was Polish political scene with its major divide into two camps – supporters of PiS (Law and Justice) and PO (Civic Platform). Even if the message or comments refer to European politics, subsequent comments would take it to the level of domestic politics. The best example of it is the article about the vision of Europe as PiS (Law and Justice) sees it – quoted in the text Jarosław Kaczyński warns about the domination of Germany in the Union, arguing that Germany holds the majority in the Christian-Democratic fraction, and PO (Civic Platform) declaring its will to join this fraction would only contribute to the revision of borders. One of the first comments to this article stated that “the fifth partition of Poland started on May 1st 2004”<sup>6</sup>, and subsequent comments refer to PO (Civic Platform) and its role in weakening the country, and also to *Gazeta Wyborcza* as a “newspaper of Polish European”<sup>7</sup> as opposed to patriots.

Comments below the coded articles reveal the degree of disheartenment of Polish people with politics in general, which translates into the perception of the European Union. The authors of posts declare that they do not have influence on politics, stress lack of trust in politicians<sup>8</sup>, and some declare that they are „too smart to partake in the elections”<sup>9</sup>. Some authors of posts point out that Polish politics makes them distrust institutions, „politicians almost every day prove that it is not worth it to go and vote”<sup>10</sup>. In the case of a little village

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<sup>5</sup> Wp.pl, 1.06.2009, T1005

<sup>6</sup> *Gazeta.pl*, 26.05.2009, T1012

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*

<sup>8</sup> *Gazeta.pl*, 1.06.2009, T1015

<sup>9</sup> TVN24, 5.06.2009, T1027

<sup>10</sup> Wp.pl, 26.05.2009, T1044

Bieczyno, inhabitants declared that the act of not voting is an „act of revenge” on local authorities, which did not fulfil their pre-election declarations<sup>11</sup>.

If there are evaluations of the European Union, they are usually statements referring to lack of legitimization of the Union’s institutions. Commentators claim that “European parliamentary elections should be boycotted, because this is all about money for the deputies”<sup>12</sup>, or “The European Parliament is a facade institution”<sup>13</sup>, and also that “it cannot get any more stupid in the European Parliament”<sup>14</sup>. Curiously enough, I am quoting the whole statements, which only shows that they do not contain evaluation of the European Union and, more importantly, it is difficult to understand the reasons for articulation of such opinions, since most comments lack any justification. Comments also show the attitude of commentators to other issues and display major stereotypes in the perception of the Union, such as a common comment „EU = USSR”<sup>15</sup>, or „EU = fascism”<sup>16</sup>, opinion „I do not want the United States of Europe”<sup>17</sup>, or the suggestion to name the EU „Union Soviet Europe”<sup>18</sup>. There were also comments underscoring democratic deficit in the European Union, for example, „in the European Parliament there is socialist democracy”<sup>19</sup>, or „Parliament is a facade institution, which we have no influence on”<sup>20</sup>.

In the comments we also find xenophobic and anti-Semitic threads, such as „LesbianTreaty”<sup>21</sup> instead of Lisbon Treaty (similar-sounding words in Polish), „stop fags in the EU”<sup>22</sup>, and also „Israel will finally have its 50 MEPs”<sup>23</sup>.

A lot of messages about project of integration have been found – among which the scope negative seems to be the most salient. Message givers were against further integration, and more in favour of Europe of Nations than federalization. That displays fears, which were raised up before the 2003 referendum – loss of independence and national identity,

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<sup>11</sup> Gazeta.pl, 9.06.2009, T1017

<sup>12</sup> Wp.pl, 22.05.2009, T1004

<sup>13</sup> Gazeta.pl, 1.06.2009, T1015

<sup>14</sup> Korwin-Mikke blog, 7.06.2009, T1039

<sup>15</sup> Wp.pl, 1.06.2009, T1005

<sup>16</sup> Ibidem

<sup>17</sup> Wp.pl, 27.05.2009, T1034

<sup>18</sup> Wp.pl, 1.06.2009, T1005

<sup>19</sup> Korwin-Mikke blog, 31.05.2009, T1032

<sup>20</sup> Gazeta.pl, 1.06.2009, T1015

<sup>21</sup> Wp.pl, 1.06.2009, T1005 In Polish „Lesboński” refers to the word „lesbijski” (lesbian), in order to emphasize its unnatural and alien character

<sup>22</sup> Korwin-Mikke blog, 1.06.2009, T1035

<sup>23</sup> Wp.pl, 6.06.2009, T1038

acceptance of the so called “civilization of death” and loss of control over crucial economic branches. Some citizens identify those threats with the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty (EU polity: level positive, only 4, and 8%, Project of integration: Level negative 31%, scope negative 33%). Some declared their outright support for the idea of Europe of Homelands<sup>24</sup>. As I have already underlined, not only coded messages, but mainly comments posted by the users of services refer to domestic politics, they are characterised by strong emotional load and lack of arguments to justify the presented stance. There were occasional comments, which in a broader context of the discussion can be interpreted as favouring the European Union, for example „Europe bet on the right and will bitterly regret it<sup>25</sup>”, or „if this is what Germanness looks like, let us Germanise as soon as possible<sup>26</sup>” – however, they also lack constructive arguments.

#### 4. Conclusion

Analysis of messages and comments reveals in the most conspicuous way polarisation of domestic political scene, and all other political issues are its derivative. Disheartenment of Poles with politics is visible, and emotional touch in opinions does not portend a quick change of the state of affairs.

In Poland we are observing ever growing alienation of political class, unfortunately also on the level of local communities. For a few years now there has been conspicuous and definite weakening of the process of creation of participatory society and simultaneously contributing to the creation of withdrawn society. The process of withdrawing from political life is best observable in voters’ turnout<sup>27</sup>, and also opinion on politics as such. As has been noted by, the reason for low turnout in European Parliamentary elections in 2004 was “the atmosphere of political debate about the European Union. Poles have been in the course of recent months bombed with negative information about the Union with regard to the debate about the European Constitution and voting procedures in the Council” (Instytut Spraw Publicznych 2004). This could also be the case in 2009. Admittedly the turnout

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<sup>24</sup> Wp.pl, 1.06.2009, T1006 this expressed support for the vision of Europe of Homelands, whose main advocate is aforementioned Jarosław Kaczyński from PiS (Law and Justice).

<sup>25</sup> TVN24, 8.6.2009, T1030

<sup>26</sup> Gazeta.pl, 9.06.2009, T1016 this commentary refers to the threat of „Germanisation” adduced by other users

<sup>27</sup> Parliamentary elections of 1989 received turnout of 62,70% of all eligible voters, in 1991 43,20%, in 1993 52,13%, in 1997 47,93%, in 2001 46,29%, in 2005 40,57%, in 2007 53,88%. European parliamentary elections in 2004 received turnout of 20,87%, and in 2009 24,53% of all eligible voters.

increased, but it still remains far from desirable. Regardless of their positive attitude towards the European Union, Polish people still do not comprehend the mechanisms of its functioning. Eurosceptic comments I came across during the research display lack of understanding and trust in politics rather than virulent euroscepticism of Polish Internet users, which is corroborated by the linkage of European and domestic issues and emotional load of posts, with concurrent lack of constructive argumentation to justify posited theses. It is worth remembering that majority of Polish society declare contentment with the membership in the European Union and can notice positive influence of the membership on the functioning of the country.

Another issue worth noting is the linkage between online and offline media in Poland. Online media participate in debate about European integration as much as traditional media, which results from the fact of being still in a phase of creation, and the fact that Internet access in Poland is not as common as in the old member states. Online sphere is still a novelty to many people and although it is expanding, it will take time until people learn to make use of all its aspects, namely until they start interacting and not only treat the Internet as a tool to access electronic editions of dailies. Polish civil society, just like online public sphere, is still in the making. It is worth remembering that civil society was created from scratch, and more than 90% of Polish NGOs were established after 1989 (Gašior-Niemiec and Gliński 2007:31) – similar situation applied to participatory journalism or other forms of activity in online sphere.

The great potential of online realm will surely soon become cultivated by Polish internauts and this is actually happening as we watch. Electronic media reach also those who are disheartened by traditional media or traditional politics. Already we observe increased interest in politics among young people, either via social platforms such as Facebook and groups which are established there<sup>28</sup>. The odds are that soon we will notice the impact of the Internet on the formation of public opinion about European issues.

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<sup>28</sup> Recently on Facebook there was a group created which promotes participation in the coming presidential election in Poland – „Election 2010”, and the number of people who expressed their support amounted to 71.850 and is ever growing



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