Communication as a Part of Smart Governance in Local Municipalities

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Abstract. The problem of many Central and Eastern European countries is very fragmented structure of public administration at the local level. It is also a specific of the Slovak Republic with 95,23% of local municipalities with less as 5000 inhabitants. The size of municipality (number of inhabitants, cad aster) influences significantly the total sum of funds needed to realize all original competences, as well as to implement innovative tools of local governance. The aim of the paper is to define the specifics of communication as a part of local governance implemented by small local municipalities and to propose how the communication can be developed in line with the concept of smart governance reflecting the human and financial limits of smaller municipalities. The paper presents selected findings of primary research on the utilization of traditional and digital tools in local governance realized by the Delphi method and compares them with the results of secondary research in the municipalities of the Slovak Republic with less than 5 000 inhabitants.

Keywords: Communication · Municipalities · Smart governance

1 Introduction

Communication of local municipality with all stakeholders in the territory, their participation in the development, cooperation and partnership are the main preconditions for an integrated approach to a dynamic and progressive development of the territory [1, 2]. The aim of communication in local municipalities is to inform stakeholders, to influence their behavior and engage them into the development activities. The smooth communication process with stakeholders helps initiate their participation and integration into the local development activities and persuade them about its necessity and benefits [3, 4].

The paper aims to define the specifics of communication as a part of local governance implemented by small local municipalities and to propose how the communication can be developed in line with the concept of smart governance reflecting the human and financial limits of smaller municipalities.

This aim will be achieved using several methods. We start with detailed characteristics of communication of local municipality that is defined from different point of views.

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The analysis focuses, firstly, on the identification of the communication tools in small municipalities as a part of smart governance and subsequently, it compares the utilization of the tools with the recommended communication tools by experts from academia and practice. Based on comparison of both approaches the papers define the potential pathway how to improve the communication in more smart way.

The paper composes of 3 main parts. The theoretical part explains the specifics of communication in the local municipalities in context of using new modern communication technologies. The second chapter presents the results of primary research on the utilization of traditional and digital tools in local governance realized by the Delphi method and compares them with the results of secondary research in the municipalities of the Slovak Republic with less than 5 000 inhabitants. In conclusions, we present some recommendations how the communication of small local municipalities can be developed in line with the concept of smart governance.

2 Communication of Local Municipality

Communication in the local municipality can be defined from different point of views. From the marketing point of view, the communication is created by a set of tools to inform about local municipality, persuade about its advantages and to motivate final market or markets to "buy" products of the municipality. To do it effectively, the important purpose of communication is to awake interest and raise awareness in public to co-solve problems in municipality and co-create tailored solutions with the aim to achieve "win-win" situation for involved stakeholders reflected in prosperity of the territory [5, 6]. Well-prepared communication plan towards municipal stakeholders can be a great source of information in defining stakeholders' needs and wishes, so then can be subsequently integrated into the development activities.

Communication of local municipality is closely connected with the communication of city. It performs in three ways [7–11]. The first way of communication is related to the physical elements and activities of the city, which include architecture, city design, infrastructure, but also the behavior of the city, e.g. municipal institutions and residents. This way of communication is indicated as primary or physical communication. The second method of communication involves formal communication through various traditional and modern forms of marketing communication. The third method of communication (tertiary communication) concerns the oral presentation of information about the city through the city's consumers (residents, entrepreneurs, visitors, etc.) and is based on their personal experience. Tertiary communication is an uncontrolled way of communication, as it is largely beyond the control of urban management. As tertiary communication primarily affects the image of the city, which in turn affects the city branding, it can bring great benefits but also cause quite a lot of problems, especially when consumers of the area have a negative experience with the city [12]. In the paper, we focus on the communication realized by local municipalities towards stakeholders, it means the second way of communication. Nowadays, these forms of communication are often associated with using internet, social media, web and mobile applications, etc.

However, because of the diversified structure of target audience in towns and cities, the communication should mix the traditional promotion mix with the new ones. From

the traditional ones belong to the most used tools in public relations in a form of press conferences, press articles, news, professional conferences and seminars, sponsorship, or event organizing [13, 14]. Personal communication, or in commerce marketing personal selling, is embodied in each provided information or service by local municipalities. The less use communication tools are various forms of sales promotion as delivering local services for free, gifts for customers, free admission to cultural events, theatres, etc. The local municipalities have preferred the advertising forms in printed form as brochures, leaflets.

However, the fast development of modern technologies has brought a lot of new possibilities in communication of municipalities. These changes are reported also by Eurostat. According to statistics, the internet access of EU households has risen from 84% in 2016 to 92% in 2021. 44% of citizens in the European Union reported that they had obtained information from the websites of public authorities during the last 12 months. This was considerably higher than the 33% of citizens reporting the same in 2008. Nevertheless, the development of e-Government and the availability of online information for citizens vary considerably across the EU Member States, as well as the share of citizens that use the internet in general. In 2019, a large part of the citizens in the Nordic countries had used the websites of public authorities to obtain information: 89% of citizens in Denmark, 84% of citizens in Finland and 79% of citizens in Sweden reported to have done this in the last 12 months. These shares were high also in the Netherlands (76%) and in Estonia (69%). In contrast, only 9% of citizens in Romania had obtained information from public authorities through their websites. This was also not common in Italy (19%) and Bulgaria (20%) [15, 16].

It is questionable what is the cause of these differences. We can anticipate the economic, cultural, social, and other differences that currently exist between individual EU countries. Anyway, we assume that one of the important reasons are activities of municipalities and local government in the on-line world. The information provided on websites and social networks, as well as the possibilities of interactive communication, enable citizens to obtain useful and important information. Therefore, it is important to be aware of what important factors local governments websites should meet.

In cites, the most often used new communication tools are websites, that are relatively cheap, widely available, and easily up-to-date, as well as social media [17–20]. During recent years, different website evaluation approaches have been introduced. To the important features of websites belong the website usability [21, 22], content [23], website accessibility [24], design [25], functionality, or technical aspects of websites.

Factors influencing a website evaluation by visitors seems to be different to factors that are important for website owners and developers. As described in Laco [26], the most important criterion for website visitors is security. Visitors need to feel safe browsing all pages and components of the site, otherwise they leave immediately. During last years, we can see rising importance of another criterion that is advertising. Visitors are already overwhelmed by annoying advertising or spamming, and they are becoming more and more sensitive to it. Another important criterion is content itself, its quality, structure, and relevance. Functionality of webpages is also a necessity to keep visitors at the site. Broken links, images or other components cause dissatisfaction and embarrassment for website visitors. Loading time, or in other words speed, has also proven to be one of

the deciding factors, especially if visitors have an alternative site to which they can browse. Nearly half of web visitors expect a site to load in 2 s or less, and they will potentially leave a site that isn't loaded within 3 s. The last crucial factor is simple and clear navigation. Real practice shows that creating and maintaining simple navigation is not easy at all. As website navigation is key to retaining visitors, it is important to use all possible tools to keep visitors informed where in the website structure they are and where they can go next. Simplicity is one of the best approaches when considering the user experience and the usability of the website.

The following factors have been marked as relatively less, but still important for website visitors. It is for example, correct display of webpages on any screen. Responsive web design is a necessity in today's world full of devices with absolutely different screen resolutions and various web browsers. The current trend can be called "mobile first", but all platforms still need to be considered. Websites must also be "searchable" in both external and internal meanings. Website must be easy to be found in the whole internet – via Google mostly. Visitors expect to have also site search possibility as they navigate from one page to another within the specific website. One of the most surprising findings is the fact that design (colours, fonts, images, …) of the webpages is relatively even less important for web visitors, but again still need to be carefully handled. It must be consistent with other factors, especially it has to support simple navigation and cannot cause long loading time due to rich multimedia content like large images of videos. Usability and the utility, not the visual design, determine the success or failure of a website. Since the visitor of the page is the only person who clicks the mouse and therefore decides everything, user-centric design has established as a standard approach for successful web design. For specific groups of visitors' language versions as well as interactivity possibilities are important too.

Website owners and developers focus mostly on website traffic, as a key performance indicator. It is very easy to be measured, but not easy to be achieved at all. Second important factor is functionality of all pages in a website. Third important is design, followed by easy-to-remember domain, simple and intuitive navigation, speed, correct display, language versions and interactivity.

The processes associated with the development and maintenance of the website depend primarily on the decision of the level of outsourcing. According to results published in Laco [26] in most cases the website is created by external company, usually marketing agency. This brings professional design and great first impression of a website. In a large number of cases, website was created by an external company, but it is updated by internal employees. This approach comes with significant benefit of flexible update possibilities. Popular and easy-to-use content management systems make website management processes much more accessible even for non-technical people than in the past. This is probably one of the reasons why in approximately one third of cases, websites were both created and updated by internal employees.

The second mentioned innovation in communication are social media. They include internet, mobile communication channels, and tools through which users can share opinions and textual, audiovisual, and visual content. Social networks involve the building of communities and networks and the encouragement of their users to participate and

engage [27, 28]. Kollárová [29] divides social media into three platforms: social networks (Facebook, Google+, LinkedIn, etc.); blogs (WordPress, Blogger), and discussion forums (Google Groups, Yahoo Groups, Answers). Few other platforms could be involved, namely: microblogs (Twitter, Posterous, Tumbrl, etc.); on-line rating sites (TripAdvisor, Zagat, Google Places); social bookmarking (StumbleUpon, Delicious, Digg); podcasting; social knowledge and Wiki (Wikipedia, Quora); geolocation services (FourSquare); shared multimedia (YouTube, Instagram, Last.fm, Slideshare).

Social media provide a lot of opportunities for interaction with citizens through plug-in applications, groups and fan pages. Each social network is specific and with its specific users. Social media give the users a chance to share their ideas, contents and relationships online. The user can create, comment and post their own content and share it with the others. The users' posts can have the form of a text, a video, animation, images, photos, etc. The concept of social networking creates vast possibilities for presentation. Creative and interactive communication brings the product, place or brand to attention. On the other hand, customers can attach videos, photos or comments to their profiles. Besides, they can have discussions managed and possibly entered by the discussion group administrators. In this way, information is spread to people who would probably not get it otherwise [30].

Moreover, the progressive development opens still new and new possibilities how to improve the communication. There are various possibilities of chat and audiovisual communication in a form of video conferences, discussion forums, IP telephoning, instant messaging (ICQ, g-talk, skype). All these technology options make communication faster and allow better cooperation between various entities. The great advantage is a quick, immediate response. Chat allows electronic communication between the Internet users in real time, or on-line discussions with several users at the same time.

Another example is a mobile communication. The advantage of mobile marketing communication is a possibility of accurate targeting of a campaign (information about the consumer's identity, behaviour, personal preferences and geographic location), the ability to mediate direct interaction between the advertiser and recipient, high operability in real time, simple and quick updating, high user comfort, low cost, large scale use and, last but not least, simple measurability [14, 31].

3 Material and Methods

The paper aim to define the specifics of communication as a part of local governance implemented by small local municipalities and to propose how the communication can be developed in line with the concept of smart governance reflecting the human and financial limits of smaller municipalities.

Research on the communication tools as a part of smart governance from the theoretical point of view was done by using the Delphi method among 33 experts during the second half of 2020 in two rounds. The experts involved in the research sample were identified by the authors' analysis of the academic papers and strategic documents of municipalities in Slovakia. In the first round, 278 experts were invited to participate. We received responses from 33 experts who were involved in the next steps of research. That is why we assume that they are perfectly oriented in the topic and that their knowledge covers the research problem in a complex way.

The experts who participated in the research were mainly from the fields of regional development (39,39%), strategic planning (27,27%), and public administration (15,15%), politics (6,06%) and other (3,03%). They come from academia (85%) and from practice (15%). 49% of the experts came from Slovakia, 18% from Poland, 9% from Italy, as well as from the Czech Republic. Other experts come from Hungary, Belgium, Finland, and Japan (Fig. 1).

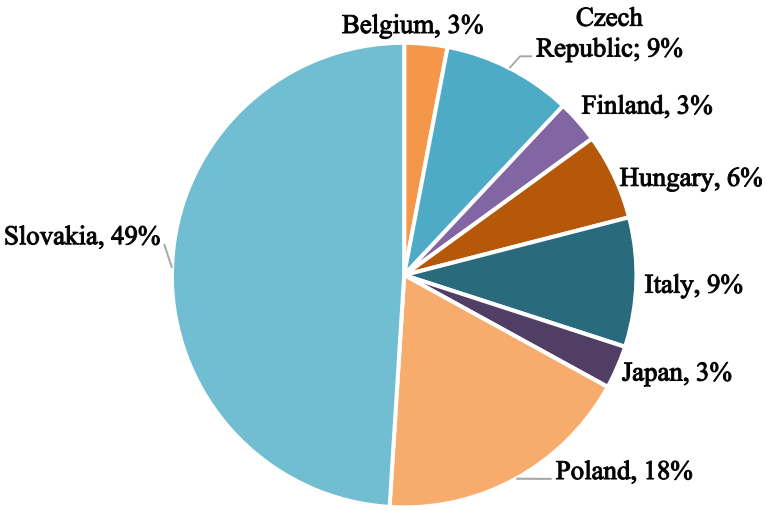

Fig. 1. The structure of experts involved in the research according to country

The next part of the research is a secondary research in a form of observing the strategical documents of municipalities, websites and other official information of the local municipalities with less than 5000 inhabitants in the Slovak Republic during first half of 2021. The research sample was 253 local municipalities. The structure of research sample by the number of inhabitants presents Fig. 2. By Chi quadrat test the research sample is representative by the large of the municipality as well as by the localization in the Slovak parts – West Slovakia, Central Slovakia and East Slovakia.

From both researches, we selected the data that are directly associated with the used communication forms of the local municipalities. To process data we used the MS Excel, statistical program SPSS. We used the methods of descriptive statistics and correlations analysis.

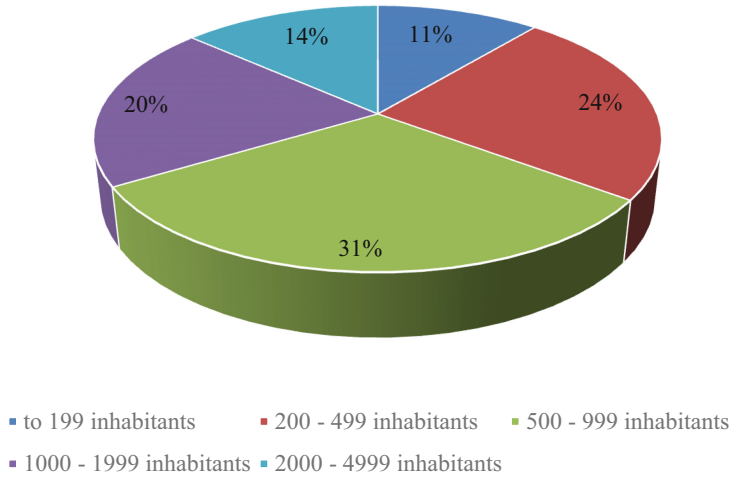

Fig. 2. The structure of researched local municipalities by number of inhabitants

4 Research Results and Discussion

The structure of Slovak municipalities was established in 1990 by no. 369/1990 Coll. on municipalities amended and its importance was confirmed also by the Constitution of the Slovak Republic in 1993 [32]. The main role of the municipality is to care about the comprehensive development of its territory and the population living in it.

In Slovakia, a one-tired municipal government was established beside the cities of Bratislava and Košice (cities over 100 thousand inhabitants) with two-layers of self-government – city and city district. The structure of the Slovak cities by the number of citizens is very fragmented. 84,81% of Slovak municipalities has less as 1 999 inhabitants, and 95,23% has less than 4 999 inhabitants. The large of a local municipality influences significantly the funds that municipality receives and is able to collect, and thus is reflected in the ability to fulfill the original tasks defined by law. Smaller municipalities, lower funds. By other words, in Slovakia, many of the municipalities are very small, are limited in sense of human and financial resources, as well as in communication forms used to inform and engage the local stakeholders.

In the research, we map the traditional and modern forms of communication which use the local municipalities up to 5000 inhabitants. By investigation of municipal websites and strategical documents we identified the most used tools of communication, which are illustrated in Fig. 3.

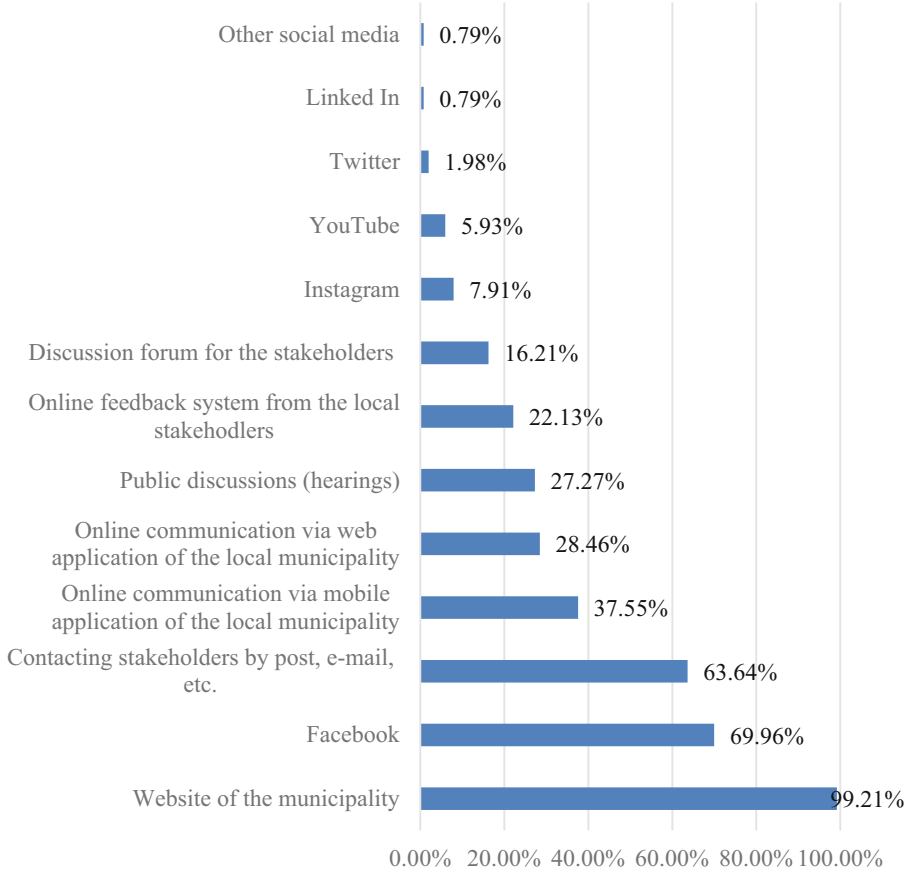

Fig. 3. Communication tools of local municipalities

The most used communication tool is a municipal website. It is followed by Facebook – the official profile of local municipality. This result confirms that Facebook is the most used social media in Slovakia. The third most used activity is contacting stakeholders by post, e-mail etc., by other words direct mail. All other activities are used by less than 38% of local municipalities. The least used forms of communication are Instagram, Twitter, Youtube and Linked In – so various types of social media.

The utilization of communication tools by local municipalities by size categories presents Fig. 4. The figure shows that in first four communication tools are the most active local municipalities with size 1000–1999 inhabitants. In the majority of other communication tools are dominant in the local municipalities with 2000–4999 inhabitants.

In the next step, we compare the tools which are the most often used by the local municipalities by the importance of the communication tools evaluated by experts (Table 1).

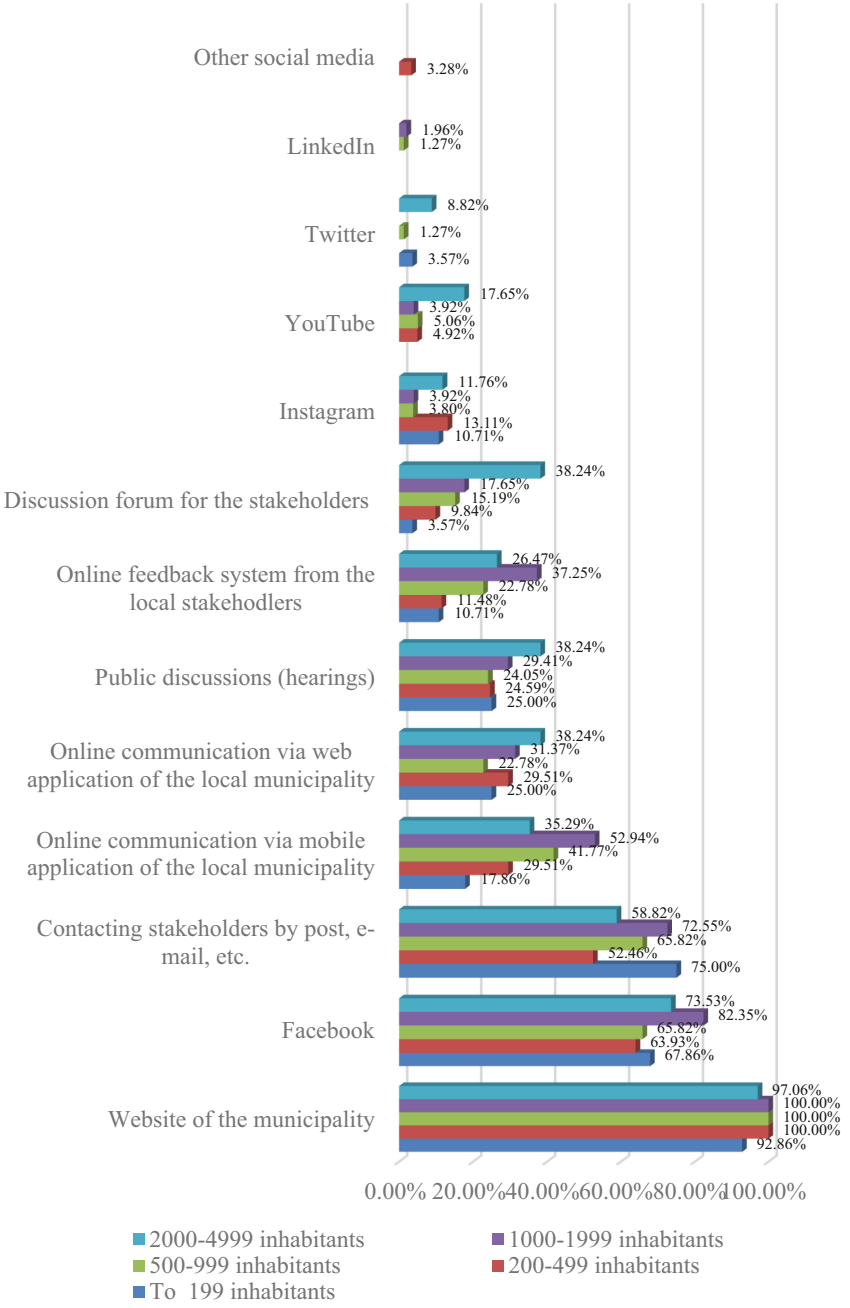

Fig. 4. Communication tools of local municipalities by the size categories

Table 1. Importance of the communication tools by experts

Importance of communication tools	Average value	Standard deviation	Min.	Max.
Online feed-back system from the stakeholders	4,39	0,86	3,53	5,26
Discussion forum for the stakeholders	4,33	0,69	3,64	5,03
Public discussions (hearings)	4,06	0,86	3,20	4,92
Online communication via web applications of the municipality	4,03	0,92	3,11	4,95
Online communication via mobile phone applications of the municipality	4,03	1,05	2,98	5,08
Online communication via social networks	4,00	0,90	3,10	4,90
Website of the city	3,91	0,91	3,00	4,82
Contacting stakeholders by post, e-mail, etc.	2,88	1,18	1,69	4,06

By experts, the modern local municipalities should use mainly online feed-back system from the stakeholders, discussion forum for the stakeholders and public discussions (hearings). To the other tools, almost with the same evaluation, belongs online communication via web applications of the municipality, online communication via mobile phone applications of the municipality and online communication via social networks. The experts confirm that it is more important to use interactive communication tools, i.e. two-way communication and feedback, as just to inform the stakeholders.

When we compare the results from the municipalities and from experts, there is an obvious difference in perception of communication tools. The local municipalities use more often the communication tools for informing and absents the support of interaction. That is why the communication as a tool of local governance loses the real meaning because it covers just the first stage of stakeholders' participation. On the other hand, the experts prefer the interactive tools with the aim to involve and engage the stakeholders into the local governance. It is desirable to re-orient the communication strategy of local municipality on the tools preferred by the experts. The interactive communication tools are a medium that support the successful implementation of smart governance based on a tricky balance of implementation of technological and social innovations relevant to the stakeholder's needs and expectation.

As we already mentioned, the research was focused on the local municipalities with less than 5 000 inhabitants. The possibilities to realise some communication strategy are limited because of the financial and human resources. However, due to the progressive IT development, there opens new options also for these municipalities.

Firstly, the most used tool of local municipalities is a website. As we mentioned in the theoretical review, there are a lot of requirements for a well-designed website. To some

practical tips belongs five quality components defined by Nielsen (2012). The important is learnability – the website has to be easy for users to accomplish basic tasks the first time they encounter the design. The second component is an efficiency – once users have learned the design, how quickly can they perform tasks – as shorter as better. The next factor is memorability – when users return to the design after a period of not using it, how easily can they re-establish proficiency. The last feature that must be minimalised is how many errors do users make, how severe are these errors, and how easily can they recover from the errors. It is important to research also the satisfaction of users, by other words, how pleasant is it to use the design.

The possibility how to use the website more interactively is also a chatbot artificial intelligence module. It is a smart tool for communication with citizens. The essence of the chatbot is interactive personalized communication between local government and residents on the main topics of the municipality such as news, invitations to cultural events, changes in the organization of transport, notifications of repairs, comments on the official board and information from the city council. By chatbot, citizens are able to choose the information they prefer to receive via "chat" in the Messenger application as well as in a web chat.

Other option, usually also financially convenient, for local municipalities are a mobile and web application. They are sold in specific packages of services reflecting the municipal requirements. In Slovakia, there are a few examples as applications SOM (I am), V obraze (I am in), Virtuálne (Virtual).

Moreover, in smaller local municipalities, the potential of the personal forms of communications should be exploited. They include various forms of public discussions and hearings, as well as events organizing for local stakeholders, or some specific activities supporting the co-creation and co-production of public services and local policy decision-making (e.g. hackathons, workshops based on the ideas of living labs).

5 Conclusions

The paper aimed to define the specifics of communication as a part of local governance implemented by small local municipalities and to propose how the communication can be developed in line with the concept of smart governance reflecting the human and financial limits of smaller municipalities.

The paper compares the used communication tools of local municipalities with the experts' opinion on their importance. The main finding is that the local municipalities prefer the utilization of the one-way forms of communication, what is in opposite to the experts. They recommend focusing on interactive communication tools. Moreover, we present also a few examples of new possibilities for smaller local municipalities given by IT progress. However, we consider as a very important to combine the modern IT communication tools with the physical ones, which are in small local municipalities extremely important.

The research showed that all the tools of communication are important and optimal way is to mix them with aim to achieve the multichannel communication with stakeholders which significantly influence the forms of interaction and cooperation in co-creating and co-producing of public services and local policy decision-making.

The presented research results open potential new research areas. As the first step, more sophisticated methods can be used to generalise the correlations between the research aspects. Secondly, the next research could answer the research questions, e.g. how are the differences between the communication of small and big cities, not only from the type of tools, but also content, frequency of communication etc., or how is the effectiveness of the communication tools to various groups of stakeholders. Because it is quite complex issue that was strongly foster and developed during corona phenomenon, it could be beneficial also its effect on the way of communication in cities and villages as a part of smart governance.

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