

# Internet, Social Welfare and Participatory Democracy

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## Abstract

Social welfare in Poland has been changing since its transition to market economy started in 1989. Currently, over two million people benefit from a variety of social support, mostly financial aid. The dynamic development of ICT has significant impact on forms of services offered by social assistance centers. Our study conducted in 2011 and 2012 showed that the use of new ICT tools in social assistance centers is increasing. First of all, they may be used to inform customers about the possibility of obtaining cash benefits. However, communication with customers in other cases is of formal, bureaucratic, one-sided and adverse. We analysed documents located on official Web sites of social assistance centers, using the Gunning Fog Index. The language of these documents is legal and very administrative, which makes it very distant from the knowledge and skills of actual and potential social welfare clients.

## 1. Social welfare in Poland

Social welfare in Poland came into existence 90 years ago as a result of the Social Welfare Act passed by the Parliament and the establishment of the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare. The latest Social Welfare Act was passed by the Parliament in 2004. Additionally, the Parliament adopted acts on family benefits, public service employment, promotion of employment, labour market institutions and social and occupational rehabilitation. These regulate forms and the scale of assistance provided to people requiring formal support from the state, local governments, NGOs, religious associations and also private individuals. The social welfare system can be

accessed upon fulfilling two conditions: the income criterion and the occurrence of one of the social risks defined in the Social Welfare Act (poverty, unemployment, disability, parental inaptitude, etc.). Over the last decade, the number of social risk categories grew from 9 to 15, which can be thought of as enlargement of the social welfare system and of the possibilities for potential customers to access the welfare system.

Social welfare benefits are accessed mostly via Social Welfare Centres, operating in each commune and providing financial assistance, social work, in-kind support and a variety of other services (care, counselling, etc.). At the powiat (district) level, there are Family Assistance Centres, at the province level – Province Social Welfare Centres, at the state level – the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare. In administrative terms, the Social Welfare Centres are arranged hierarchically. In terms of values, norms and goals, however, the social welfare system proves inconsistent, which results from an on-going political conflict between proponents of the residual model and the industrial achievement-performance model, inconclusive experts' discourse on proportions between financial and non-financial aid, conflicting interests of those working in public centres and the non-profit sector, the copying of foreign models in an eclectic manner, etc.

Generally, in the last couple of years the system has seen some modernisation, especially in the domain of family assistance, foster care and group community work. The system used to be more generous in providing financial assistance, yet as the public spending was cut down, the social welfare outlays came to be controlled more tightly. Some independent country-wide surveys have researched the functioning of social welfare centres, especially concerning the standardisation of assistance and social integration services (Szarfenberg, 2011). The surveys conducted by the Institute of Public Affairs showed a conflict between clerical and service-oriented attitudes. The first attitude is mostly represented by social workers employed at state and local government centres, the other – by those working at NGOs. As Marek Rymśa argues, "(...) the 'non-mainstream' workers, i.e. those working as qualified yet complementary staff at various

specialist assistance centres prove to be most social-work-oriented" (Rymsza, p. 358). The staff of Social Welfare Centres, be it at the poviát or commune level, are more focused on gathering documents and preparing administrative decisions, exercising control over the impoverished rather than doing social work aimed at enabling their customers to play all civic roles. These kinds of tasks are pursued much more often by workers of not-for-profit organisations, who commit to directly working with customers in their living places and communities. In other words, state and local-government centres are growing less and less democratic and increasingly technocratic – oriented towards managing their cases in line with authorities' policy of stronger official control and coercion by the police and municipal services.

The following are major directions of changes in the system:

1. Maintaining of the number of beneficiaries (2.144 million in 2000 and 2.018 in 2011) and the value of benefits (respectively PLN 3.11 billion and PLN 3.64 billion in 2000 and 2011) at a roughly unchanged level;
2. Substantial prevalence of financial benefits (2011: PLN 2.7 billion for 1.7 million people) over non-financial ones such as meals, care services and other, housing and funerals (PLN 950 million for 994,000 people);
3. Social work as one of assistance forms – in 2012, 906,000 families used social work opportunities offered by public centres, including 79,000 families in the Province of Małopolska alone (MPiPS, 2012);
4. A slow increase in the number of residential care homes – 753 centres for about 70,000 people, with the number of men prevailing over the number of women at such facilities;
5. Increase in the number of foster families – up to almost 40,000 families in 2012;
6. Greater specialisation in institutional foster care, with the number of foster children using such facilities staying in the recent years at an unchanged level (about 20,000 people);
7. Introduction of new approaches such as standardisation of services and ICTs. Polish Social Welfare Centres had 173 employees working on the

positions of IT Coordinators – staff members responsible for managing centres' computer hardware and software needs (statistics for 2012).

## 2. Access to Information and Communication Technologies in Poland

The vast majority of Poles, though not all of them, are capable of using information technologies. The most recent survey has shown that more than 70% of households have had computers, with close to 67% of households having Internet access (Batorski, 2013). Two years before, in the Province of Małopolska, where we conducted our Internet access survey, the households with Internet access accounted for 65.7% of the sample (Batorski, 2011). The possession of mobile phones was even more popular, with 87% of people (of the survey sample) declaring they had mobile phones. The poor economic status translates into rare possession and use of hardware, though this is not an excluding factor. Almost a half of the lowest-income households used the Internet (Batorski, 2013). Over 90% of the unemployed had mobile phones. The unemployed and persons professionally inactive used social network services (such as Nasza klasa, Facebook and MySpace) more frequently than other socio-professional categories (except for students). Other data confirms that the use of mobile phones and the Internet is a routine way of communication among the majority of Poles. The majority of Polish citizens (62%) declared the use of those tools for the purpose of obtaining information from public institutions. However, many differences were found in what Poles expect from specific institutions. The need to settle the whole matter, from the beginning through to the end, was declared by nearly 30% of respondents in the case of healthcare centres, 23% – for local government and state administration agencies and 17% – for the centres providing unemployment benefits and social welfare services.

Based on many years of research, Dominik Batorski claims that:

Although the availability of public services via the Internet is an obvious necessity, it will presently not be a significant developmental stimulus. What is of key importance today is the country's computerisation meant as the use of ICTs to improve the functioning of administration, both internally and in contacts with companies and citizens rather than the very provision of public services by means of the Internet. (Batorski, 2013)

### 3. ICTs in social welfare

Social Welfare Centres make for a good object to be researched in order to find out how the Internet is used by state and local government institutions to communicate with citizens, most often limited in their rights or in a poorer situation than those not using social welfare. Those centres have obligations stemming from the acts passed by the Parliament as well as governmental and ministerial decrees. The fundamental task is to solve social problems of citizens and provide them with financial, in-kind and service support, as needed. This primarily requires broad and precise communication of information on the functioning of those centres. Additionally, the way the institutions function shapes state's and local government's image.

Social welfare needs to actively respond to the changing social conditions. It operates under circumstances marked by frequent legislative changes, needs to respond to the dynamically changing environment and is often required to react promptly to critical situations. People usually do not plan to use social welfare institutions. They find such a necessity surprising and come to seek for information only when such a need arises. It often happens at a time other than the time of making specific legislative decisions communicated by the authorities' representatives and the mass media. In such situations, the Internet is an ideal tool for the institution to communicate with citizens. First of all, the Internet is cheap to use, easily accessible and can be a source of ever up-to-date information. A general question we have posed is how social welfare institutions use the Internet in their activities, in particular websites

and e-mailing. Our research project has covered basic institutions in all cities of one selected province of Poland.

There are some differences among specific Social Welfare Centres, which result from various sizes of communes and cities they operate in and specific problems occurring in individual areas. This makes Social Welfare Centres more difficult to survey and compare. What they all have in common, though, is that they use the Internet to communicate and provide their basic services. We have set two basic research objectives. One of them concerns the scope of information available on the centres' websites, the other – centres' response to queries we have sent to them.

Firstly, we have determined five most basic pieces of information we thought should be easy to find on centres' websites:

1. Does the website have a report on its previous year's operation or a strategy defining its tasks for the future?
2. Who is entitled to claim social welfare allowance and what are the awarding criteria?
3. What in-kind benefits and services are offered by the Social Welfare Centre?
4. What other agencies are financed or supervised by the Social Welfare Centre? For example, residential care homes, communal homes of mutual aid, day care units and social therapeutic centres.
5. Is there complete address information posted, including telephone numbers and working hours?

Secondly, we wanted to see what matters we can settle with a Social Welfare Centre via the Internet. Here we enter the area of the so-called e-administration. Our expectations in this domain were not too high, since the institutional development of e-administration started only with the establishment of the Ministry of Administration and Digitalisation back in 2011.

In the case of the second criterion, we also formulated five questions and sought for related answers on institutions' websites. We wanted to answer the following questions:

1. What was the social welfare allowance awarding procedure? Such a procedure helps save the time of customers, who can contact the institution and prepare all necessary documents on their own at home.
2. Can the necessary forms be downloaded from the Social Welfare Centre's website? Similarly, this is a comfortable solution that also helps the institution save its time.
3. Does the website provide a form that the customer can use to report a matter? Social welfare also needs to reach those who need assistance yet, for a variety of reasons, do not want to contact the institution themselves. That is why it is so important to obtain information, even from anonymous persons.
4. Is there an e-mail address given on the website of the Social Welfare Centre?
5. Does the Social Welfare Centre respond to e-mails sent?

#### **4. Survey methodology and the process of conducting the survey**

This survey was conducted in the Province of Małopolska in 2010 and 2012. We evaluated the Internet presence of Social Welfare Centres and their level of service towards potential customers. Below are presented the objectives and principal results of our surveys conducted at a two years' interval.

The first problem was with determining Web details of the institutions. It turns out that there is no single credible list of such information. Information that can be found on the ministry's website includes traditional e-mail addresses and phone numbers only. It seems that Social Welfare Centres have used the Internet in quite an arbitrary way, without using a consistent model to provide their Web details. Names of their own websites varied

greatly. The only way to access a website of an institution was through search engines such as Google. We also failed to find some of the websites at all, which has always raised doubts about the institution's actually having one (or our ability to find it). Websites we failed to find can be considered practically non-existing.

Due to the lack of standards and guidelines for the institutions, the results of website assessment differed greatly. Mere 16% of websites had an operational report or strategies posted on them.

Results for the question about who is entitled to claim social welfare allowance were much better. 75% of websites provided exhaustive information on this topic. An announcement that an institution provides social welfare allowances, even if accompanied by a breakdown into various kinds of allowances, was deemed by us to be insufficient.

For reasons unknown to us, the centres have not provided information on the tasks they pursue. Almost 45% of them posted information on non-financial services they provide. Even fewer (only 32%) listed centres they run or supervise.

Address details gained the best score. All websites of Social Welfare Centres included an address but only 84% of them included complete information on working hours and phone numbers.

The results for settling matters with the centres look similar. A described allowance awarding procedure was found on 42% of websites, and forms necessary to claim an allowance could be downloaded on 32% of the websites. Although the forms can be found on other websites, we believe that the only credible source of the forms is the website of the institution which is to receive the filled-in forms.

Only 19% of the websites included a form for the customer to communicate a given matter. Thus, a vast majority of Social Welfare Centres have failed to



provide for a convenient formula of gathering information important to the customers.

On the address list published by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, each Social Welfare Centre has an e-mail address. However, an e-mail address can be found only in 90% of cases. It appears as if 10% of institutions did not want to contact their customers this way. It is also worth noting that sometimes an institution's website address was different from that provided on the ministry's website, which raises doubts about its being credible and up-to-date.

It was of utmost importance for us to check institutions' practical use of e-mailing. For that purpose, as potential customers, we sent out e-mails to all institutions with a simple question requiring no inquiry into the matter or any additional consultations. Responses were returned by a half of all Social Welfare Centres. Interestingly enough, except for one case of a response that arrived at a later date, most responses were sent on the same day, whereas others – within two days at the latest. Thus, the questions were responded to within a short time; however, they were provided by every second centre. By European operating standards for public institutions, the feedback from Social Welfare Centres in Małopolska should be deemed as diverging from the standards set for agencies supposed to serve citizens.

The basic task of a Social Welfare Centre is to provide information on assistance to be obtained by those seeking it. Citizens have a right to expect that the communication will be clear and precise. These two requirements sometimes stand in contradiction. Social Welfare Centres work based on applicable law and tend to literally quote excerpts from laws and decrees regulating their functioning. Yet legal texts are some of the most difficult to understand and require specialist education. The texts should, thus, be edited to provide an easily understandable message while at the same time maintaining precision. We attempted at measuring the readability of information posted on websites of Social Welfare Centres.

The most popular of many text readability indices is the Gunning FOG Index<sup>1</sup>. This index measures the difficulty of a text in terms of years of formal education needed to understand it. The index calculation is based on two elements: the length of sentences and the number of difficult words. The longer the sentence, the harder it is to understand, the greater the competences and the higher the education it takes for the reader to make sense of it. That is why the first step in calculating the index consists in counting the number of words and sentences and, based on this, calculating the average sentence length.

The other part of the index looks at the occurrence of the so-called difficult words. All words with four and more syllables are difficult. Originally, in analysing the English language, Gunning assumed that all words with at least three syllables were difficult. The Polish language has quite a lot of three-syllable words. Language comparisons show that this number should be increased for the Polish language to as many as four syllables. Unfortunately, there is also a problem of the words getting longer as a result of declension. Since this has no impact on the meaning of words, we take into account the singular nouns in the nominative and verbs in the infinitive only. We calculate the Gunning index by taking account of the percentage of difficult words occurring in the text (we divide the number of difficult words by the number of all words in a text and multiply it by 100).

The FOG index is arrived at by summing up the average length of sentences and the percentage of long sentences and subsequently multiplying this total by the coefficient of 0.4. The number obtained so correlates with formal education required to understand a given text. To put it more precisely, the index expresses the number of formal education years (i.e. completed year of a given school) needed to understand a text.

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1 Gunning index is not the only measure describing textual difficulty. Others include: the Flesch-Kincaid index, Fry's Readability Graph and Dale-Chall Readability Formula.

It is interesting to see the values of the FOG index calculated for various typical kinds of mass communication media. The most popular texts in tabloids and TV broadcasts have an index at the level of 8, whereas the opinion-making weeklies – 12 (it takes secondary school education to understand them). Academic texts represent the level of between 15 and 20. Legal texts are most difficult, especially acts with an index of over 22. A text with an index of 30 is virtually unintelligible and its author can be suspected of an intention to manipulate the reader. When addressing a mass audience, one should calculate the Gunning index value of a given text, and this should not be higher than 10.

Undoubtedly, the target audience of social welfare texts have lower education and cultural capital than an average citizen. What follows is that one should pen texts in a clear and easily comprehensible way. To see if this is the case, we have assessed texts on websites of 10 institutions providing assistance that discussed the most fundamental part of their mission – i.e. the awarding of welfare allowances.

With a dedicated software, the Gunning index is easy to calculate. We used an application available on [www.logios.pl](http://www.logios.pl) that takes account of the specificity of the Polish language. Additionally, the application provides results with reference to Poland's educational system.

These calculations are of enormous significance for the process of public institutions' communication with citizens. In nine cases (Social Welfare Centres), the index was higher than 18 (the level of doctoral studies or legal apprenticeship) and in one case (Social Welfare Centre), it amounted to as much as 13–17 (graduate studies). The high difficulty of those texts stems from the fact that texts posted on the websites of Social Welfare Centres include literal quotations from the Social Welfare Act and are thus written in a very difficult legal language. The question is who are those texts addressed to, certainly not those using welfare institutions.

Representatives of Social Welfare Centres might argue that one cannot write about legal and administrative matters in an easy and understandable

language. Experience shows, however, that everything can be written in a comprehensible manner. Yet it takes specific knowledge and skills. In connection with the announced changes regarding social welfare to come into force as of 1 November 2012, on 24 August 2012 *Gazeta Wyborcza* published a text entitled *Pieniądze dla rodziny* (Money for the family), penned by Monika Adamowska. We assessed an excerpt on social welfare allowances. The FOG Index value of 9–10 implies that the text should be understood by anyone who completed a lower secondary school (a person with no secondary school education). Thus, principles of social welfare can be discussed in a comprehensible way.

## 5. Discussion

The above-mentioned examples undoubtedly show that public institutions have Internet presence, although its extent varies. Public institution's Internet presence changes relationships between the citizen and the state.

In states such as Poland, which have been building a democratic system for the past twenty years, a citizen is a weaker party in contacts with public institutions, the tradition of officials' lordly power over *ordinary applicants* still being there. The role of the modern democratic state is to develop legal mechanisms protecting citizens against usurpation of power, which was the case in the system of the so-called *state socialism*. The social change can be accelerated and intensified by the use of the Internet as a tool facilitating faster and frequent mutual communication (or, in some cases, multilateral communication).

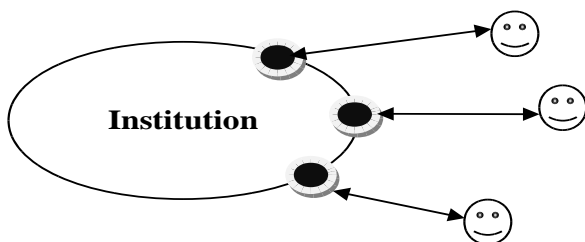


Fig. 1 – Traditional way of communication between citizens and institutions

On the Internet, the relationship between the institution and the citizen can be turned into a relationship between the institution and a group of citizens. The power of a group is incommensurately greater. Consequences of this might impact the functioning of state bodies and the whole society.

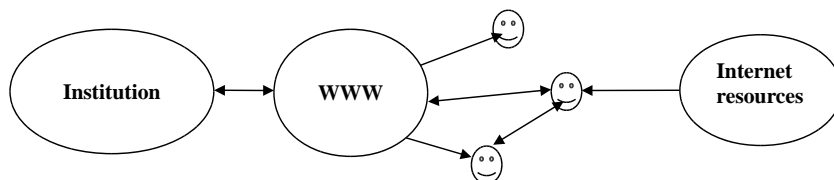


Fig. 2 – Communication between citizens and institutions with use of Internet

In the recent years, we have observed profound social changes resulting from motivation of society members through the Internet and other communication tools as well as increased civic awareness.

The violent protests against ACTA<sup>2</sup> in Europe, including Poland and the revolutions in northern Africa termed briefly as *the Arab Spring* are considered the most important examples of participatory democracy involving the use of mobile phones, tablets and laptops.

It is worth adding here that there are critics of this point of view. In their opinion, it was the Internet that caused violation of corporations' and authoritarian states' interests. As a result, they came up with an idea to profoundly interfere with the freedom of using the Internet or to censor it. This provoked opposition from Internet users, mostly young people adept at using modern ICTs, and then street protests, with the Internet playing a significant role in organising them. The Internet caused both development of

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2 ACTA – Anti-Counterfeiting Trade Agreement – an international agreement opposed by a broad movement of Polish Internet users. The agreement was negotiated in quite a secretive way, without social consultations, and announcement of its ratification met with strong opposition. The Internet (Facebook) facilitated easy communication among people from various cities across the country and mass opposition, including street manifestations. It was also thanks to the Internet that the protest spilled over to the whole EU. Consequently, the agreement was rejected by the European Parliament.

laws constraining Internet access or censoring the Internet and the protest against enforcing those regulations.

One can also take a different look at the Arab Spring. Revolutions did break out at the time when no modern communication media were available. What is decisive for resistance to break out is a group of people who are in opposition, mass awareness of this opposition and motivation to act, and the Internet was just an easier and faster communication medium. All regimes attach great importance to the control over contacts and free communication of ideas among citizens; they keep phones and correspondence under surveillance, launch censorship, grant publishing licenses for newspapers, magazines and books and limit Internet access and coverage.

## 6. ICTs' past, present and future

The transformations we have been observing prompt us to pose a question about future: what is the direction of contemporary societies under the rule of the global technological revolution? Transformations can be usually expounded by means of a theory, which merges single episodes into a coherent whole. Luckily, we do not need to develop such a theory – it already exists.

Marshall McLuhan was a Canadian media researcher and author of the theory of technological determinism. He observed that the world develops by leaps, and breakthroughs are connected with changes in the way people communicate. The first period of primeval community ended upon the invention of alphabet. Ever since, people could communicate without meeting in person. They could communicate with each other in writing. And hence emerged the law and then an institution enforcing it – the state. This is a one-to-one kind of communication, with a single author and one known addressee.

It was so until a printing press was invented. A printed book, newspaper and leaflets could be read by many readers unknown to the author. Mass

communication (one-to-many) was born. There was still one author, yet a message could be addressed to a number of (anonymous) addressees. Consequences of this change were ground-breaking, they gave rise to representative democracy. The printed Bible, available for anyone to read and interpret, led to the Reformation and also enabled the development of a mass educational system. Knowledge, science and technology became widely popular, and this resulted in a scientific and technological revolution.

The emergence of the new media did not lead to the establishment of new institutions but has had a profound impact on the functioning of those in place. The time and distance barrier was lifted. What proved to be particularly ground-breaking was television, with emotions playing a greater role than content. It is not important what one says, it is important how they look, what image, movement and sound accompany them. Now one can reach all illiterate people, who cannot read or do not understand the content; it is important that they watch, experience and provide their support.

The modern capitalism rests on mass communication. Workshops had been turned into factories, which resulted in using economies of scale, intensified production, consumption and advertising as well as awareness that a good idea can be turned into fortune. To protect this system, copyrights, patents and other means to protect intellectual property were created. However, the emergence of the Internet has changed the principles of the game for power and controlling collective consciousness.

To put it more precisely, it was digital networks in general rather than the very Internet (another common digital network, besides Internet, is the mobile phone network). As a result of the digital form the information is provided, information can itself manage the way it is processed and spread. A vinyl album could be listened to by anyone but a DVD can be recorded so that it can be played only in certain parts of the world. US servers store information that is visible only to American computers. We have seen, thus, the emergence of tools enabling selective control of information – one can

predefine a territory within which some information will be available. This makes for new possibilities of manipulating the citizen.

Another element is the Web itself. One-to-many communication turns into a many-to-many model. On the Web, anyone can be a sender and a recipient of a message. We can talk of *network wisdom*, resulting from the wisdom of its users, which is epitomised by the positive example of Wikipedia.

There is little doubt that we are witnessing a transition, in the sense of McLuhan's theory, to a new age. Fields of conflicts between *old* and *new* orders are growing clearly visible.

Copyrights have come to be one of the first areas of the clash between the old and the new. Explanation of this clash is as follows. In the previous epoch, information and its carrier were inextricably connected. A book could not exist without paper it was printed on, music and films were recorded on various carriers and photographs were printed. The form and the content was one. In the digital world, this unity is disintegrated. Text, sound and images are just shapeless collections of bits. One can do many things with them, in particular move from one bit vessel into another, or to put it more precisely: send from one computer's disk into another's by means of the Internet.

Therefore, one needs to again answer the question of what and how to protect and if it is possible to control the exchange of bits on the Web at all. Should control apply to material carriers (requiring greatest costs) only? Defenders of proprietary copyrights fail to notice that the Internet has also contributed to protecting those rights. After all, the Internet makes it easier to check who, when and in what way unlawfully appropriated someone else's intellectual property. Plagiarism became easily detectable and related



scandals have broken out with extreme intensity, bringing about changes in the educational system and authorities of many states<sup>3</sup>.

The freedom of Internet information exchange has provoked similar questions in domains akin to copyrights. According to some, patent protection hampers the world's development. Others (Harvard University being one of the examples here) argue that the access to scientific achievements cannot be restricted and rebel against paying for publishing one's papers in scientific journals and then paying again to access the same publications. An increasingly popular view is that research projects financed from grants, i.e. by the state, are the property of those paying for them, i.e. all citizens, and that results of those projects should be published on the net. The same goes for public information generated in institutions financed from state budget.

This broad movement advocating information freedom will sooner or later result in changes to copyright and, in a broader perspective, intellectual property laws. It usually happens that the new continues to feature some influences and areas of the former order. After all, democratic states continue to have numerous thoroughly undemocratic bodies, many behaviours being based on past authoritarian solutions. Every change meets with resistance and fear of the unfamiliar new. Nevertheless, history shows that changes are inevitable.

Our research demonstrates that there is a lot yet to be changed in making public institutions more socially-oriented and using modern ICTs in the civic service. Our surveys have covered just one of sixteen regions, the Province of Małopolska, one of the most developed regions in social and technological terms. Situations in other regions have been much worse than in Małopolska.

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3 Those who stepped down due to plagiarism include the president of Hungary Pal Schmitt (April 2012), the German Minister of Education Annette Schavan (February 2013) and the minister zu Guttenberg (2011). The case of plagiarism related to Romanian Prime Minister Victor Ponta's doctoral dissertation has been yet uncompleted.

Based on the materials gathered, we conclude that the Internet can contribute towards participatory democracy as far as the following conditions are met.

First of all, the centres will systematically and precisely inform citizens of their welfare assistance operations. Secondly, their information will be written in a language adjusted to their customers' education rather than using legal and administrative jargon understandable for university graduates in those fields. Thirdly, almost all centres (rather than a half, as shown in our research) will respond to customers' queries and react to the needs reported by inhabitants. The change will come with renouncing lordly management of the underprivileged individuals in favour of collaboration between the staff of Social Welfare Centres and their communities. Fourthly, the centres are presently focused on providing information and granting financial allowances. This kind of operation will be complemented with provision of information and non-financial services, especially social services. Last but not least, new forms of social work provided via the Internet will be developed to tap into commercial successes of networking portals such as Facebook, MySpace, Google+ as well as Polish Nasza Klasa.

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