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DIGITALIZATION AND POLITICAL PARTY LIFE IN POLAND – A STUDY OF SELECTED COMMUNICATION HABITS OF PARTY MEMBERS AND ELECTIVE REPRESENTATIVES

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Abstract
The article discusses the influence of digitalization on the organization of a political party and on its members. It presents an analysis of factors limiting and facilitating the development of a political party connected with the use of digital media. The analyses employ data gathered through quantitative and qualitative research conducted among backbenches, members of parliament and leaders of six Polish political parties. A positive connection has been demonstrated between a party's age and the mode of using particular media types and communication tools. Also, attention has been paid to the phenomenon of digital divide and the possible means of connectivity to party political activity via new technologies, digital tools and digital media. Party members perceive traditional and direct forms as attractive; however, new parties with younger members clearly expect and practice more online activities.

Keywords: digital media, digitalization, party members, political parties, party organization

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to discuss selected results from the empirical research on Polish party members[1], and in particular the state of digitalization and its consequences at two levels: individual party members on the ground and organizational intra-party communication. Political party as an organization has been a subject of research at least since the early 1980's, when discussions on the de-freezing of party systems intensified in Western

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[1] This paper explores qualitative and quantitative data taken from the project 'Political parties and their social environment. An analysis of the organization and communication activities of Polish political parties'. Further information on the project to be found in the acknowledgment section at the end of the paper.

Europe. Since then, also in the context of party development in young democracies, like Poland, party organizations have undergone many changes.

Political parties and their membership structures in democratic regimes are an important research subject because of the roles which they play in the political system. However, since the 2000s we have been witnessing, for the number of reasons, a growing skepticism towards the ability of parties to represent voters. Some say it is because "the elites have failed to represent their 'own' people" (Hameleers et al., 2018: 520), others (Wauters, 2018: 227) argue that it has happened because "governments have also taken action to provide citizens with alternative mechanisms for participation and these mechanisms bypass the formal representative role of political parties (…)". For Mair (2009: 6) parties are no longer vehicles of representation because they made a U-turn "from representing the interests of citizens to the state, to representing the interests of the state to its citizens".

Indeed, since the first free elections in Poland in 1991, the Polish party system has undergone many changes concerning the effective number of parties, fragmentation, legal framework, financing etc., which were broadly explained by political scientists in Poland and abroad (Antoszewski, 2012; Szczerbiak 2008). Tavits (2013: 4) rightly illustrates the significant variance in party instability in post-communist democracies. In Poland, 29 parties and electoral formations were elected into the Lower House (Sejm) in 1991. Only five of those survived through the next election and only two parties – the Polish Peasant Party (PSL) and Democratic Left Alliance (SLD) – were still present in the political scene in 2018. Recent data (from the Polish Central Statistical Office) indicate that, in 2016, representatives of 11 parties participated in state power in the parliament or government[2], representatives of the next 12 groups sat only in the authorities of the self-government. The remaining 30 parties did not participate at any level in public authorities.

Researchers point to the challenge faced by parties posed by the volatility, shifting or even decline in loyalty of citizens and voters, who instead place their trust in non-party actors such as social movements, activists' groups or charismatic individuals. This explains why studies into party membership structures in liberal Western European democracies concern mainly processes connected with the falling membership[3] (van Biezen, Mair and Poguntke, 2012; van Biezen and Poguntke, 2014), the loss of connection with grassroots (Dalton and Wattenberg, 2002) or the reasons for the growing anti-liberal and populist attitudes.

Digitization and technological development affect both politics and policy areas. It is a generally accepted view that in modern competitive democracies digital technology is an increasingly important element of political activity, in particular during campaign periods. Looking at statistics for Poland, the Internet in Poland was used by 82% of the country's households (78% broadband) in 2017. The country has 25 million Internet users, which is 65% of the population (Central Statistical Office, 2017). Although Poland has not pretended to become a digital frontrunner in Europe, social media and Internet penetration remain at quite high level. Social media statistics (StatCounter, 2019) show that since the very beginning of social networking sites' existence, Poles have been active on social media, using popular platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Twitter etc.

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[2]   Brief information on the key parties in Poland to be found at the end of this article.

[3]   This is also a case of Poland, where in 2016 all the parties declared a total of nearly 251 thousand members, by 16% less than in 2014, what constitutes less than 1% of Poles eligible to vote.

Unsurprisingly, this has also brought most parties, politicians and candidates to social media.

In terms of developing digitization policies, Poland, as a member state, follows the EU digital agenda and has developed its own policy concluded in a document titled Digital Poland (Digital Poland, 2014). According to this report, ICTs are of major importance for the development of the economy and lead to dynamic changes in social life. However, after the Law and Justice party's electoral success in 2015, opposition parties claim that the agenda was strongly overshadowed by huge social spending and new social benefits programs and actions, making concepts of innovation, technological advancement, hi-tech driven productivity less attractive (Rosa, 2016).

This article is divided into three sections. First, a theoretical and research framework is introduced, explaining, among others, what digitalization is and what are its effects for parties. Second, research empirical findings with numerous quotes from in-depth interviews are presented. Third, final conclusions and remarks are made so that the main findings might be recapitulated and shortly discussed. It is also important to mention that all parts of the article address issues grouped around these research questions:

1. How do political parties and their members perceive means of traditional versus digital communication?
2. Are there differences between parties in the use of digital media and traditional media?
3. Are party representatives aware of the digital divide?
4. What are the key factors (variables) that cause the differences between parties?

In order to be able to deliver empirical findings, qualitative and quantitative data were aggregated within the project "Political parties and their social environment – An analysis of the organization and communication activities of Polish political parties". A research team managed to collect over 2,400 questionnaires between 2016–2018 from party members of six Polish political parties: the Law and Justice (PiS), the Civic Platform (PO), the Modern Party (.N), the Polish Peasants Party (PSL), the Left Democratic Alliance (SLD) and the Together Party (Razem). The questionnaires were filled in by the party members either online (web survey) or during party congresses and meetings of the rank-and-file members (paper and pencil questionnaire). Findings of the qualitative nature result from the selection of material from 59 individual, structured in-depth interviews, with party leaders, MEP's and MP's of six relevant political parties in Poland, including four parliamentary ones and two non-parliamentary ones. They were conducted between December 2016 and December 2017.

Four of the analyzed parties (PiS, PO, .N and PSL) are represented in parliament, and the remaining two are extra-parliamentary ones. The key selection criterion of the parties was their status of receiving subsidy from the state's budget..

Theoretical and research framework

Many theoretical explanations have been proposed regarding the impact of digitization and technology, web evolution, online social networks and communities on political actors, the media and voters (Anduiza, Jorba and Jensen 2012; Bimber and Davis. 2003; Chadwick, 2007; Chadwick and Howard, 2009; Foot and Schneider 2006; Margolis and

Resnick, 2000). One theoretical explanation that unites researchers says digitalization and the emergence of social media changed the structure of the democratic public sphere (Iosifidis and Wheeler 2016) so that communication patterns were transformed from the formerly dominant one-to-many or few-to-many perspective into many-to-many. Scholars achieved a consensus on the idea that "parties have adapted more quickly to new media technologies than to any previous technological advances" (Ward 2008: 1–2), so that "most parties and candidates have hastened to establish a presence on any genre of digital communication that has been made available to them" (Vaccari: 2013: 48).

Studies of the online party members activity have been carried out on a smaller scale (Lusoli and Ward, 2004; Ward, Gibson and Lusoli, 2002) and the predominant research focus in the field has been on parties and the digitalization on the party – electorate relationship. Gibson (2015: 186) points out that few scholars (Heidar and Saglie, 2003; Löfgren and Smith, 2003; Margetts, 2006) working in the more recent and rapidly expanding field of Internet and politics have claimed a deeper organizational impact of new communication technology on party structures. They stated that adaptation to the online environment "opens them up to a more networked model of organization that reduces the need for formal membership and gives grassroots supporters' a stronger decision-making role".

One of the rationale used for this research paper is the weakened and internally evolving parties of Western democracies, and those of young democracies (for example, in Central and Eastern Europe) are increasingly attempting to change their attitude towards members who remain "useful reservoirs of volunteers, opinion leaders, candidates and donors" (Scarrow 2015). That is why parties might be interested in expanding their use of new technologies, digital tools and digital media and scholars should follow-up those attempts. Coleman and Blumler (2012: 89) believed, on the basis of normative theory supported by empirical findings, that interactive, digital technologies "would seem to offer promising ways of creating forms of political discourse consistent with democratic norms and it could facilitate political communication".

Margetts (2001) recognized that the "digitalization" of parties may revitalize their direct linkage with the electorate. On one hand this could be regarded as particularly important in the light of declining membership figures, while on the other hand, instead of maintaining traditional membership, Margetts' model assumed the creation of "cyber parties", which strengthen the relationship between voters and party by web based technologies. Early theoretical works on the cyber parties have turned, in recent years, into more substantial and evidence-based studies, triggered by the emergence of the so – called digital parties.

Gerbaudo (2018, p. 6) in his new book defines the digital party as "the new organizational template seen across a number of new political formations that have been created in recent years". Digital parties have emerged in many, mostly Northern European, countries under the name Pirate Party (eg. the German Pirate Party, the Pirate Party of Finland, the Icelandic Pirate Party, Pirate Party of Sweden, Czech Pirate Party), they have formed left-wing populist formations such as Podemos in Spain, France Insoumise in France or Movimento 5 Stella in Italy and they have appeared as grassroots movement organizations such as Momentum, supportive of the Labour Party in the UK. The rise of the digital party is often connected with the promise to deliver a new kind of politics supported by digital technology. Digital media, including social media, are characterized by openness, directness, transparency, responsiveness, choosing options, disabling the in-

termediation of other communicators and organization of the community. Digitalization results in a party that is "more open to ordinary people, more immediate and direct, more authentic and transparent". This could mean that in those countries a party-centric model is not a universal way of organizing political competition anymore (Chen 2013, p. 25). However, it seems not to be the case in Poland, where the core of the electoral process rests on established parties, rarely bringing unexpected breakthroughs, like the careers of Paweł Kukiz and Janusz Korwin-Mikke, right-wing populists with a strong online presence (Lipiński & Stępińska 2018).

According to Coleman (2016), digital democracy refers to a potential relationship between the affordances of digital information and communication technologies and the normative requirements of effective political democracy. In the context of digitalization, literature describes several phenomena having an impact on organizations and their members. These include: the digital divide, preferred and available means of connectivity, the way of consuming the media (traditional vs. new media) and methods of customization of communication media and contents.

Taking into account the arguments of many scholars, Pedersen and Saglie (2005) perceived two opposing camps. There are "cyber-optimists" who describe the democratic potential of the Internet and underline how parties and citizens can gain access to more information and new channels of communication, and there are "cyber-pessimists" who highlight the potential threats of technology to democracy, a digital divide and exclusion. No matter which perspective is winning, at the end of a day most of the recent studies suggest that there are still differences between parties even though these are best described as "change within a continuity", because technological innovations go through a diffusion process whereby the initial advantage of smaller parties is washed out in later phases (Jacobs, Spierings, 2016: 5).

The theoretical considerations above may entail a number of consequences, namely increasing the scope of members' due rights, upgrading information circulation and adjusting and standardizing internal communications in keeping with the demands of the digital world. Having these considerations, four effects of digital communication can be distinguished (table 1): effect on organizational culture, effect on political engagement, effect on user experience and effect on political marketing actions.

First, in the first decade of the 21st century demands to reinforce the members rights and the leadership fight against the effects of the outflow of members met with digital opportunities which resulted in more focus on individual actions and experiences and possibility to promote an interactive organizational culture.

Second, effects on political engagement, because digital media allowed party members to contribute more into party life and newly established social media platforms enabled creating online political communities, social networks, activists groups etc.

Third, there are effects on user experience. Digital communication is available 24/7, and this elevates of the level of social interaction. It allows permanent connectivity and "the notion of stickiness" (Jackson, 2003), manifesting in the frequency of updating a status or instant posting messages.

Fourth, ICT triggered new political marketing and e-PR actions. Members expect direct communication and customized, exclusive content. Parties can organize online data-driven actions including fundraising, crowdsourcing, popular vote for party chairman etc.

Table 1. Effects of digital communication

Level / Effect	Individual party members on the ground	Organizational intra-party communication
1. Effect on organizational culture	More focus on individual actions and experiences.	Transformation from monologue to dialogue and interactive organizational culture
2. Effect on political engagement	More democratic approach. Digital media allow party members or supporters to contribute more into party life, e.g. creation of a manifesto.	New digital platforms allow entering or creating interlinked networks, which offer more convenient way of political activism. Supporters can leverage their own social networks.
3. Effect on user experience	Arguable elevation of the level of social interaction. Isolation in human contact on one hand, on the other inclusion in the like – minded political groups.	Permanent connectivity through discussion platforms and online political groups.
4. Effect on political marketing and e-PR actions	Customization of content. The range of custom-built or commercial digital affordances	Collection of digital footprints. Data-driven actions

Source: own elaboration

Research findings

During individual interviews, party representatives were asked to assess the importance of digital technologies in political communication. Elected representatives from PO and Nowoczesna point mainly to the opportunity for effective communication within the party, access to voters and a chance to gain the upper hand through online activity and social media presence:

"Many members of PO have a strong presence in social media and in this way they form opinions on those who follow them or relate to what they do." (PO1_2017)

"We've got a communication system in the club. We've got quick information. The solutions are simple, free, available. I'm surprised that [others] don't use them. We use them to reach our supporters and members, too." (N2_2016)

One Law and Justice representative was less willing to talk about party members though:

"I'd rather not talk about members, but in the electoral sense the Internet is more and more important." (PIS6_2017)

There are also those who remain skeptical in this respect, claiming that Twitter or Facebook are not the media for pursuing politics.

"Twitter kills politics and politicians. That's my opinion. But I'm quite particular about these matters. I don't feel the need to constantly follow what's happening in politics; I don't check the Internet all the time." (PIS5_2017)

One of the consequences for parties, brought about by technological transformations, and observed across society, is the digital divide. Vaccari (2013, p. 26) is right in saying that inequalities may exist at the individual level, because many party members, like many citizens, do not enjoy universal access to free or high-speed Internet connections. Moreover, the skills needed to fully take advantage of digital media are not evenly distributed within rank and file party members, or among political activists or representatives. This shows that there exists a group of "losers of digitalization" or those purposely oppose modernity.

Some MPs openly admit that they abandon certain communication practices due to their own limitations:

"I haven't reached the level at Twitter to take part in discussions. I don't do it, consciously and deliberately, because I'm not that aware or adept to do it anytime anywhere." (PIS4_2017)

In a group of digital devices light-users there even occur MP's, who seem to deliberately reject digitally mediated communication. Most probably they prefer traditional face-to-face or simple phone-to-phone connectivity:

"I have a page on Facebook. A colleague of mine runs it. But I do not even know how often he posts something there. (…) You asked me, if there were any other messaging communicators or social networking sites. A Twitter? It kills politics and politicians. Have you seen my mobile [an old-school one]? What I can do with it, it's just to press 'send'. I don't want [a new] one that I need to slide my finger over." (PIS5_2017)

Party leaders and some MPs show an awareness of the divide, attributed to a number of reasons. Razem and PSL point to the geographical remoteness of the residence of their electorate and party members:

"Traditional media are still influential, our voters require that because that's a target group. Here each party acts differently. We don't have electorate in big cities. They're medium or even small rural boroughs. They don't always have a digital platform. Now we can see the disproportion." (PSL9_2017)

"The members come from different towns and remote villages, and it's more difficult for them. More difficult to get around, as commuting by bus takes time, and they're often digitally excluded, older people, who can't take advantage of communication platforms to get in touch with others across Poland." (R4_2017)

An SLD politician attributes it to habits concerning organization forms and to members' older ages:

"*There must be a group of people who don't use the Internet that often, in SLD as well, but there are also people in all parties who don't use it at all. They like to meet, and it's a characteristic that when you actually organize a meeting, those who come are of a generation who didn't master modern communication or the Internet or media in general, and they have the need for a traditional meeting.*' (SLD6_2017)

A PO MP indicates, however, that a preference for direct contact is not necessarily caused by the digital divide as the party members tend to be open to new technologies and they use them, while, at the same time, some of them value conversation during a meeting more:

"*Members are open [to new digital technologies] but they need to be categorized into those who prefer to simply meet face-to-face and then talk in a meeting, and they – though I didn't expect that – are often older people, who have Facebook, who aren't digitally excluded, who write emails which you need to answer.*" (PO6_2017).

The digital divide is perceived objectively and raises rational reactions among party representatives. Since members have certain limitations or habits, then adaptive actions, even if conservative, need to be conducted to offer them satisfying solutions. Hence one of PO leaders admits:

"*Obviously, some mainly use the Internet and this type of communication is indispensable in the 21st century, but on its own, it's not enough. In general, direct contact is more appreciated.*" (PO11_2017)

According to some researchers (Min 2010), the digital divide can even lead to a democratic divide, which raises the issue of possible negative consequences should parties neglect action for the digital inclusion of their members. Hence, the solutions which lead to exclusion should be limited or abandoned. For instance, the Civic Platform (PO), during the direct chairperson election in 2015–2016, distributed voting packages that enabled members to vote both electronically and via mail. The majority of members opted for the former. However, after the internal chair elections, under the new party charter, a direct election was held for local and regional party authorities, during which the voting took place either in the party headquarters or via mail, with the e-voting option not available.

Effective communication among members, and between party leaders and members is based on the use of various materials, devices and technologies, enabling direct and indirect contact, via the means of phones, meeting, online and printed materials, social media, closed discussion groups, forums, chats, mailing and electronic newsletters and traditional printed letters. Which have been used most widely? According to party members' statements, the three most popular means of communication are the phone, direct meetings and remote online contact through private closed chats or social media groups. All of them enable direct interaction, feedback and member engagement monitoring. Other means, such as owned media outlets including newsletters or party magazines, traditional mail, or even social media are mentioned less often or not at all.

Interest in face-to-face meetings has been indicated by interviewees from all parties. It can be attributed to a desire to be better informed using primary sources and, on the

other hand, it can point to nostalgia for direct forms, whose advantages outweigh those of remote forms made available thanks to digital technologies. Thus, the fascination with the possibilities offered by digital media, connected with the development of participation culture (Delwiche & Henderson 2012) on the Internet, in the case of political parties, can go hand in hand with the premises of the social presence theory formed by J. Short, E. Williams and E. Christie (1976). They state that the media vary in terms of "social presence" understood as a participant's visual, verbal as well as physical presence in interpersonal communication. Therefore, direct forms of contact within a party and meetings with politicians lead to an enhanced "social presence" and a sense of personal contact with others.

PO politicians admit that by visiting regions they fulfil members' expectations regarding direct contact with a central level politician:

"Electronic communication enables everybody to follow others. Often out of curiosity. I check to see if there's something happening in other regions. But for some time now, a form of direct communication has been visiting the regions. MPs from all over the country express a desire to go and then visit a particular region." (PO2_2017)

Also, a "hunger for information" can be observed, which might mean that political awareness, or knowledge of events and facts following from their absorption of different media, is insufficient for those with a serious interest in politics. They expect the possibility to both listen to and interact with their leaders.

"I've noticed a hunger for direct information, and that's why we meet up on regular basis to have a chat. Somebody asks a question and often it'll be someone else who answers, not me, someone who has knowledge of the subject and is up to date, not the way we'd imagine it." (PO2_2017)

A Razem representative agrees:

"Open meetings are crucial to us and people do come to them. Sometimes they sign up on the spot. But sometimes they want to have a chance to ask and talk." (R1_2017)

Three groups can be distinguished among political parties. The first are old parties, which demonstrate a close correlation between the age of the party, the age of the members and the low uptake of digital technologies. Included here are SLD and PSL, parties of post-communist descent, with respectively 83% and 93% of members opting for phone and meetings as the main means of internal communication. The "aging" PO falls into the second group, presenting mixed preferences regarding communication. On the one hand, like in SLD and PSL, 70% of respondents opted for the traditional means of contacting the party, namely the use of phones and meetings; on the other hand, 15% of the interviewees indicated email as a medium of contact, with a further 12% choosing a variety of online communication options.

Again, members' age proves an important variable influencing choices regarding communication. The younger the members – constituting a minority in PO – the higher the likelihood that they will use digital technology. PO members pointed to practical advantages of using the phone for internal communication:

"We've got each other's phone numbers so we also communicate individually by phone, if need be." (PO12_2017)

"We call each other. Sometimes it's important. If my colleagues are invited by the media and they know that it's about an international issue, they very often call me to get better informed. I very often call, too." (PO11_2017)

The third group comprises young parties, such as Nowoczesna and Razem. These parties show a weaker preference for the phone, opting for meetings and digital platforms instead, as indicated by over a quarter of the respondents. This approach reflects in the opinion of one of the Nowoczesna MPs:

"Regional leaders and MPs travel around Poland, too. But our everyday communication takes place via Facebook. Everybody checks Facebook. On their phones, on other devices, people stay connected." (N10_2017)

The members of the third group type tend to be young, and, especially in the case of Razem, a natural inclination of "digital natives" towards chats, instant messengers and digital platforms is visible. Technology-enabled party organizations aim to build technology solutions to enable collaboration and decision-making at large scale and in combination with executive action (Benett et al. 2017, p. 14). Razem members openly admit to using Slack, commonly employed in business and project management, for everyday communication, decision making, exchange of opinions, etc. Hence, digitalization translates into internal democracy and the leveling off of organization structure. According to a Razem politician, the party was a pioneer in this respect, with other parties following suit.

"Everyday, a few times a day, we communicate with the world via Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. I'll risk saying, however it may sound, that when it comes to Polish politics, we started it. Now all parties that communicate through Facebook, communicate in this way […]." (R1_2017)

At the same time, maybe paradoxically, another Razem politician notices that the phone replaces other means of electronic communication. Therefore, there is an image of a party strongly embedded in digital communication, but at the same time, in peripheral spheres, pragmatically employing the means available.

"Most are scattered around mountains and valleys of the Sub-carpathian region and they're very active members from the region. This is a very decentralized region. Actually, they mainly communicate using the phone; they hardly ever meet and they're very active." (R4_2017)

**Chart 1.** Means of party internal communication with members
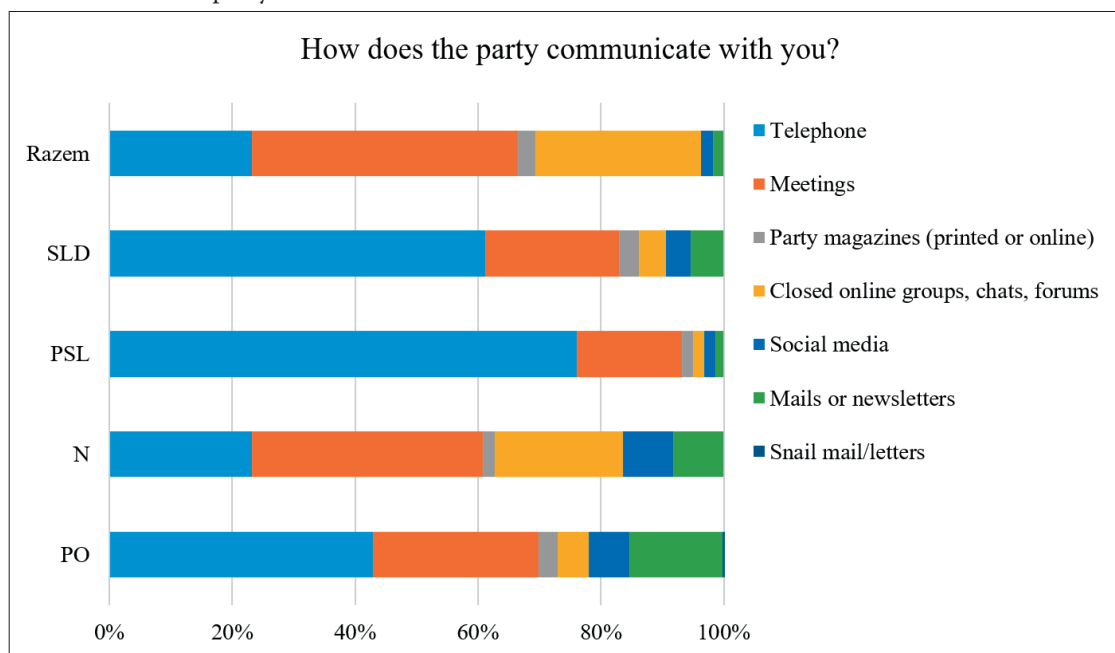
Source: own elaboration, N=2390

In the questionnaire, members were asked about their preferred means of communication. Only Razem members seem to accept the status quo, meaning no discrepancy had been noted between the existing internal means of communication, and the desired state (compare charts 1 and 2). The remaining parties display a noticeable and growing need for meetings to replace phone communications. Mature and older parties should also allow, to a degree, for activity via closed online channels, and to diversify information directed at members through owned media. The data in the charts indicate a high demand for direct contacts among members, while they do not call in any significant way for an increased use of digital technologies to enable contact with the party.

Ideas on how to take advantage of the more advanced features of a smartphone are promoted by young PO MPs. This tool could be directed at all members, with its main task being to shorten the distance between the backbenchers and the party's representatives in parliament, as well as providing access to exclusive content.

"We must have a phone app. It's the 21st century. It doesn't cost a fortune to create an app but then everybody has access to the party on their phone. They've got info on press conferences, our activity in parliament, MPs, legislative bills. They don't have to boot up their computer, log on. They have it all. Simple as that." (PO5_2017)

"If you're a party member, then you're part of an exclusive club, and you're entitled to something exclusive. And nowadays, in the 21st century, that should be an app, with quick access to information, with a discussion forum where you can talk to MPs directly." (PO6_2017)

Chart 2. Most preferable ways of party internal communication
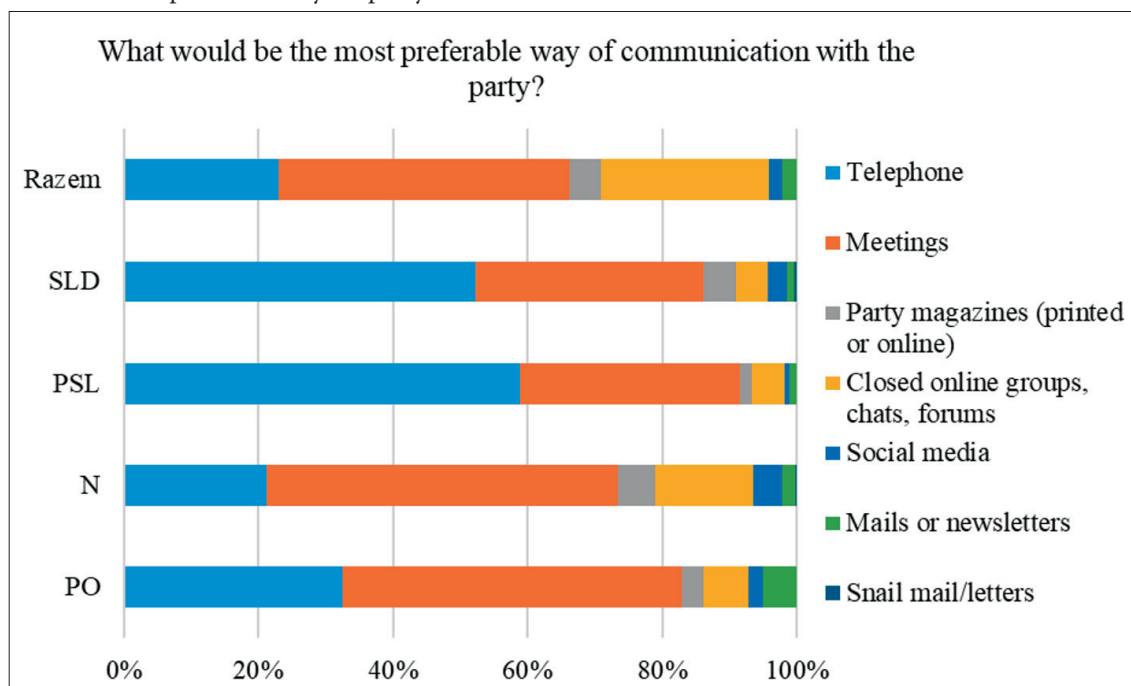
Source: own elaboration, N=2396

The interviewees and rank-and-file party members were asked to point out the media types which they use to follow news about their parties. Party representatives' presence in media is indeed followed by its members. On one hand it is an important instrument in motivating the ranks, but, on the other hand, it leads to internal tensions among MP's and leaders connected with gaining a chance for better or worse exposure in the media:

"*Media play an important role internally, as it's a scarce commodity. And as such, it generates tensions, but it's important for Nowoczesna or other parties' members to see a lot [of party representatives] in the media. It motivates them more.*" (N9_2017)

Of the four proposed media types (television, radio, press, online media), traditional TV and online media remain the most attractive media for party members to obtain information. Preferences for certain media types indicate the user's habits, and allow for them to draw conclusions regarding the consumption of electronic and traditional media.

It emerges that, with respect to following their own party's activities, members of the five parties differ not only in their choice of the media, but first and foremost in their attitude towards the media from the ownership perspective (public vs. private media). Some party members reject the content of public television. Over half the members of young (Nowoczesna and Razem) and mature parties (PO) firmly declare that they do not watch public TV at all. As one MP explained:

"*Nowadays, public media are completely politicized. They submit to just one side. What's worse: they manipulate and their main aim is actually praising the government and turning people against the opposition, while private media attempt to retain some kind of balance despite their preferences.*" (PO11_2017)

Also, a PSL MP stressed the one-sidedness of public media in Poland, which, in his opinion, have been taken over by the ruling party:

"Theoretically we have national [hence public] media, but according to me and many Poles the national media have become the media of just one political party." (PSL1_2016)

Chart 3. The most frequently used source of news/political information about a given party among its members. Responses according to media type (television).
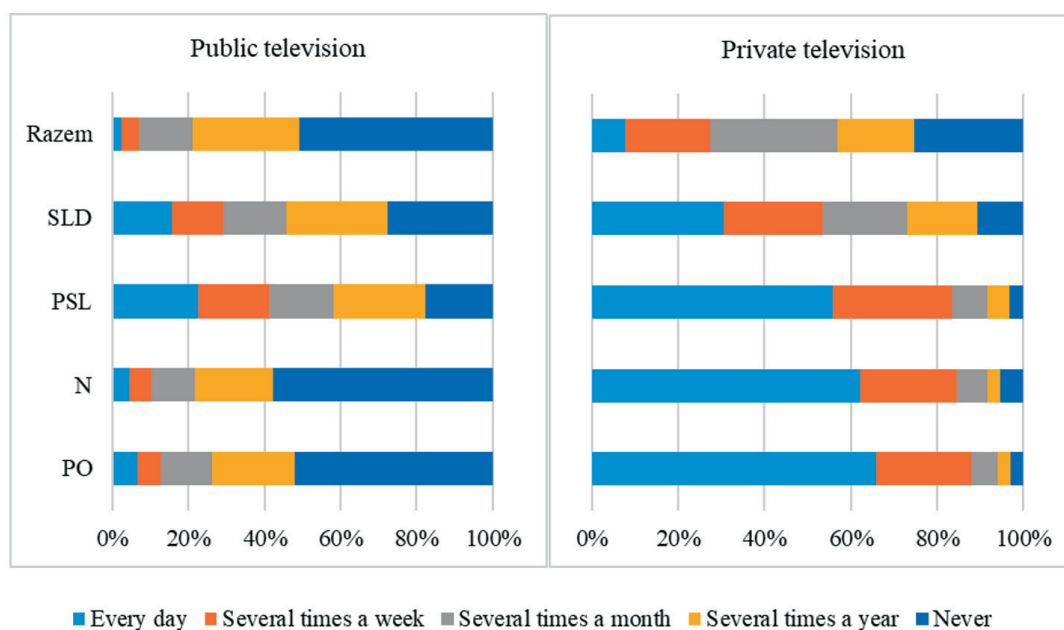
Source: own elaboration, responses for public tv N=2339 and for private tv N=2248

At the same time, over half of PO and Nowoczesna respondents admitted to watching TV, but mainly private channels. In Razem, TV is not the medium of first choice. It is also the party with the biggest number (a quarter of those asked) of their members not following the news about their own party on TV. SLD and PSL members are the least biased towards public media, but still they declared that they watch private TV more often than public TV.

Can the observations pertaining to TV be used to make generalizations about other public and private media? Private radio stations attract far more listeners, especially among Nowoczesna and PO members, with 2/3 of respondents listening frequently; however, private radio stations appeal less to SLD and PSL members. As an information medium, radio stations are less popular than TV stations. This can be attributed to, on the one hand, a weaker appeal of the medium as such, but, on the other hand, it confirms a meager interest in the public broadcaster's offer.

The last type of media are online portals and social media. Comparing previous data from charts 3–5, it has to be stated that using online media outlets is the most common media habit for party members. There are discernible differences among the parties. The discriminative variables are again the age of the party and the age of the members. Members of the post-communist parties (SLD and PSL) tend to use portals more than social media sites, which indicates a lower level of competence regarding the use of digital me-

dia, and adherence to type 1.0 Internet solutions; Nowoczesna and Razem members are most rooted in social media, which confirms previous declarations concerning the internal use of digital media.

Chart 4. The most frequently used source of news/political information about a given party among its members. Responses according to media type (online media outlets)
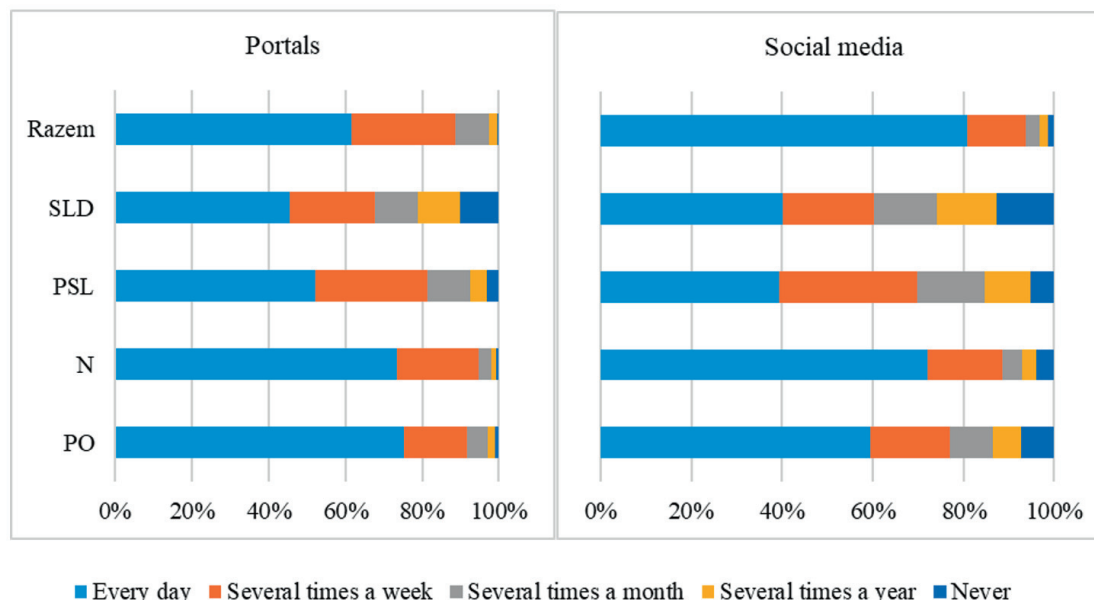
Source: own elaboration, responses for portals N=2339 and for social media N=2318

Conclusion

Relevant parties in Poland try to professionalize and use digitalization by establishing new links with the electorate through various networks interlinked by social media in order to be able to effectively spread political messages, which later helps in mobilization and reinforcement of partisans. Party members perceive traditional and direct forms attractive, however new parties with younger members expect and practice more online activities. Key variables that determine party's approach to its members include party age and members seniority. Members of younger parties (established in 2015) are generally more active and attached to a party than is the case of mature and old parties' members. The latter try, with different results, to perform online in the expanding party universe (Gauja, Groemping 2019: 1), but as ageing parties they face troubles related to the use and presence at new channels and communication structures. Additionally, organizational inertia might be seen *eo ipso* as a barrier for adopting digitalization in organizations (Haag, 2014).

Parties' everyday lives rely mostly on communication via mobile devices (telephones) and direct meetings. To contact members, parties use the phone, which still allows direct access via voice connection or SMS gateway, even if it offers fewer interaction possibilities than a smartphone application or an online platform accessible by members only.

According to party members' opinions, their preference to follow news and information about the political party they belong to depends on the age of the party. The younger

the party is, the more of its members prefer online tools, mostly social media; the older the party is, the more of its members are oriented to traditional media such as television, the press and radio. Moreover, members declare that they more often follow coverage on private media, in particular on television channels, that on public media, which many of them perceive as not objective and highly pro-government.

Three out of the five parties analyzed show no distinct inclination towards using digital media. However, young parties, Nowoczesna and Razem, stand out from the rest, opting to a greater degree to employ digital communication platforms within the organization, and allowing to follow party activities online. There might be several reasons for that. First is the young age of many members, who fall into the category of digital natives rather than digital immigrants. Secondly, the party leaders' attitude and awareness seems to be of key importance, as they adjust technological advancement to members' expectations and capabilities. And thirdly, it follows from the party's activity organization context, and the conditions under which the young parties were established, namely in 2015, as opposed to PO or PiS, set up in 2001, or older parties, SLD and PSL which date back as far as the beginning of the transformation in the 90s of the 20th century.

These arguments fit in with the discussion about political actors' online presence that has been going on for over a dozen years under two approaches: normalization and equalization (Bimber and Davies, 2003; Margolis and Resnick, 2000). What can be confirmed is that small and young parties gained the opportunity to rule out inequalities and to get more power balance with bigger, established parties. This goes in line with the study of Gibson and McAllister (2015) who found that minor-party candidates' "use of digital campaign tools is linked to an improved electoral performance and thereby they support the hypothesis that cheaper social media technologies are helping minor parties to become more competitive". Naturally, older parties' members face the digital divide, or demonstrate low media literacy.

A conclusion following from the questionnaires and statements by MPs and party leaders is that party members still show a preference for direct meetings, considering such communication situations important and desirable. This could be explained by a desire to participate in something unavailable to others, something that cannot be replaced even by advanced digital technology. One has to agree with the proponents of the social presence theory. Despite the availability of digitally mediated forms of communication, party members willingly choose "atavistic" forms such as meetings, political discussions or visits by MPs and party leaders. Digitalization seems an important opportunity to technically refine party structure, but for many fails to provide emotions and a genuine feeling of belonging to an ideological community. Old and mature parties are struggling to gain a footing in the democratic online sphere, which breeds opportunities for new political movements and organizations. On the one hand, falling back on old habits, tried and tested in the period of the democratic consolidation in Poland, might strengthen the belief that parties do not have a grasp on the changes taking place. One can therefore agree with Zielonka (2018) who argues that technological, social and ecological upheavals contributed to an anti-liberal counterrevolution, with tangible consequences for the functioning of mature parties in all of Europe, facing the wave of populist challengers. On the other hand, it is difficult to use this perspective to compare party structures of the traditional conservative PiS, the leftist progressive Razem or the neoliberal Nowoczesna, as sharing similarities. It

has to be said that all of them support changes. The changes refer either to the political order en bloc after 1989 in Poland (the rejection by PiS of the idea of the Third Polish Republic), or to the social-corporatist order (the rejection by Razem of liberal economy and action to counterbalance the consequences of economic transformation), or to the economic order (a return to free market economy and to the abandoned liberal paradigms promoted by Nowoczesna). But differences between parties are still visible. A political agenda, human resources, the age of the party, the membership, the mode of operations, internal democracy, etc. Therefore, communication practices and the degree of digitalization of political organizations in Poland are influenced to a lesser degree by the tendencies to reject the order of the Third Polish Republic in all its different forms, but are connected more with the generational change, the "novelty" effect, the scarce membership base, and the ease with which the new parties introduce digital and communicational technologies from scratch.

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Additional information

List of original party names, acronyms used and English names

Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (PiS) – Law and Justice Party
Platforma Obywatelska RP (PO) – Civic Platform
Nowoczesna (.N) – Modern Party
Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe (PSL) – Polish Peasants Party
Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej (SLD) – Left Democratic Alliance
Partia Razem (Razem) – Together Party

List of interviews used in the paper

N2_2016 – in-depth interview with a member of Modern Party, 20.01.2017
N9_2017 – in-depth interview with a member of Modern Party, 13.02.2017
N10_2017 – in-depth interview with a member of Modern Party, 08.02.2017
PIS4_2017 – in-depth interview with a member of Law and Justice, 30.01.2017
PIS5_2017- in-depth interview with a member of Law and Justice, 17.02.2017
PIS6_2017 – in-depth interview with a member of Law and Justice, 24.01.2017
PO1_2017 – in-depth interview with a member of Civic Platform, 08.02.2017
PO2_2017 – in-depth interview with a member of Civic Platform, 01.02.2017
PO5_2017 – in-depth interview with a member of Civic Platform, 18.10.2016
PO6_2017 – in-depth interview with a member of Civic Platform, 17.10.2016
PO11_2017 – in-depth interview with a member of Civic Platform, 15.05.2017
PO12_2017 – in-depth interview with a member of Civic Platform, 25.01.2017
PSL1_2016 – in-depth interview with a member of Polish Peasants Party, 24.10.2016
PSL9_2017 – in-depth interview with a member of Polish Peasants Party, 06.04.2017
R1_2017 – in-depth interview with a member of Together Party, 26.02.2017
R4_2017 – in-depth interview with a member of Together Party, 16.03.2017
SLD6_2017 – in-depth interview with a member of Left Democratic Alliance, 24.01.2017

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Main political forces represented in the Polish Parliament:

Law and Justice (PiS) – a rightwing party, conservative, founded in 2001 by the Kaczyński twins, Lech and Jarosław, who have respectively served as Poland's president and prime minister. Lech died in a plane crash in 2010, while Jarosław is now the party's chairman. PiS has formed United Right government coalition and since 2015 holds majority in parliament. Approximately 35–40 thousand members.

Civic Platform (PO) – a centre-right liberal, pro-European party, founded in 2001. Its leader Donald Tusk was appointed president of the European Council. PO has been the main party of government in years 2007–2015. Approximately 17–20 thousand members.

Kukiz'15 – an anti-establishment movement led by the former rock singer Paweł Kukiz. Kukiz won 21% of the vote in presidential elections held in 2015, finishing third. Subsequently he entered parliament with a broad populist-style coalition of inter alia far-right nationals and Eurosceptics, lacking programmatic coherence.

Modern Party (Nowoczesna) – a centrist classic liberal party founded in 2015 by the former World Bank economist Ryszard Petru. Its political manifestoes emphasize economic liberalism and European integration. Since its foundations the party has suffered leadership crisis and separation of several MP's. Nearly 6 thousand members.

Polish People's Party (PSL) – established in 1990, a centre-right peasants party, formerly the junior partner in government coalitions. The only party that inherited mass structure as the successor of a former communist satellite party (ZSL) representing the large farming sector. Currently with estimated 120 thousand of members.

Main political parties outside Parliament:

Democratic Left Alliance (SLD) – social democratic, pro-European party, with strong ties with the remnants of the communist Polish United Workers' Party (PZPR) after its dissolution. In 90's formed coalition governments, later became minor party, with no successes in parliamentary elections. Despite founding several centre-left electoral alliances the social democrats have not been electorally competitive after 2001 and thereafter has been an opposition party. Membership base counts circa 30–35 thousand members.

Partia Razem – a left-wing social democratic party founded in 2015. The party has been polling below the threshold to enter parliament, but managed to succeed 3%, what enabled receiving a state funding. It has approximately 4 thousand registered members.

Coalition for the Renewal of the Republic – Freedom and Hope (KORWiN) – a rightwing Eurosceptic party. Its MEPs sit in the same European Parliament grouping as the Swedish Democrats and the UK Independence party (UKiP).