

The subject of the research and research goals:

In 2018, the lawmaker introduced in Poland an instrument, unprecedented in other political systems, that allows for regular (annual) accountability of local and regional executive authorities for their actions. The accountability tool introduced in the legal order is aimed at “increasing the participation of citizens in the process of electing, functioning and controlling certain public bodies” (Journal of Laws 2018, item 130). This new mechanism includes a) a report on the state of the municipality (and correspondingly, the county and region) including information on the activities of the executive body; b) a public debate on the content of the report, in which the inhabitants of the local unit have the right to participate and have their say. The consequences of the debate on the report may have far-reaching implications, including triggering the procedure to recall the executive body in municipalities by referendum and in county and region by a council vote. The project aims to find out whether the report on the state of the municipality and the debate on it is an efficient accountability tool, and what factors determine its usefulness. Considering the three key elements for this mechanism, i.e., information (report), public debate, and implications for local authorities, we consider that it meets the conditions of an accountability tool identified by Brandsma and Schillemans’ (2013), which constitutes the theoretical and methodological framework of the planned research.

Why accountability of public authorities?

Accountability of public authorities is associated with and strongly influenced by concepts of democratization, decentralization, arms-length government, and public participation. Occasionally, accountability is associated with the control of public authorities, or accountability mechanisms are considered participatory tools. However, accountability is highly complex and multidimensional and constitutes an essential component of public governance. The scope of research, i.e., the report on the state of the municipality and the debate on it, makes it possible to analyze both dimensions of local government accountability, i.e., horizontal (accountability of the executive to the legislative) and vertical (accountability of the executive to the local community). The research focuses on the accountability of local authorities in general (in particular on the report and debate on the state of the municipality) for several reasons: 1) limited empirical research on accountability tools of local authorities, including the report and debate on the state of the municipality; 2) disregarding the accountability of local authorities in research on local government, models of public governance, decentralization, and civic engagement; 3) the need to determine the effectiveness of the report and debate as a tool for making local authorities accountable and improving local governance; 4) the need to find out if inhabitants are interested in holding local authorities accountable and what is the level of civic engagement; 5) a need to check whose interests are served by the accountability tool under research and the possibility of using it as an instrument of political competition; 6) a need to determine to what extent the accountability tool under research corresponds to accountability systems of public authorities in other European countries.

Implementation of the research:

The research goal is to: a) examine the content of reports and debates in the selected municipalities; b) identify determinants affecting the course and results of debates in the municipalities; c) determine the effects of holding the authorities accountable; d) identify the relationship between the determinants of debates and their results; e) evaluate the awareness of accountability tools and the intention of the residents to use them. The research covers 14 municipalities (including county cities) in which 84 individual interviews, 14 focus group interviews and non-participant observations of the debates will be conducted. The Qualitative Data Analysis (QDA) and Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) tools will be used to analyze the contents of the reports on the state of the municipality, the debates and other collected data.

The expected outcomes of the project:

The research results will contribute to the development of theory and research on accountability and the dissemination of knowledge about accountability tools in local government. Findings will be shared with the international academic community during scientific conferences. The uniqueness of the accountability tool implemented in Poland and the comparative nature of the research make it interesting for the international community. Moreover, the research team hopes that the results will impact public life and contribute to the promotion of the report and the debate in the community and, consequently, help achieve the accountability’s primary objective, which is to improve the quality of governance.