Words vs. Deeds: Do Local Officials Walk the Talk on Participation?

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Abstract: Local democracy can be understood both as direct citizen participation in decision-making and as a representative model led by elected officials. The scope of participation and its impact on administrative efficiency remain key challenges for contemporary local governance. Across Europe, public participation is facing a crisis due to low transparency, complex decision-making processes, difficulties in accessing information, lack of trust, and social inequalities. Negative perceptions in public discourse often reinforce this crisis, suggesting that participation merely shifts responsibility, slows down administrative processes, or involves citizens who are not sufficiently competent.

Although legal frameworks and available tools shape participation, studies indicate that its actual implementation largely depends on the attitudes of local authorities and municipal administrations. These actors determine whether participatory mechanisms become genuine spaces for shared decision-making or merely formal obligations that hinder effective governance (Denters & Klok, 2013; Swianiewicz, 2020).

This article addresses the following research question: How do the attitudes of local government officials toward public participation relate to the participatory practices implemented in the municipalities they represent? Real participatory practices are measured across three dimensions: (1) transparency, (2) openness and responsiveness of local government, and (3) civic activity and citizen empowerment.

Based on these measures, municipalities are classified according to two overarching dimensions: the level of declared support for citizen participation among officials and the overall level of real participatory practice as captured by the three dimensions above. This classification results in four types of municipalities: those with high declared support and high real participation, those with high declared support but low real participation, those with low declared support but high real participation, and those with low declared support and low real participation.

The study highlights potential tensions between normative support for participation and the practical constraints of local administration, showing how administrative attitudes can either foster or constrain the development of participatory practices at the local level. The findings provide new insights into the role of administrative culture in shaping citizen engagement and inform discussions on improving participatory governance in Poland.