Accountability only through elections? Social assessment of the accountability process on the local level. The case of Poland

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Abstract: Accountability is essential to a democratic system as it ensures transparency in decision-making, legitimizes decisions made by authorities, and holds them responsible for those decisions. Despite three decades of democratization in Poland, accountability has not been widely recognized, either as a research area or as a practice in public life. The term was instead associated with the oversight of decision-makers by dedicated public authorities. The lack of accountability mechanisms, especially at the local level, was also a significant limitation. In Poland, the only means of holding local authorities accountable were elections and recall referendums. Over the years, local communities lacked instruments to assess the performance of local authorities during their terms of office.

In Poland, the importance of accountability at the local level has grown since 2018. This was marked by the introduction of a new accountability procedure for municipal authorities, specifically mayors. This procedure consists of three interrelated elements: a) a report on the state of the municipality, b) an annual public debate open for residents to discuss the situation of the municipality and the performance of the mayor in the last year, and c) a vote of confidence for the mayor conducted by municipal councilors. The new accountability procedure aims to enhance citizen engagement in public matters and also strengthen the position of the municipal council in relation to the mayor, who has a powerful position in the Polish local government system. A key aspect of this procedure is the public debate, which facilitates active resident participation—a significant shift in the practices of Polish local governments.

The authors will present research findings underscoring the necessity of implementing accountability mechanisms at the local level and the importance of holding local executive authority (i.e., the mayor) accountable. The qualitative research involved multiple case studies conducted in 14 Polish municipalities, including individual interviews with participants of the annual public debates and focus group interviews (FGIs) with residents. The research was undertaken in the framework of the project "Accountability of Local Authorities: The Report and Debate on the State of a Municipality as a Tool for Accountability" (project no. 2022/45/B/HS5/00084), funded by the National Science Center, Poland.