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Accountability and the European Parliament Elections : the Illusion of Supranational Accountability

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indirect, rather than direct assessment of political activity. Most of all, though, the act of voting ends with a specific result: a politician is (re-)elected or is not. Thus, voters give their sanction to particular candidates, who can be rewarded or criticised for their previous actions. Moreover, the campaign is a time when candidates are eager to interact (often directly) with the electorate – something they are far less likely to do in between elections.

The issue of accountability is relevant most of all to those bodies within the political system that are formed as a result of a direct election. This is so because such election determines who will represent the society and legitimises the newly chosen representatives to act on a broadly understood political scene. As such, the question of accountability is relevant also to the supranational level – for instance, to the European Parliament, which is the only representative institution within the EU chosen through direct election. Like in case of other elections, the period prior to the election day sees intense activity on the part of candidates, as they attempt to garner support of the voters by presenting their previous achievements and proving their responsibility. They also face the task of showing how they kept promises made earlier on, or explaining why they failed to do so. Some candidates fight for re-election, while others make their first attempt at earning the seat in the European Parliament. Still, both groups are subjected to an assessment of their previous activity. In case of the former, it is *ex-post* in nature (and comes down, broadly speaking, to legitimising their output). For the latter, it is mostly an *ex-ante* judgement, albeit it may entail some evaluation of their prior public activity in other areas.

Largely insufficient scope of accountability standards substantially hinders their implementation in the European political sphere. Numerous scholars have emphasised the democratic deficit that can be observed in several key (closely interconnected) dimensions, such as accountability, legitimacy and/or representation [Bovens et al. 2010; Hobolt, Tilley 2014; Majone 1996; Majone 1998; Majone 2009 (1); Majone 2009 (2); Menon, Weatherill 2002, Mulgan 2014; Ruszkowski 2010; Scharpf 1996; Sroka 2011; Wojtaszczyk 2011]. If the European political system suffers from a chronic deficit of accountability, it might be an interesting academic challenge to answer the question of why direct elections to the EP, and debates preceding them, have not eliminated the aforementioned democratic deficit. For the purpose of this paper, I have formed a hypothesis that accountability associated with EP elections is inefficient because principals are not fully principals, while agents cannot be considered as 100 per cent agents. Hence, what we have here is a certain political illusion as to the relations between the electorate and its representatives. The purpose of this article is to examine the quality of relations occurring between principals (voters) and agents (candidates to the EP and/or MEPs) against the background of political accountability.

The considerations presented in this paper are founded upon the premise that certain conditions are necessary for the accountability to function:

a) (...) there are legal and formal institutions and mechanisms to hold governments to account;

b) there are clearly defined agents who demand government action;

c) there are clearly defined agents who are responsible for government action;

d) there are legally established and effective sanctions for those who are not accountable [Acosta et al. 2013: 12].

The electoral process - including the one on the supranational level, in case of the European Parliament - occurs in all the above circumstances. Most of all, there is a mechanism allowing for accountability: the institution of direct election itself. We also have agents: politicians who wish to be (re)elected MEPs, and hence have to garner the support of the electorate. Candidates are not novices on the political scene - they have operated on it for some time and have fulfilled certain duties as public officials. There is an effective sanction: a candidate may succeed or fail in garnering sufficient support. Finally, there are principals empowered to sanction the actions of their representatives. Therefore, there is a plane upon which relations of accountability may occur and be analysed. The examination presented below is based on three theoretical pillars - theory of democracy, theory of political system and the principal-agent theory (PAT). The first one has allowed me to focus on issues that are essential to the functioning of democratic political systems. The second has provided a tool for placing political entities in the framework of cyclical political activity. The third one, in turn, has facilitated the analysis of relations between the key actors of a political system.

As this paper has a well developed theoretical framework, it is based largely on the existing academic literature on the functioning of democracy (as well as accountability) and the European political sphere. A part of the analysis is accompanied by data from Eurobarometer, as well as two Polish organisations: the CBOS research agency and the Institute of Public Affairs, which monitors how Polish representatives operate in the European political system. Wherever possible, I have also utilised large-scale data referring to other EU member states. However, most of the empirical data presented here refers exclusively to Poland. Still, this does not diminish the value of the research, since Polish political system is largely representative of most systems that currently exist in Central and Eastern Europe.

The article consists of three parts. the first one presents particular types of accountability. This allows me to connect this concept to the other part of the subject - European Parliament elections. The second part constitutes an analysis of how principals (voters) execute accountability to sanction the political

activity of agents (candidates to the EP). The final part is focused on the (potential) representatives and their readiness to be held accountable.

Due to the limited scope of this paper, a number of issues have been only briefly mentioned, while some others were omitted altogether. Among the most relevant subjects that are not discussed here one can note the question of systemic determinants governing the work of an MEP. Such determinants unquestionably have a certain impact on how MEPs act (in the formal context). Another issue left out of this article is European multilevel governance, which determines the structural and functional character of the European political system and shapes relations between all actors on the European scene, where MEPs function as they execute their mandates. Both these subjects are fairly broad and well covered in the existing literature. Thus, readers willing to reach for additional knowledge should not have any trouble with finding sufficiently informative sources.

Accountability and its forms

The concept of accountability is of ancient provenance. It derives from the Latin terms *accomptare* (to account for), *computare* (to sum up) and *putare* (to judge, to assess). Although etymology and history place it as a term related to accounting and financial administration [Bovens 2006: 6], in modern times it is most often associated with public and political activity. It signifies transparent and fair management of the public sphere, and the mechanism of holding politicians and public officials responsible to the electorate, public opinion and representative democratic bodies.

The essence of accountability lies in one's obligation to account for one-'s actions - to take responsibility for the activity one undertakes when acting on behalf of the society, as a part of an entity that has been legitimised by the voters to perform certain tasks and fulfil certain promises. Accountability can be thought of as (1) a mechanism that encompasses a system of procedures and institutions; (2) a virtue that characterises the attitudes of people participating in political processes; or (3) a standard of how the public sphere functions. The concept can be viewed in a narrow or broad sense. The narrow perspective shows accountability as, primarily, a mechanism, while attitudes and standards are treated as additional aspects. Hence, following Mark Bovens [2006: 6], we can define accountability in this sense as an interaction that encompasses the following key elements:

1. a relation between the decision-making body (an actor, agent, politician) and the forum that evaluates its actions (a principal, voter),
2. in which actors are obliged to

3. explain and justify their conduct,
4. where the forum may pose questions
5. and pass a judgement,
6. while actors may face consequences.

In such view, the occurrence of the abovementioned stages testifies to the fact that accountability functions as a specific instrument of a political process.

The broad perspective pictures accountability as a category without specified borders and scope - a concept which encompasses a number of similar categories such as transparency, efficiency, democracy, effectiveness, responsiveness, responsibility, openness and coherence. All these terms de facto constitute criteria, or even indicators with which we can measure how advanced the process of accountability is. Both perspectives depict the complex, multi-level nature of accountability which results from the complicated composition of contemporary political systems and the extent of network-like connections between their actors. This means that any analysis of accountability has to factor in the position of each entity in the system, as well as the purpose and complexity of the system itself (and/or its sub-systems). As a consequence, literature of the subject names several types of accountability: horizontal, vertical and diagonal; direct and indirect; external and internal; social, legal, professional, ethical, electoral, peer, political, public and many others.

One criterion by which accountability can be classified is the source of interaction between entities participating in the political system. In such division, we can distinguish three types of accountability: horizontal, vertical and diagonal. [O'Donnell 1998; The Anti-Corruption... 2009; Bovens 2006]. The first type refers to situations when public officials are limited in their actions and supervised by other public bodies (courts, ombudsman, central bank, audit agencies, etc.) which may demand explanations and, ultimately, punish an official for improper conduct [The Anti-Corruption ... 2009: 2]. In other words, it describes control mechanisms and the balance of power within the system of public institutions. **Horizontal accountability** is therefore typical for inter-institutional relations stemming from standard administrative procedures (for instance, vote of confidence or supervisory control) or from a call for intervention on the part of one actor. The most typical example of horizontal accountability is Montesquieu's tripartite model of separation of powers [Łukomski 2004: 119-122], complemented with control and supervisory institutions. This model of accountability dominates the literature on the functioning of public administration [Bovens et al. 2014: 4]. However, horizontal accountability also includes administrative accountability, which may take the form of external accountability (that exists parallel to legal supervision and encompasses a number of judiciary, quasi-judiciary or independent institutions) and internal accountability

(based on internal regulations, statutes, codes of conduct, common practices, etc.). Horizontal accountability is also described by constitutional law scholars, who analyse legal accountability - that is, the obligation to face legal consequences of one's own or other people's actions. Legal accountability is most commonly associated with infringements of the law.

Accountability can also take on a **vertical** form which has its source in external influence - namely, in a hierarchical relation between the person held accountable and the forum. The essence of this dependence lies in the fact that the forum (a voter, principal or superior body) is formally entitled to hold its representatives (agents, politicians) responsible for their actions. This type of accountability is based on existing regulations, including the act of voting as a kind of external influence exerted by the electorate over politicians. According to standards described by Transparency International, vertical accountability enables the public to execute its right to hold public officials accountable through the procedure of election, independent media, active civil society and other, similar channels [The Anti-Corruption... 2009: 33]. Vertical accountability is typically used by political scientists, who believe that '(...) accountability generally denotes a relationship between elected politicians and their voters, sometimes mediated by parties, government representatives, or bureaucrats' [Bovens et al. 2014: 5]. The most common variants of vertical accountability are political and, even more narrowly, electoral accountability.

The third type is the so-called diagonal accountability, which occurs when citizens use public institutions to improve supervision of the activities of the authorities, but also when they engage directly in political processes (for example, through social consultations, budget proposals, monitoring of public spending or other such actions) [The Anti-Corruption... 2009: 33]. Diagonal accountability is facultative and functions without any formal pressure stemming from organisational or legal requirements. Its quintessence rests in the participative model of public policies [Bovens 2006: 20-21]. The nature of this type of accountability is well reflected in democratic accountability [Acosta et al. 2013], social accountability [Ackerman 2005] and public accountability, which emphasise citizens' involvement in the process of holding authorities and administration responsible for their conduct. At the same time, diagonal accountability can be considered a form of direct accountability, since it relies on actions undertaken directly by the principal. As indicated by Herbert Simon (et al.), this form is also important, as the mere existence of control institutions (and procedures they execute on a daily basis) is not sufficient to make the process of accountability comprehensive and effective. Simon emphasises that if accountability is to be truly implemented, law-makers should act to eliminate passive attitudes in the society by designing control mechanisms that would include individual stakeholders

in the process of monitoring and evaluating public authorities and administration [2005: 561]. Following this approach, Transparency International interprets diagonal accountability as "(...) a domain between the vertical and horizontal dimensions. It refers to the phenomenon of direct citizen engagement with horizontal accountability institutions when provoking better oversight of state actions. Citizens by-pass cumbersome or compromised formal accountability systems to engage in policy-making, budgeting, expenditure tracking and other similar activities" [The Anti-Corruption... 2009: 33].

The catalogue of accountability types can be complemented with several other forms of cross-sectional nature. One such form is moral (ethical) accountability which shows politicians as subjects responsible for judging their own conduct and establishing an appropriate relationship with their. Such accountability is a part of political culture understood as a set of patterns of rational behaviour [Łukomski 2004: 147]. It is also a virtue expected of our political representatives. Peer accountability is also a cross-sectional type of this phenomenon. One differentiation worth making here is that in its horizontal dimension, peer accountability is initiated and executed by institutions, while in vertical and diagonal dimensions it is the society at large that acts when certain norms are being violated.

The examination of accountability presented in this paper is focused on the narrow understanding of this concept - that is, on direct relations that occur between the key actors of the (European) political system, or, if one considers the problem of democratisation, between principals and their representatives. Still, I find compelling the conclusion presented by Hanna Pitkin, who stated that "(...) in a democratic environment, government officials are account givers and most of their actions are open to public scrutiny. It would not be realistic, however, to expect all officials to respond to every citizen for every one of their actions" [1967...]. This is why the subjects of the following analysis are such mechanisms of accountability as enforcement (analysed in the context of elections) and answerability (understood as deliberation and responsiveness to stakeholders, customers and clients) [Boström, Garsten 2008: 6]. These mechanisms occur in specific moments of the political cycle and refer to interactions between specific actors.

The Principal's Perspective

As indicated in the introduction, accountability can only occur in an existing, effective system and depends on certain criteria with regard to the functioning of the agent. However, our understanding of this issue is incomplete unless we also consider the subject of accountability - the principal, the voter. Voters are the ones who decide which politicians and parties will function on

the European scene, and who delegate agents and grant them certain decision--making competences. Voters are also the ones who control the agents' output and determine their further political fate [Ruszkowski 2010: 26].

This paper begins with a somewhat provocative hypothesis that European voters cannot be considered principals in the full meaning of this term. Hence the question: what behaviours should they exhibit if we are to classify them as truly responsible principals? There are two simple, frequently used criteria we can use to assess their involvement in political life: turnout for elections and their attitude toward a given institution (measured by their knowledge about candidates and the institution itself). In part, this is about voters' participation, as it is understood by Sartori in his concept of democracy: "Participation, in its proper sense, relies on one's willing, active personal involvement. Therefore, it is not about being merely a part of something (which usually comes down to being embroiled in some events), and it is definitely not about unwilling, compulsory engagement in something. Participation is a spontaneous action - the exact opposite of being mobilised" [1994: 148]. In case of the EP elections, participation is a secondary manifestation of political activity, as seen in Schumpeter's vision of procedural democracy. As such, it stems from and at the same time crowns the primary manifestation - one's attitude toward a given institution and the system as a whole [Schumpeter 1995: 336-337].

Even though the European Parliament is the only body in the European political system that is chosen by citizens in direct election, voters seem to have little interest in influencing its structure and composition. Since 1979, when the first direct election was held, the turnout rate has been constantly declining (Figure 1). In 2014, it fell to 42.52 per cent - nearly 20 per cent less than in the first election. Worse still, if one disregards countries where voting is compulsory (Belgium, Cyprus, Greece and Luxembourg), the result is even lower: 38.96%. When analysing turnout rates for each country, it is clear that the citizens of "old" EU countries vote much more frequently than those from the "new" ones. With the exception of Lithuania, where turnout was calculated at 47.35%, none of the Central and Eastern European states exceeded the average ratio (not even its lower "bound") for the entire Union (as presented in the figure below). The two countries that came closest were Estonia (36.52%) and Bulgaria (35.84%). Nearly one third of all eligible voters went to the polls in Romania (32.44%) and Latvia (30.24%). In Hungary (28.97%), Croatia (25.24%), Slovenia (24.55%) and Poland (23.83%) only about one in four citizens chose to vote. The lowest turnout rates were recorded in Czech Republic (18.20%) and Slovakia (13.05%).

Among the "old" EU member states, the lowest numbers of people cast their votes in Portugal, UK and the Netherlands: 33.67%, 35.40% and 37.32% respectively. The country most active in the election was Malta, with

approximately three in four citizens showing up at the polls. Other nations that clearly exceeded the overall EU average were the Italians (57.22%), the Danes (56.30%), the Swedes (51.07%) and the Germans (48.01%). In all other member states, the turnout rate was close to the average.

The gap between the "old" and "new" member states proves that the Union lacks political and cultural coherence. As it turns out, despite substantial structural support (and the accompanying promotion of the European structures) which the EU has provided to its Central and Eastern European members, and which has directly translated into improved living standards and economic growth, societies of these countries have so far failed to strengthen pro-European and civic attitudes. This conclusion is corroborated by the comparison of turnout rates in EP and national parliamentary elections. Firstly, societies identify much more with their national political scenes and consider the EP elections as secondary in importance. Secondly, Central and Eastern Europe still suffer from less developed civil societies, although Lithuania, Bulgaria and Romania are worth pointing out as exhibiting the lowest divergence in turnout rates between EP and national parliamentary elections. Among the "old" EU member states, the British emerge as the nation most stable in its attitudes - they show consistently low interest in both types of elections discussed here (with 7 per cent difference in turnout rates). Across Europe, the divergence in turnout rates varies from about a dozen per cent (France: 15%; Italy: 17%) to over 30 (Finland: 30%; Denmark: 31%; Sweden: 33%). Greece provides an interesting example of a country where even the obligation to vote is not enough to mobilise citizens, regardless of which type of election is considered (59.97 and 62.47% turnout rate respectively).

In Central and Eastern Europe, the divergence was higher than 25%, with the exception of the three countries mentioned in the previous paragraph. In Poland, it was recorded at 25%, in Estonia and Hungary at 28%, while in Latvia at 29%. Next, there is a large gap and even higher differences: 40% in case of Slovenia and Czech Republic, 41% in Croatia, and as much as 46% in Slovakia. Interestingly, the turnout rate for national parliamentary election in the latter states in comparable to that observed in most "older" democracies (still lower than in Scandinavia or Malta, though).

The data referred to above indicates that the mechanism of election is only used as a tool of accountability to a limited extent. This is particularly visible in case of the European Parliament elections, which all around Europe draw noticeably less attention among voters than national parliamentary elections, regardless of how old a given democracy is. This, however, corresponds to and reflects the results of research conducted by Eurobarometer before the most recent EP election, in which people from EU member states were asked about their identity. 39 per cent of respondents described themselves only as citizens of their

respective countries (Germans, Danes, Poles, etc.). 51 per cent expressed a "double" identity - primarily, they referred to themselves as nationals of their countries, but they also identified themselves as Europeans. Only 6 per cent of respondents considered themselves most of all Europeans, and secondarily, citizens of a given state.

The second element indicated here as a criterion for verifying the society as the subject of accountability is our knowledge about and attitude toward the EU's institutional order (in a broader sense) and the EP itself (in a narrower sense). Research conducted by TNS Opinion one year before the 2014 EP election brought rather encouraging results. As it turns out, more than half of all respondents (53 per cent) pointed to the European Parliament as the one institution in the EU's system they are most familiar with - a result that puts the EP far ahead of any other European body. The second and third most frequently mentioned institutions were the European Central Bank and the European Commission, both named by 27 per cent of respondents. However, nearly one third of the people who participated in the research were unable to name any EU body [One Year to... 2013: 35]. A number of other research projects revealed that we tend to confuse European institutions with one another, and it is a trend observed not only in the "old" EU member states.

An interesting picture of European voters emerges if one juxtaposes the turnout rates and levels of knowledge about the EP in particular countries (Figure 2). The two statistics are often inversely proportionate - the lower the turnout rate, the more knowledge we declare to have about the institution. This has been true in case of all Central and Eastern European member states: Slovakia (13.05 vs. 79%), Czech Republic (18.2 vs. 69%), Romania (32.44 vs. 81%), Bulgaria (35.84 vs. 75%), Hungary (28.97 vs. 67%), etc. Among the "old" EU countries, Portugal provided the most striking case of the same phenomenon (33.67 vs. 67%). In several states, the tendency is quite the opposite: the percentage of those who voted was larger than of those who declared familiarity with the EP (Malta: 74.8 vs. 63%; UK: 35.4 vs. 24%; in Sweden, France and Spain the trend was the same, but the divergence between the two numbers was fairly small). It is difficult to state with certainty what the cause of such differences in the levels of knowledge about the EP among European nations is. Any attempt at doing so is rather a speculation than a firm conclusion. One possible reason, especially with respect to the "new" member states, is the combination of cultural factors and a certain uncertainty people feel as to their knowledge on the subject. It can also stem from the fact that European bodies were strongly promoted among these societies as their countries underwent the accession process (which took place in fairly recent past, after all, especially in case of Romania and Bulgaria).

50 per cent of Europeans who took place in the abovementioned research consistently identified the European Parliament as the body which represented European interests the best. Still, nearly half of them (46 per cent) did not know when the next direct election would take place. The date of the next election was known to 34 per cent of respondents, which indicates that societies were basically aware of the event and, thus, could be considered a conscious electorate. Once again, however, if the results are considered separately for each country, it turns out that our knowledge as to the date of the election did not translate into proportionately high turnout rates - a fact clearly visible with regard to Central and Eastern European states [Ibidem: 48].

After the 2009 EP election, Eurobarometer conducted a research in order to find out why so many Europeans did not vote. The results revealed three main categories of reasons: those stemming from general opinions on politics, personal and, finally, those related directly to the EU itself. The first category was the most frequent one - 53 per cent of respondents said they did not participate in the election because they were generally unhappy with politics (they did not trust politicians), they thought their vote would not change anything or were simply not interested in politics. 30 per cent of citizens pointed to reasons related strictly to the EU: lack of knowledge about its structure, discontent with the activity of the EP, as well as overly limited public debate and/or insufficiently informative election campaign [Wybory do Parlamentu Europejskiego 2009].

When analysing European political sphere, Robert Wiszniowski compiled a review of the existing literature on behaviours and motives of the electorate. In it, he pointed out a variety of factors that determine our activity as voters. He discerned two perspectives - that of voters as individuals, and that of the environment in which they function. From individuals' point of view, the elements that shape our activity at the polls are related to our knowledge and attitudes toward politically significant issues. These are: trust toward the EP, the sense of empowerment, interest in elections, approval for the government, political preferences, the level of general knowledge about politics, etc. One additional internal factor comes in the shape of our own perception of the European elections as being secondary in importance. The elections we find primarily important are those on the national level: parliamentary and presidential. The environment, in turn, encompasses elements such as the voting system, timing of the election (including the question of whether more than one election occurs in a short space of time), geographical factors[1], etc. [Wiszniowski 2008: 188-214; 226-235].

In his comments on our involvement in European elections, Janusz Ruszkowski explains our lesser interest in them through several key factors:

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[1]   Geographical factors are those related to the administrative division of a country and spatial distribution of constituencies (e.g. their size).

(1) the election does not take place on the same day in all EU countries and, hence, appears less prestigious; (2) voting systems differ across Europe, which means we lack foundation to build a stronger European identity; (3) election campaigns are dominated by national political parties; (4) the debate preceding elections revolves mostly around respective national perspectives; (5) European structures are too distant and hence abstract to most citizens; (6) election campaigns are not particularly intense and (7) not well funded; (8) EP elections attract little interest from the media; (9) the EP lacks a clear position and role within the European political system [Ruszkowski 2010: 124-125]. What is interesting about this catalogue is that it focuses on shortcomings of the environment rather than voters. It points to shortcomings on the part of politicians and parties, problems of the voting system and institutional order, as well as the role of the media which shape the public opinion. This, of course, should not be an excuse for all the passive citizens. To the contrary - it signals how much the system is detached from the voters, or, looking from the opposite perspective, how much the voters are detached from the system. Having in mind such circumstances, one can hardly expect accountability to be truly effective.

The Agent's Perspective

In the framework of interactions described here, an MEP is an agent directly legitimised by a principal (a voter) to act on the political scene. His position within the system is, however, somewhat complex. In fact, he enters into various relations of accountability: electoral accountability, political accountability, direct accountability, internal accountability, external accountability etc. Moreover, one needs to remember that MEPs operate in a peculiar environment of multilevel governance, which blurs the structural and functional clarity of the system. Still, although all this background is important, it should not derail us from the analytic perspective adopted here, whereby the one crucial element of accountability is agents' readiness to be held responsible for their actions. The key moments in the process are the election and the campaign preceding it. In principle, the campaign should be the time when our representatives willingly subject themselves to judgement. The question that arises here is: how do politicians account for their activities? What exactly do they do to this end? How do they try to garner or maintain the support of the electorate? How is their input and output evaluated? In other words - how deep is our assessment and what is its nature (is it ex-ante, ongoing or ex-post)?

Most of all, the actions of candidates are shaped largely by their respective political parties. This refers to both the possibility of running for re-election and the debate preceding the election. It is worth noting here that national

parties are strongly involved in evaluating the actions of their MEPs. It can be perceived as an expression of internal or, to some extent, horizontal account-ability (as it occurs within a certain political structure). This means that voters' power to hold a candidate accountable is limited right from the outset of the entire process. Even before the electorate determines the fate of candidates, all MEPs are assessed by decision-making bodies of their respective parties [Schmitt et al. 2010: 223]. This process constitutes an internal verification of loyalty, effectiveness, political strategies and further plans. As a result, a given politician is, or is not, allowed to run for an EP seat. One other element that determines a candidate's chance for (re)election is his/her place on the list, also decided on by partisan organs. As Ruszkowski pointed out: "(...) potential re-election of an MEP depends much more on his popularity within his national party than on his previous achievements as an MEP. It is determined by the leaders of the national party, not his political group in the EP (...)" [2010: 103].

In the 2014 EP election in Poland, as much as 80 per cent of MEPs (41 people) were cleared to run for re-election[2]. This means they were subject-ed to both ex-post and ex-ante evaluation from the voters. Of 51 elected peo-ple, nearly half (24) was re-elected for the first time, while 11 were re-elected for their third term-of-office in the EP. The abovementioned politicians proved effective either due to their previous actions on the European and/or national venue, or thanks to an attractive agenda they presented for the future. One other possible explanation is that they simply benefitted from their partisan affilia-tion[3]. High number of re-elected candidates testifies to the fact that experience in European politics is an asset highly regarded by the voters. This view is cor-roborated by the results of research conducted on EP elections in Poland. As it turns out, the percentage of people who make a decision based on the candi-date's name, rather than on his partisan affiliation, has increased with every successive EP election held so far (in 2004, it was 50%; in 2009 – 54%; in 2014 – 58%) [BS/96/2014: 9]. Apparently, the name and the public image that comes with it are not without importance. This is particularly true in the light of an-other statistic - 46 per cent of respondents declared that MEPs had a substan-tial impact on Poland's image in Europe (while only 38 per cent said MEPs

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[2] Interestingly, out of those 10 first-time candidates, 9 were registered by one party - Platforma Obywatelska (PO, eng. Civic Platform). However, such personal shift in the ranks of its EP candidates is less surprising when one considers the fact that PO was by far the biggest winner of the previous EP election, when its members had obtained 25 seats.

[3] Among those who won the EP seats were also well-established politicians, seasoned in working in important positions (for example, B. Zdrojewski, who prior to the election had been a minister in the government; M. Boni - also former minister; A. Kozłowska-Rajewicz - government's plenipotentiary for equal treatment), as well as two new MEPs without any experience in politics (Z. Krasnodębski and B. Wenta).

determined how well Polish interests were represented in the EU) [Ibidem: 4].

Another element of some significance to accountability is the election campaign (most of all, its quality) - the particular time when politicians are supposed to subject themselves to assessment by the electorate. Unfortunately, most candidates who base their strategy on ex-ante evaluation make a vital mistake right at the start - they fill their agendas with declarations which are impossible to implement. Moreover, such agendas are frequently vague and noncommittal. This, of course, is a safe choice if one has in mind the need to account for one's activity before the next election. Another problem concerns the debate that occurs throughout the campaign. Since it is conducted primarily by national parties, it is usually dominated by national rather than European issues. Furthermore, it is full of impractical, infeasible proposals and declarations that have nothing to do with the competences of an MEP. One example was provided by J. Kalinowski who, in a rather crude manner, (especially considering his position as an MEP and the standard we expect of the European political debate) addressed the voters, saying: '*What about regional roads? What about local roads? Don't we need them? These are the issues we're handling now, and the issues I'm sure we will be handling in the future!*' Of course, the message is far from reasonable, as it completely misses the scope of issues tackled by MEPs. It stems from a populist approach, but also from the expectations expressed by the electorate of PSL (Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe, eng. Polish People's Party). Still, even though such agenda was clearly shaped by a calculation of votes, the candidate referred both to his previous activity, and the actions he intended to undertake in the next term-of-office.

Another significant shortcoming that hinders accountability is related to information policy adopted outside the close circles of candidates. Research indicates that the media fail to fulfil their educational and informational functions. Numerous respondents stated that the media provided insufficient coverage of the European Parliament and its work, or that information given on the subject was biased (excessively negative) - there was not enough positive message and first-hand information on what the role of the EP in the European political system is. Moreover, respondents complained that media focused on dominant countries such as Germany and France [Wstrzymujący się od głosowania... 2012: 6]. Finally, they believed media made insufficient effort to mobilise the electorate [Wiszniowski 2008: 347-348]. All the above-mentioned criticism is particularly relevant in the light of another research which revealed that during the campaign, the media (or more specifically, TV programmes) were the major source of information about parties and candidates for 58 per cent of voters. Slightly lower number of respondents pointed to TV spots and advertisements (53 per cent). On the other hand of the spectrum were meetings and direct conversations

with the candidates - 5 and 2 per cent of all answers, respectively. Internet provided information to 16 per cent of respondents. Interestingly, 27 per cent gained some knowledge from their families and friends. As much as 23 per cent did not come across any information on any of the parties or candidates [BS/97/2014]. The same research examined voters' opinions on the effectiveness of the campaign. 39 per cent of respondents stated that the campaign did not provide them with any relevant information about the candidates running for EP seats in their constituencies. 19 per cent said they only learned very little [Ibidem]. Such numbers force me to conclude that the conduct of the election campaign does not support the process of accountability. As it turns out, neither politicians and parties nor the media provide a viable platform for genuine accountability to exist on.

Many politicians and analysts emphasise that the campaign starts the day after the election, when the chosen representatives begin their work and, at the same time, their effort to be re-elected the next time around. The reality of the job forces MEPs to be constantly on the move. They perform a part of their duties in Brussels, where they participate in committee sessions and meetings of political groups and additional plenary sessions. They also work in Strasbourg, where they sit on twelve several day-long plenary sessions per year. MEPs are also "spokesmen" for the EU in their respective constituencies[4]. Although they are not legally obliged to follow the instructions of their voters, they should take their opinions into consideration. One also needs to remember that MEPs are given funds to set up their offices, which means they are given means to constantly stay in contact with the voters. Hence, the shape of the system in which MEPs execute their mandate provides a convenient ground for them to subject themselves to ongoing evaluation. However, there are two conditions that need to be met if such evaluation is to actually occur. Firstly, MEPs have to do some work which they can later be proud of in front of their voters. Secondly, they have to keep the electorate constantly informed of their actions. Here, we can refer to a qualitative research conducted in Poland, which indicates that MEPs are not widely recognisable, and "(...) even if they are, it is due to reasons different than their activity in the EU structures. The Poles do not distinguish MEPs from other Polish politicians who work in various other institutions (...)" [Dudkiewicz et al. 2013: 8]. According to analyses presented by the Institute of Public Affairs, "(...) in both the current and the previous term-of-office, not all Polish MEPs managed to execute their mandate in a satisfactory manner. Some were focused too much on national politics and, consequently, neglected their actual workplace - the European Parliament. Others engaged in work on

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[4] MEPs gather in political groups based on their views, regardless of their nationality. They execute their mandate independently. Since their prerogatives have increased over the years, their activity now influences of spheres of citizen's daily life: environment, consumer protection, transport, education, culture, health care, etc.

issues which are not particularly relevant to the future of the European Union and Poland's role in it. Others still did not possess sufficient knowledge, abilities and contacts to be able to influence decision-making processes. All such mandates cannot be considered well used. Informing citizens about the functioning of European institutions is equally important to being effective in influencing the decisions made by the EU" [Łada, Szczepanik 2013: 2]. Analysis of work done by MEPs also shows the extent of their accountability. "(...) MEPs are subjected to less control by the public opinion – the media do not follow the events in the European Parliament, so it is easier to remain anonymous and not attract any interest with one's statements and behaviour (...). The accountability of MEPs is different due to (...) lesser external control and, secondly, the complexity of issues tackled by the EP (...)" [Dudkiewicz et al. 2013: 48].

As indicated by the presented data, candidates' readiness to answer for their actions to the electorate is relative and depends on external factors. Most of all, current and/or future candidates are strongly dependant on the will and decisions made by their political parties. This refers as much to the turning point in the electoral process - a decision to allow a given person to run in the EP election - as to the information policy adopted by parties and imposed on their members. Hence, accountability is strongly determined by internal relations between politicians and their formations - an aspect which is beyond the influence of voters. This means that the electorates' decision-making powers are limited right from the start of the process.

The second factor that weakens the election as a tool of accountability is the shape and content of the debate preceding the elections. As the campaign is focused on national or even local issues and dominated by empty promises, voters have little to no reference points by which they could evaluate and verify a given politician's performance before the next election.

Finally, (Polish) MEPs show insufficient activity in fields which are vital and relevant to the functioning of the European Parliament. They also fail to keep voters well informed of their actions. Therefore, even though most of them have been positively verified in the last election (as they were re-elected for another term-of-office), the effectiveness of their work remains doubtful.

Conclusions

Acting through the European Commission, the European Union has made accountability one of the most important standards for the functioning of the public sphere. The *European Governance White Paper* [European Commission 2002] enumerates five basic principles of good governance: openness, participation, effectiveness, accountability and coherence. Although these principles

clearly fall within the multilevel governance model, they also emphasise the significance of including citizens in the process of formulating, implementing and evaluating public policies. This can be inferred from the abovementioned list. Firstly, it provides for relations based on open conduct of political process and inclusion of individuals (also through implementing standards of accountability). Then, it postulates ensuring effectiveness, efficiency and coherence of the system. None of these criteria leave out citizens, although in every case, their participation can be considered from two perspectives: infrastructure and implementation. The former is related with how the system is organised - for instance, with the existence of appropriate regulations, solutions and standards. The latter refers most of all to the activity of political actors: various administrative bodies, politicians participating in direct elections and ultimate beneficiaries of all public activity - citizens. If the system guarantees the first aspect (that is, the institutional framework), the second one depends on the activity of institutional actors and voters. Implementing good European governance requires several key elements: 1) transparency of decision-making processes and access to public information (which are the essential factors of openness); 2) mechanisms for inclusion of social (and sectoral) actors in decision-making processes; 3) a responsive model for making decisions (which is a virtue of every effective and coherent system). Such structure for European governance unquestionably forms a framework and possibility for limiting the democratic deficit observed so far. Still, the existence of standards, or even their fairly broad promotion[5], does not by itself make the system more democratic. This is clearly reflected in the picture of the electoral process described earlier in this paper.

In practice, European societies exhibit a very limited willingness to hold their representatives (current or potential) accountable. Their participation in the elections - a crucial element of any democratic system - is incidental. Barely over 30 per cent of European eligible to vote regularly go to the polls. Societies of Central and Eastern Europe stand out us particularly passive. Moreover, voters possess a limited knowledge of the European Parliament - the institution in which they put their representatives through direct election. One particularly striking tendency is their propensity to confuse various European institutions. Furthermore, their knowledge about their representatives' activity at the European level is far from satisfactory. In the context of the subject discussed here, a closer look at those citizens who do cast their votes is also revealing - most of them make their decisions without proper reflection and analysis of

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[5] One example of such promotion in Poland in the period from 2007 to 2013 was a dedicated „Human Capital" Programme funded from the European Social Fund. „Human Capital" provided support for, among many other projects, public administration, to assist it in implementing standards of good governance (one of the Programme priorities was titled „good governance").

what each candidate has done so far, and/or intends to do in the future. Rather than that, they follow the overall image of a given politician. Although the causes of this „laziness" are actually quite complex and include many other factors, the fact is that such attitude is not conducive to the process of democratising a system through mechanisms of accountability.

The quality of debates conducted during the election campaign indicates that MEPs are not willing to subject themselves to judgement from voters. First of all, the subjects (and with them, the entire dialogue) touched on by current and/or potential MEPs are not particularly relevant. Secondly, it is hard to speak of an actual dialogue, since candidate limit their efforts to simply informing the electorate about their actions and intentions, without engaging in a true discussion. Still, even if it is narrowed down to passing information, the mechanism could be used for the purpose of accountability, if only candidates were ready to provide information most useful to the voters (for instance, about their previous achievements in European politics, or about how they fulfilled promises made earlier on) and formulate agendas adequate to their prerogatives as MEPs (rather than focused on national issues). Finally, candidates to the EP seats are dependent - both formally and informally - on internal political systems of their countries. This fact is reflected in a number of factors: (1) dominant position of national parties; (2) varying national voting systems; (3) national character of the electorate; (4) focus on national issues during the campaign; (5) focus on national issues during the work in the EP [Ruszkowski 2011: 164].

As indicated above, the relation between MEPs and their principals do not entail evaluation of their political activity, regardless of whether one considers ex-ante or ex-post assessment. Deputies' daily work is also not easily subjected to judgment - it is either poorly reported to the electorate, overly focused on national context, or, quite simply, insufficient. This means the MEPs do not create circumstances that would allow voters to conduct ongoing evaluation of their actions.

Clearly, the European political system suffers from a substantial deficit of accountability, as reflected in very limited implementation of one of the basic standards of democracy. Consequently, EU structures lack strong legitimacy. Although a crisis of participation has affected most of Europe and is not limited to „new" members of the Union, it is particularly visible in younger democracies of states that have joined the EU since 2004. This underscores the distance between the „new" and „old" member states in terms of development of civil society and pro-European attitudes. While accountability constitutes only one area in the larger, more complex problem of democratic deficit, it is definitely worth more attention on the part of both theorists and practitioners. It is, after all, a factor that shapes social and institutional order and is required to build

high political culture.

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Figure 1. Turnout rate in selected EU countries: 2014 EP election vs. national parliamentary elections
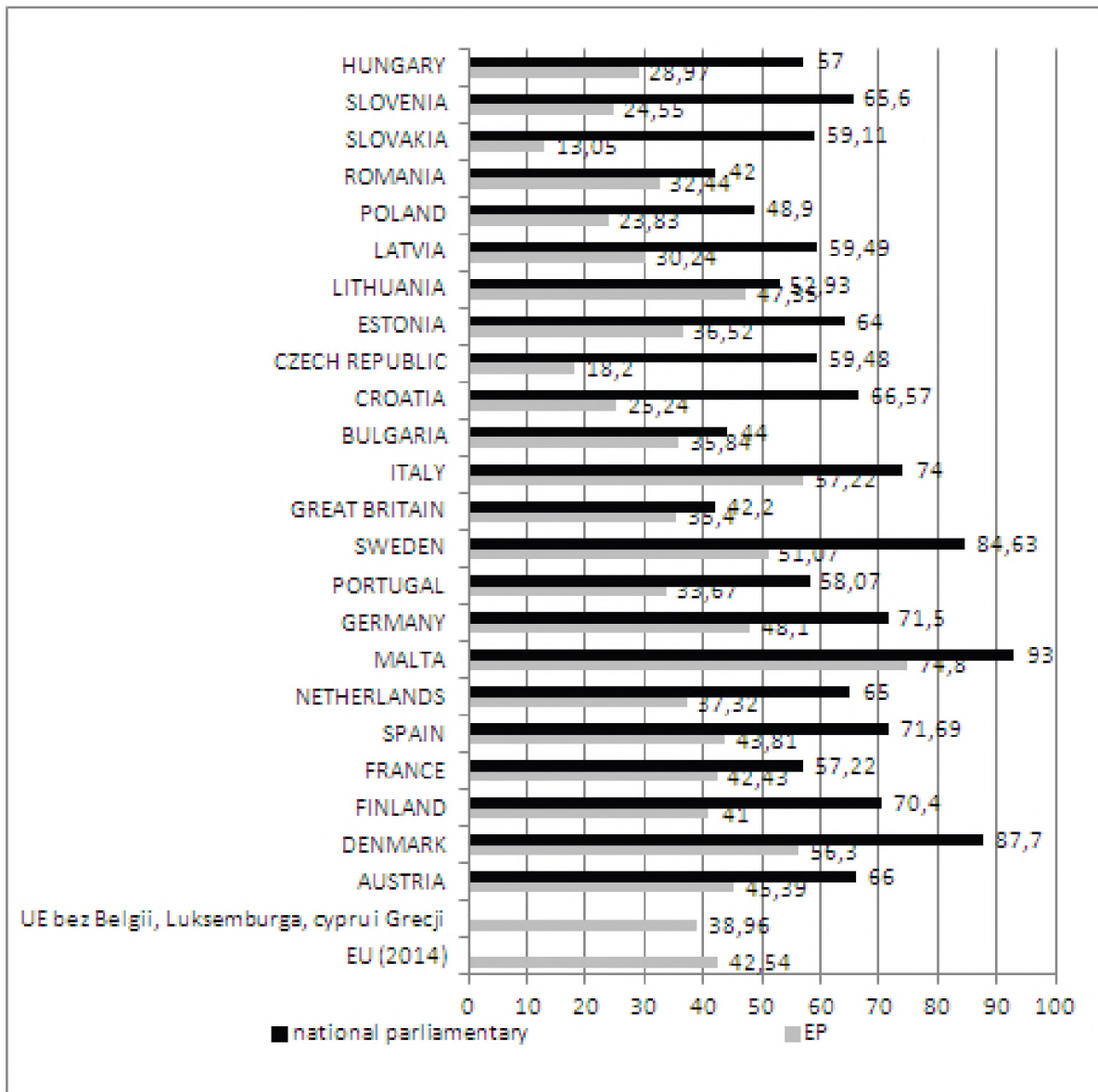
Figure 2. Turnout rates and levels of knowledge about the EP in particular countries