

CITIZENS' PARTICIPATION - AS A DECISION-MAKING FACTOR AT LOCAL LEVEL

PARTICIPAREA CETĂȚENILOR – FACTOR DE LUARE A DECIZIILOR LA NIVEL LOCAL

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Abstract

Citizens' participation in decision-making processes is a key element of achieving democracy at central and local level, ensuring transparency and contributing to holding public officials accountable for decisions taken. The effectiveness of participatory democracy implies simultaneous and mandatory observance of the principles of information, consultation and transparency of the decision-making process. Participatory democracy involves citizens' participation in public decision-making; citizens' control over spending public money; public consultation of civil society as a whole. Participation is a mechanism of representation, a means by which governors are informed about the preferences and needs of the public. The purpose of involving citizens in the decision-making process at local level involves providing citizens with quality services and services necessary for citizens, improving the content of decisions developed by local authorities, as well as orienting the activity of local public authorities towards citizens' needs and increasing citizens' credibility towards local public authorities, through the effort of representatives of local public authorities to give their mandate vigour and efficiency.

Keywords: *democracy, participation, decision-making, local authorities, political participation*

1. Introduction

Decision making is an integral part of human activity, as well as institutions, organizations, enterprises. Any decision requires a conscious selection from several variants of action and, at the same time, an orientation towards one or more goals. Decision is a deliberate social act of a person or group of people, which establishes the purpose and objectives of an action, the directions and ways of achieving it, all determined according to a certain need, based on a process of information, reflection and evaluation of the means and consequences of carrying out that action (Dulschi 2019: 24).

The involvement of citizens in the decision-making process is one of the fundamental elements in the exercise of democracy at central and local level, through which transparency is ensured and aims to hold public officials accountable for decisions taken. The involvement of citizens in decision-making is a perpetual process, and the dissemination of information about the

policies and decisions of the authorities is carried out in both directions: citizens express their options, and the public administration informs citizens about state policies.

Participation as a means of influence significantly expands the sphere of political action of citizens in a democracy. Participation is a mechanism of representation, a means by which governments are informed about the preferences and needs of the public and are stimulated to respond to those preferences and needs." In other words, the receptivity of the political system to citizens' preferences is the normatively essential issue that political participation seeks to resolve within this model of democracy (Teorell 2006:787-810).

The concept of citizen participation is based on the need to consult citizens and express their views on decisions taken at different levels and from which they may be directly or indirectly affected. A genuine participatory democracy involves citizens' participation in public decision-making, informing citizens about public authorities' decisions, citizens' control over spending public money; constant use of public consultations by public authorities and decision-making transparency. The effectiveness of participatory democracy implies simultaneous and mandatory compliance with the principles of information, consultation and transparency of decision-making (participatory democracy at local level). Participatory democracy involves: citizen participation in public decision-making, public consultation of civil society as a whole (Tatar 2021: 70).

2. Methodology

In this research we conducted the analysis of doctrinaire approaches to citizen participation in local decision-making. Another important part of this study is dedicated to the comparative method, which gives us the opportunity to identify the advantages of consulting citizens on issues of local interest. We also applied the comparative research method, analyzing specific aspects of participatory democracy in different states, where citizen consultation is applied to examine issues related to economic, social and health issues. We also used the synthetic method to identify the positive aspects, following the experiences applied at local level. The use of the sociological method was manifested in the interpretation of statistical data on the degree of information of citizens by local public authorities and the level of involvement of citizens in proposing solutions and consulting draft decisions of local public authorities.

3. Conceptual approaches to political participation

In the literature, by the phrase *political participation* are most often designated those actions through which individuals or groups try to defend and promote their interests in the political sphere. This is essentially the conceptualization of participation as an attempt at influence. Political participation refers to those actions of private citizens that attempt to influence governors, either by affecting the choice of government personnel or by affecting choices made by government personnel" (Tatar 2021: 79).

We can summarize by emphasizing that political participation as an attempt at influence aims to elect decision-makers or governors and influence the decisions they take (Comşa 2006: 137).

The central idea of the participationist perspective is to get citizens more involved in solving problems of local interest, even if this happens within the broader institutional framework of representative democracy (Teorell 2006: 780).

The word 'participation' thus encompasses a number of different elements: communication, information, consultation, dialogue, engagement, joint decision-making,

deliberation, etc. The boundaries between these various approaches have proven porous, and the link to decision-making often remains obscure. For example, simply informing citizens is sometimes passed off as participation. Moreover, elected officials often seek to maintain this confusion and ambiguity while reaping the symbolic benefits attached to "participation" (Lefebvre).

Thus, there are a number of elements needed to ensure effective citizen participation at local and central level: successful implementation of citizen participation requires well-motivated and aware citizens; the driving force of the process must come from the citizens; local and central government must create an environment conducive to citizen participation, including well-established channels for disseminating information, providing logistical support, guiding through the process and even providing financial and human resources; all stakeholders must be familiar with citizens' methods of participation and be able to distinguish between participation in decision-making and real decision-making authority; citizens need to be aware and educated about their rights and responsibilities in relation to local self-government and decision-making; the benefit of the process must serve both citizens and local government; both parties must be transparent about their actions, especially in relation to local government; both sides must be flexible and able to negotiate and cooperate; having it necessary, the assistance of external experts (Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture) must be committed.

Creating a permanent dialogue with citizens – through consultation, partnership processes and participatory programming – generates better solutions within the community in the fight against power opacity and corruption. It also facilitates the inclusion of minorities and marginalised groups. Civil society organisations can be actively involved in a wide range of activities, from community development to skills training for sustainable livelihoods and access to local democracy.

4. The essence of participatory democracy

The process of participatory democracy opens new horizons in terms of relations between authorities and citizens. Participatory democracy can transform the individual from a private citizen, concerned only with his problems, into a public citizen, attentive, caring, who cares about what is happening around him. Participatory democracy involves mechanisms through which decisions are made about community issues by involving citizens.

The participatory democracy label covers a number of co-existing procedures, techniques and approaches of varying importance, the common aim of which is to 'associate' citizens in political decision-making (Lefebvre).

Participatory democracy does not automatically produce benefits and does not bring benefits and well-being, but is present and beneficial under certain conditions, namely when citizens and organized groups of civil society become active, even pro-active participants, through: involvement, which means that they use their right to participate in social and political life, making their voice heard in public debates (Dulschi 2019: 23).

The involvement of actors at different stages of political decision-making varies according to the intensity of participation. There are four levels of participation sorted from least to most participatory (Council of Europe Code of Practice for Civil Participation in Decision-Making (2009): information - a relatively low level of participation, which usually consists of a provision of one-way information from public authorities; consultation - public authorities can ask for their opinion on a particular policy or development topic; dialogue - two-way communication based on mutual interests and potential shared objectives to ensure a regular exchange of views (broad and collaborative dialogue); Partnership - the highest level of participation in which citizens, public

associations and public authorities cooperate closely, while ensuring that citizens and public associations continue to be independent and have the right to campaign and act regardless of the partnership situation. The partnership may include activities such as the provision of services, participatory forums and the establishment of decision-making bodies.

The main prerequisite for pursuing sustainable democratic reform processes is the ability to make citizens trust the authorities. The stronger the bond between the two parties (citizens from one side and authorities from another), the more developed society will be, but also more democratic. Undoubtedly, this relationship is strengthened in proportion to the authorities' willingness to respond to citizens' real needs, to represent their best interest and to improve their quality of life. This is increasingly important at local level of government, where the relationship between the two parties is more obvious, tangible and sensitive (Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture).

The purpose of public involvement in decision-making is to improve the quality of decisions taken and their social legitimacy. Involvement in the process of elaboration of normative acts of non-governmental organizations, of different interested groups from all sectors contributes to balancing strategic documents, elaborated in accordance with the interests of the community, of society as a whole. In addition, public participation in decision-making is also of key importance in terms of civic education, empowering both public administration representatives and citizens by establishing an effective proactive dialogue. Citizen participation is the process by which citizens' concerns, needs and values are incorporated into the decision-making process within public administration (Monitoring Report).

According to international practice, citizen participation creates several advantages for public administration, among which: it restores and forms trust between public administration and citizens; helps the administration identify community needs; leads the community to consensus and not to conflict; Administration and citizens are able to tackle problems and opportunities together in a creative way. At the same time, citizens have the opportunity to get acquainted with the draft regulations proposed by the public administration, to express their views on these projects, to defend their personal interests and those of the community. Citizens need to be involved in decision-making, from agenda setting to policy development. No matter how complex a topic is, authorities must "translate" technical language and use a variety of tools to arouse the interest of residents. Recent analyses show that most members of communities and society who do not trust the authorities and the system in general, will not believe in their ability to change things for the better through civic involvement to solve common problems. A society in which the majority of its members do not consider legitimate the decisions of the authorities and do not believe in the rule of law is a society in which there will be no belief in the value of respecting the rules of the game, such as respecting the law or paying taxes (Brînzaniuc 2019: 23).

Compared to other countries of the European Union, in Moldova, the level of trust in authorities is quite low. The categorization of European countries, including Moldova, in terms of the level of trust in the Government and Parliament, highlighted that Moldova ranks 2nd at the end of the list, being surpassed only by Greece. As several studies have highlighted a robust correlation between the population's trust in institutions and the perception regarding the level of appreciation of the quality of life, it is worth mentioning that the countries positioned in the immediate vicinity of Moldova are characterized by a low level of satisfaction with the conditions in which they live. The low interest in involving citizens in public administration is caused by the authorities. About 7 out of 10 citizens know about the functions of the local public administration and its attributions to

make public its decisions, but only 1 out of 10 participated in public consultation activities that involved developing the strategic plan of the community in which they live, consulting and distributing the budget and attracting investments. Among the major factors determining this low degree of participation are insufficient knowledge about the decision-making process - 32.2% of respondents selected this option (Brînzaniuc 2019: 23).

5. Participatory democracy at local level

The state of local democracy is a synthesis of mechanisms of legitimacy before the demanding citizen, a tool made available to citizens to reassess their relationship with public authorities and, at the same time, the place where we can watch how certain decisions influence the quality of life of a person, of a wider community, and may, if necessary, challenge the concrete results of political decisions that do not serve his interests. Effective and functional local democracy requires, in turn, the existence of competent, effective local authorities, capable of deliberating and autonomously administering the interests of the communities they represent, which are genuinely separate and distinct from the central (national) level of government (Chiriac 2023: 5).

Dialogue between citizens and elected local representatives is essential in local democracy, as it strengthens the legitimacy of local democratic institutions and the effectiveness of their measures. While respecting the principle of subsidiarity, local authorities have and must assume a leading role in promoting citizen participation in a context where the success of any policy of local democratic participation depends on the commitment of the authorities (Dulschi 2019: 23).

Local authorities are closest to citizens: they are thus an essential element in encouraging citizen participation and the development of citizens' communities aimed at greater involvement in public decision-making and greater transparency at local level. To strengthen good local governance, elected representatives are responsible for enabling citizens to influence decision-making and take citizens' needs and concerns into account. Citizens' trust in local authorities means more engagement and participation, which benefits from participatory democracy, a crucial tool to enable local elected representatives to effectively fulfil their roles and responsibilities.

In 2016, the Council of Europe developed the necessary criteria for defining civil participation in order to achieve good local governance. This effort led to the development of the Civil Participation Guide (2017), which defines the key principles of participation. In order to be effectively appointed and have a positive impact on local governance, a civil participation process must be based on: respect for all actors as a basis for interaction and mutual trust; respect for the independence of public associations, even when their opinions differ from those of the authorities; respecting the position of public authorities with whom they cooperate in decision-making; openness, transparency and accountability, meaning that full and up-to-date information should be provided to citizens about decision-making and participation procedures; responsiveness, providing adequate feedback, meaning that adequate information should be provided in a timely manner at all stages, allowing substantial input from citizens, starting from the earliest possible stage of the decision-making process; non-discrimination and inclusion so that all voices, including those of the least privileged and most vulnerable, are heard and taken into account, ensuring that appropriate means and channels are used; gender equality and equal participation of all groups, including those with interests and needs such as young people, older people, persons with disabilities, minorities, etc., in the sense that public authorities should demand the widest possible input; accessibility of the

participation process using clear language and appropriate means of participation, offline or online and on any device (Participatory democracy at local level).

However, local authorities need the support of civil society to effectively exercise their public duties, serve the community, consult citizens and maintain public trust. Participatory democracy is based on timely and constant information of the population, although information alone does not allow citizens to automatically influence the decision-making process. This requires a whole range of participatory democracy instruments implemented with the support of the population and different segments of civil society. Participatory democracy remains the most important tool for socializing the population and involving them in solving local problems, as evidenced by the growing interest of citizens in different forms of this type of democracy. Under the influence of common Europeanization processes and the introduction of new public management, local democracy adapts to new challenges and modern realities (Cherkasov 2021).

Most often, respondents get informed about the activities of local authorities online, visiting the website of the city hall (34.9%) and the use of social networks maintained by the city hall (33.3%). Only secondly, respondents get informed about the activities of the city hall at public meetings (27.6%), panels on which are displayed draft decisions and other orientation information for the population (21.3%) or other individual actions of the city hall in relation to the population (18.1%). Curiously, the majority of the population does not have high expectations from the local media - only 2.7% ; From the distribution of leaflets, brochures and other informative materials were informed – 6.9%. Definitely, 2.3% of respondents claim that they do not get informed in any way about the activities of local public authorities. The most popular means of informing citizens are, unanimously, the Internet and social networks (Chiriac 2023).

The most familiar with social networks are, obviously, young people aged 18-29, in proportion of 51.4%, followed by people with higher education – 47%, economically active – 42.7%, people with high incomes – 43.3% – and urban population. Women seem to be relatively more active on the Internet and social networks than men (36.1% vs 33.4%), but the stark contrast is observed between people with higher education and people with incomplete education (50.6% vs 25.1%). Similarly, there is a gap between young people (46.9%) and older people (22.7%). However, respondents would prefer in the future more public meetings of the city hall with members of their communities – 48%, keeping as projection the course towards digitizing services and timely communication between mayors and residents – 38.8% (Chiriac 2023).

Civil servants, civil society representatives and citizens increase their capacities and awareness of the participatory decision-making mechanism in order to put them into practice effectively for joint political decision-making. In matters of local interest, which concern a part of the population of the administrative-territorial unit, various forms of consultations, public hearings and talks may be organized with this part, under the law. The draft decisions of the local council shall be consulted publicly, in accordance with the law, in compliance with the procedures established by each representative and deliberative authority of the population of the administrative-territorial unit of the first or second level, as the case may be (Law no. 436).

At the same time, it is important to mention that the meetings of the local council are public. Any interested person may attend its meetings. Citizens, associations established in accordance with the law and other interested parties have the right to: participate, under the law, in any stage of the decision-making process; to have access to information on the locality's budget and how to use budgetary resources, draft decisions and the agenda of local council and mayoralty meetings; to propose the initiation of drafting and adoption of decisions; to submit

recommendations to local public authorities, on its own behalf or on behalf of groups of inhabitants of the respective communities, on various draft decisions subject to debate. Creating a participatory process involves considering how the result will be achieved, as well as which methods will be applied and when.

6. Good practices on participatory democracy at local level

An example of good practice on citizen participation concerns the organisation of local referendums, i.e. citizens' consultation on issues of local interest. The referendum is an indispensable procedure of modern democracy, the use of which has been shown to be effective in establishing contact between the state and citizens. The analysis of the results of sociological research on the referendum allows us to ascertain that the main problems faced by the Republic of Moldova in applying the referendum are: low level of political culture, political and civic absenteeism, lack of trust in state power institutions, etc. About 45 local referendums were held between 1995 and 2019. In most cases, the referendum applied only to remove the mayor. Political absentism, low degree of political initiative, low degree of political culture lead to inefficiency of local referendum in the Republic of Moldova (Participation as an element of democracy). We believe that, through the local referendum, numerous social problems of local interest can be solved, such as problems related to the administrative-territorial division or social problems. The effectiveness of the referendum is determined by the presence of political culture and civic consciousness in citizens who get involved in political processes.

In Switzerland, since the adoption of the Constitution (1848) until now, more than 300 referendums have been organized, at which numerous issues regarding health (alcohol problem), economic (pension system, trade) have been examined. The development of political culture, civic awareness through different forms of education can help activate citizens' involvement in solving community problems. The establishment of initiative groups can bring forward imperative topics of the community: environmental issues, heritage preservation, opening cultural institutions (Participation as an element of democracy).

Any of the parties, either the initiative group or the representative of the local authority, may come up with proposals with a view to establishing a dialogue, which may be general or collaborative. General dialogue is a process of mutual communication and, possibly, common objectives, which aims to ensure a regular exchange of views. It ranges from open public hearings to specialized meetings between citizens' associations and local public authorities. The collaborative dialogue shall be based on mutual interest in the development of a specific policy. It is more dynamic than general dialogue because it consists of common, often frequent and regular meetings aimed at jointly developing major policy strategies and often leads to mutually agreed outcomes, such as a recommendation or a common law (Participatory democracy at local level 2020: 8).

Another example of good practices aimed at communication between citizens and representatives of local public authorities is public meetings with local citizens, where programs or activities envisaged by local public authorities are presented.

Surveys or surveys are also widely used. Cimislia City Hall organized an investigation into policies and services provided to citizens by specialized services of the City Hall. The survey was conducted in Cimislia among representatives of local authorities and civil society groups. The Council of Europe's Elog system was adapted to the local situation after the implementation team was agreed. The citizens' survey was implemented through a Google form that was spread between

various associations and also promoted through various media networks. The number of interviewees was 77 (citizens, NGO representatives, etc.). The survey among local elected officials and local authorities was conducted using face-to-face interviews or also online. 11 local councillors were interviewed. The investigation took place between 10 and 20 June 2019. The main difficulties of the survey were to approach a wide group of different people in conducting the survey (Participatory democracy at local level 2020: 8).

Conclusions

The activity of the local public administration is carried out in the interest of the citizen, in order to provide him with socio-economic security. The exchange of ideas and proposals between citizens and local public administration requires mutual involvement of stakeholders and takes time and requires additional resources. However, only through a viable partnership between the community and authorities can successful democratic governance develop. For all citizens to trust administrative institutions, in the quality of services provided by officials, transparency, honesty and integrity are needed. The purpose of involving citizens in the decision-making process at local level involves providing citizens with quality services and services necessary for citizens, improving the content of decisions developed by local authorities, as well as orienting the activity of local public authorities towards citizens' needs and increasing citizens' credibility towards local public authorities, through the effort of representatives of local public authorities to give their mandate vigour and efficiency.

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