CHAPTER 7.

STRATEGII PENTRU PARTICIPAREA CETĂȚENILOR LA PROCESUL DECIZIONAL EUROPEAN. TENDINȚE ȘI PROVOCĂRI

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Rezumat: *Lucrarea analizează evoluția și diversitatea mecanismelor de implicare în procesul decizional în Uniunea Europeană, evidențiind importanța consolidării democrației participative prin transparență, incluziune și dialog constant între cetățeni și instituțiile publice. Structura lucrării urmărește să evidențieze aplicabilitatea principiului participării cetățenești așa cum este evidențiat în documentele europene, în special în articolul 10 din Tratatul Uniunii Europene. De asemenea, studiul comparativ privind modul în care participarea cetățenească devine un instrument pentru democrația europeană, pentru stimularea dialogului democratic și pentru întărirea coeziunii sociale, arată diferențe semnificative în cultura participativă și în maturitatea instituțională a proceselor consultative. Țările nordice și vest-europene se disting prin modele bazate pe încredere, cooperare intersectorială și utilizarea extensivă a platformelor digitale de consultare publică. Privitor la România, aflată într-un proces de convergență, sunt reliefate provocări privind educația civică, accesul la informație și interoperabilitatea digitală. Digitalizarea participării cetățenești, prin platforme de e-consultare, vot electronic sau bugete participative online, devine astfel un instrument esențial pentru creșterea incluziunii și eficienței decizionale. Lecțiile învățate subliniază necesitatea unui cadru comun european care să îmbine bunele practici și inovația digitală cu principiile transparenței și responsabilității democratice.*
Cuvinte cheie: *strategie, participare cetățenească, proces decizional european, implicare civică, digitalizare.*

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STRATEGIES FOR CITIZEN PARTICIPATION IN EUROPEAN DECISION-MAKING. TRENDS AND CHALLENGES

Abstract: *The paper analyzes the evolution and diversity of the mechanisms of involvement in the decision-making process in the European Union, highlighting the importance of strengthening participatory democracy through transparency, inclusion and constant dialogue between citizens and public institutions. The structure of the paper aims to highlight the applicability of the principle of citizen participation as highlighted in European documents, in particular in Article 10 of the Treaty on European Union. Also, the comparative study on how citizen participation becomes an instrument for European democracy, for stimulating democratic dialogue and for strengthening social cohesion, shows significant differences in the participatory culture and in the institutional maturity of consultative processes. Nordic and Western European countries are distinguished by models based on trust, intersectoral cooperation and extensive use of digital public consultation platforms. Regarding Romania, which is in a process of convergence, challenges regarding civic education, access to information and digital interoperability are highlighted. The digitalization of citizen participation, through e-consultation platforms, e-voting or online participatory budgets, thus becomes an essential tool for increasing inclusion and decision-making efficiency. The lessons learned underline the need for a common European framework that combines good practices and digital innovation with the principles of transparency and democratic accountability.*

Keywords: strategy, citizen participation, European decision-making process, civic engagement, digitalization.

Introduction

Citizen participation in decision-making is a fundamental element of European democracy and an essential condition for strengthening the legitimacy of the European Union institutions. In a context marked by political, economic and social challenges, the active involvement of citizens contributes to increasing transparency, accountability and trust in European governance. Through participation, citizens not only react to public policies, but also become their co-creators, influencing strategic directions and priorities for action at European level.

The European Union has enshrined the principle of citizen participation in several fundamental documents, in particular through the Treaty of Lisbon (2009), which emphasizes that "decisions shall be taken as closely as possible to the citizen" (Art. 10 TEU). In this spirit, the European Citizens' Initiative (ECI), introduced by Article 11 of the Treaty on European Union and governed by Regulation (EU) No 211/2011, provides a formal framework through which citizens can request the European Commission to propose new legislative acts.

This innovative instrument transforms citizens from mere recipients of European policies into direct actors in the decision-making process, stimulating democratic dialogue and social cohesion at Union level. The European Citizens' Initiative (ECI) has thus become an essential benchmark for transnational civic engagement, offering concrete opportunities for collective expression and influence on the European agenda. Therefore, the analysis of strategies and challenges regarding citizens' participation in the European decision-making process must start from an understanding of this need for participatory democratisation and from an assessment of the effectiveness of current mechanisms, in particular the ECI, as pillars of a more open and inclusive European governance [3].

Although the European Union has developed a series of instruments aimed at bringing citizens closer to the decision-making process, such as public consultations, citizens' hearings or the European Citizens' Initiative, the experience of the last decade has demonstrated that these mechanisms, in their current form, are no longer sufficient to respond to the dynamics of contemporary society and the needs for authentic participation. First, the accessibility and visibility of these tools remain limited. According to Eurobarometer data [15], less than a third of European citizens say they are informed about the possibilities to get directly involved in the EU decision-making process. For example, the European Citizens' Initiative (ECI), although innovative in concept, has been effectively used by a relatively small number of groups, and only a small proportion of the proposals submitted have led to concrete legislative initiatives. Procedural bureaucracy, strict technical requirements and the lack of clear feedback from the European institutions have limited the effectiveness of this mechanism.

Secondly, traditional citizen participation no longer corresponds to modern forms of civic engagement, based on digital communication, social networks and online activism. Citizens, especially young people, prefer fast, interactive and visible forms of participation, such as digital petitions, thematic campaigns or online deliberative platforms, instead of bureaucratic mechanisms, perceived as distant and difficult to access. Thirdly, the current geopolitical and informational context marked by disinformation, polarization and multiple crises (health, economic, climate), has eroded citizens' trust in European institutions. This decline in trust reduces the motivation to participate and accentuates the feeling of "democratic distance" between citizens and decision-makers.

Thus, European strategies regarding citizen participation must be reconfigured, in order to move from consultative to collaborative and co-creative participation. This involves: the introduction of interactive digital tools, based on transparency and immediate feedback; the integration of public consultation results into real legislative processes; systematic European civic education, which strengthens participatory skills; the development of permanent deliberative platforms, such as the European Citizens Panels, experimented with at the Conference on the Future of Europe. Only by adapting participatory mechanisms to current social and technological realities can the European Union achieve the goal of a genuine participatory democracy, capable of reflecting the diversity and real will of its citizens.

The objective of our chapter is to analyse the strategies adopted at European and national level to stimulate citizens' participation in the decision-making process, to identify the main trends and challenges and to formulate recommendations for strengthening civic involvement. The central question is: How can European and national strategies stimulate the real involvement of citizens in the EU decision-making process?

The methodology is one of documentary synthesis: relevant institutional norms, European strategies, current research on civic participation and digital trends are analysed. The limits of the work are related to the absence of an empirical study of its own, being focused on specialized literature and official documents.

The Conceptual Framework of Citizen Participation in European Decision-Making

Participatory Democracy and Active European Citizenship

The terms "participatory democracy" and "active European citizenship" reflect the idea that citizens should not only be represented, but also effectively participate in the decision-making process. Civic participation involves not only voting, but also consultation, deliberation and involvement in the formulation of public policies. Active citizenship refers to the deliberate and continuous involvement of individuals in public life, going beyond occasional voting, so that citizens contribute to the formulation, monitoring and evaluation of public policies and to the life of their communities (e.g. civic volunteering, protests, participation in organizations, transnational initiatives) [30].

A useful framework for understanding active citizenship is proposed by Hoskins et al. (2009), which measures it along four interconnected dimensions: (1) participation in representative democracy (e.g. voting, contact with representatives), (2) participation in community life (volunteering, local activism), (3) protest and social change (collective actions, mobilizations), and (4) democratic values (tolerance, trust in rights). This approach shows that active citizenship is not a single behaviour, but a set of measurable practices and attitudes.

European comparative studies show that patterns of engagement vary: some citizens are "active" through volunteering and community projects; others are "active online" or act through protest and thematic mobilization. Recent research on European youth identifies different patterns (fighter, activist, volunteer, backer, online, indifferent), suggesting that different strategies are needed to stimulate participation among diverse groups [10].

The concept of active citizenship has been criticized or nuanced from several perspectives: some authors warn that the idealization of "activity" can mask social inequalities; not all citizens have the resources (time, skills, digital access) to participate equally; consequently, policies that only promote "participation" can reproduce inequalities [1].

There is also a debate about the transformation of the concept into neoliberal rhetoric (where social responsibility is transferred to the citizen, rather than addressing structural causes). This observation frequently appears in the educational literature and criticism of civic "activation" policies [1].

In the European context, active citizenship acquires not only a national or local dimension, but also a transnational one (e.g. citizens' initiatives, participatory platforms, citizens' panels). European measures to stimulate participation must recognize the plurality of forms of engagement and provide infrastructure (civic education, digital access, institutional feedback) to transform engagement into real influence.

The Principle of Participation in the EU Treaties

The treaties on which the EU is based give citizens' participation an institutional dimension. For example, the Treaty of Lisbon states that the Union "shall be based on democratic representation and, in addition, on the direct participation of citizens" (Article 10 TEU). In line with this logic, mechanisms such as the right of petition, access to documents and the European Citizens' Initiative (ECI) have been introduced.

Citizens' participation in the democratic life of the European Union is a fundamental constitutional principle, enshrined in the founding treaties of the Union and gradually strengthened in recent decades. This participatory dimension is based on the recognition that the legitimacy of European decisions depends on the direct and informed involvement of citizens in the process of drawing up public policies.

The first document to explicitly introduce the principle of citizen participation was the Maastricht Treaty (1992), by establishing citizenship of the European Union (Article 8, later Article 20 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union – TFEU). It grants citizens additional political and civic rights at European level, such as the right to vote and to stand as a candidate in elections to the European Parliament or in local elections in the Member State of residence.

With the Treaty of Amsterdam (1997) and the Treaty of Nice (2001), the participatory dimension was strengthened by promoting the principles of transparency and decision-making proximity, paving the way for the Treaty of Lisbon (2009), a turning point in the explicit recognition of citizen participation in EU governance.

Article 10 TEU defines the democratic framework of the Union: "The functioning of the Union shall be based on representative democracy. Citizens shall be directly represented at Union level in the European Parliament. [...] Every citizen shall have the right to participate in the democratic life of the Union. Decisions shall be taken as closely as possible to the citizen". (TEU, Art. 10, para. 1–3).

This formulation enshrines the principle of "local democracy", which implies not only indirect representation through institutions, but also the possibility of direct participation of citizens in defining policies.

Article 11 TEU details the instruments of direct democratic participation and establishes concrete obligations for the European institutions:

(1) "The institutions shall give citizens and representative associations the opportunity to make known and publicly exchange their views in all areas of Union action."

(2) "The institutions shall maintain an open, transparent and regular dialogue with representative associations and civil society."

(3) "In order to ensure the coherence and transparency of Union action, the European Commission shall carry out wide consultations with interested parties."

(4) "At least one million citizens of the Union, nationals of a significant number of Member States, may take the initiative of inviting the Commission to submit a legislative proposal [...]" (according with Treaty on European Union, consolidated version, OJ C 202/1, 7.6.2016).

This article constitutes the legal basis for the European Citizens' Initiative (ECI), introduced by Regulation (EU) No 211/2011 and subsequently updated by Regulation (EU) 2019/788, which simplifies the procedure and digitalises the collection of signatures. Through this mechanism, citizens can invite the European Commission to propose legislative acts in areas of EU competence, thus strengthening participatory democracy at transnational level [12].

Complementing the TEU, the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) establishes complementary provisions: Art. 15 TFEU guarantees the transparency of the work of the European institutions and public access to documents; Art. 20 TFEU reaffirms the political rights associated with citizenship of the Union; Art. 227 TFEU recognises the right to petition the European Parliament, as a direct instrument of communication between citizens and the institutions.

These provisions reinforce the idea that citizen participation is not just a political principle, but a concrete legal right, supported by institutional mechanisms.

In more recent documents of the European Commission, citizen participation is integrated into a broader vision of deliberative and

digital democracy. The European Democracy Action Plan (2020) and the Conference on the Future of Europe (2021–2022) mark the transition from consultative participation to collaborative engagement, through instruments such as European Citizens' Panels, experimental deliberative spaces at European level [13].

Thus, the principle of citizen participation in the treaties evolves from an abstract legal norm to a practical dimension of European governance, adapted to the digital context and the need for direct involvement of citizens in the development of public policies.

European Strategies for Strengthening Citizen Participation
European Strategic Framework

A prominent example is the European Democracy Action Plan (EDAP), launched by the European Commission on 3 December 2020, with objectives that follow to protect the integrity of elections, to promote democratic participation and combat disinformation [24]. EDAP proposes measures on the transparency of political advertising, the financing of European parties and cooperation between Member States for democratic resistance [4]. EDAP also recognises the importance of involving citizens and civil society organisations in policymaking (civic space and engagement) [15].

Also, in the area of citizen participation, a particularly important aspect is given by digitalization which can support the development of a "common European public sphere" through online civic engagement tools [22].

Good practices of citizen participation in the European Union reflect the diversity of democratic models and the capacity of Member States to adapt participatory tools to their own social and institutional realities. The comparative analysis highlights several major directions: strengthening civic dialogue, the use of digital platforms, the development of civic education and the implementation of permanent deliberative mechanisms.

Sweden – institutional partnership with civil society

The Swedish model is often considered a benchmark for participatory dialogue between the state and citizens. In Sweden, the decision-making process systematically includes public consultation (remiss procedure), through which draft laws or public policies are

submitted for analysis to organizations, institutions and citizens before adoption. This mechanism is regulated by The Swedish Administrative Procedure Act and aims at transparency and co-creation of policies. Local governments also frequently organize citizens' dialogues for urban planning, public services and local budgets [37; 29].

Germany – deliberative culture and integrated civic education

In Germany, participatory democracy is based on a mature institutional ecosystem. Public consultation mechanisms are strengthened by a dense network of civic organizations and educational foundations [5], which promote democratic skills and the critical spirit of citizens. Projects such as the Bürgerdialoge zur Zukunft Europas ("Citizens' Dialogues on the Future of Europe") organised by the Federal Foreign Office and the Bürgerforen (local deliberative forums) demonstrate an integrated approach to citizen engagement, combining deliberative participation with civic education (Federal Foreign Office, 2019; BpB Annual Report, 2021).

The Netherlands – participatory budgeting and local social innovation

The Netherlands promotes a model of "collaborative citizenship" (doe-democracy), based on the idea of active citizen involvement in local governance and urban development projects. Municipal administrations, such as those in Amsterdam and Rotterdam, implement participatory budgeting mechanisms and neighbourhood councils, in which citizens decide on the allocation of a share of local public budgets. These initiatives are complemented by open government platforms that provide transparent access to public data and consultation results. The Dutch model is often cited by the European Commission as an example of mainstreaming open governance principles [37; 16].

Ireland – mini-publics and collective deliberation

Ireland is renowned for its use of "mini-publics", randomly selected Citizens' Assemblies, which debate complex issues (e.g. constitutional reform, climate change, gender equality). The Irish model has inspired similar initiatives at European level, such as the European Citizens' Panels at the Conference on the Future of Europe. Independent evaluations show that these assemblies have contributed to increasing public trust in decision-making and reducing political polarization through deliberation based on arguments and expertise [27; 37].

France – citizens' councils and climate participation

France has recently developed the Citizens' Council for Climate [7], a relevant example of extended deliberative participation. This forum, made up of 150 citizens selected by lottery, had the mission of formulating legislative proposals to combat climate change. The results were partially integrated into the French legislation on the ecological transition (Loi Climat et Résilience, 2021), demonstrating the potential of the deliberative model for policymaking [37; 7].

The comparative analysis allows the identification of common features of successful models, particularly procedural transparency and clear communication on the impact of consultations on decisions; institutional feedback provided to participants, to maintain civic trust and motivation; participatory digitalisation (open online platforms, e-consultations, open data); permanent civic infrastructure (democratic education centres, NGO networks, public forums); integration of young people and vulnerable groups in decision-making processes.

Therefore, European good practices show that effective citizen participation requires a combination of political will, digital infrastructure, civic education and institutionalised deliberative mechanisms.

Non-governmental organisations and civil society networks play a key role in mediating between citizens and institutions, informing the public and mobilising for participation. For example, documents such as "Enhancing Citizen Participation in the EU" highlight that the decline in trust in institutions and the rise of populist parties make European civic participation more important than ever [22].

Particularities and Challenges for Romania

In Romania, citizen participation in European decisions remains limited due to the low level of public information, the distraction of attention to national issues, the weak representativeness of European mechanisms and socio-economic barriers. For example, the Real Instituto Elcano analysis highlights that EU participatory instruments "remain underused by the average European citizen"[2].

Citizen participation in Romania has experienced significant evolution since joining the European Union in 2007, being shaped by the processes of Europeanization, democratic consolidation and digitalization of public administration. However, civic involvement often remains fragmented and dependent on non-governmental initiatives or

socio-political circumstances. The foundations of citizen participation in Romania are enshrined in the Romanian Constitution (art. 2 and art. 30), which guarantees national sovereignty exercised by the people, as well as the right to free expression. These principles are developed through a series of specific normative acts, including Law no. 52/2003 on decision-making transparency in public administration, which establishes the obligation of authorities to consult citizens and legally constituted organizations in the process of drafting normative acts, Law no. 544/2001 on free access to information of public interest, which guarantees access to data and documents held by public institutions and National Strategy for Open Governance in Romania (2025–2030), which includes objectives related to digital governance and electronic participation (e-participation).

These instruments provide a formal framework for civic involvement, but, according to a report by the European Commission (2023), their application "often remains formal, without clear feedback mechanisms and without an administrative culture oriented towards dialogue" [14].

At the institutional level, public participation is facilitated through several mechanisms, like public consultations organized by ministries and local authorities, published on the *transparenta.gov.ro* platform, advisory councils attached to public institutions (e.g. the Economic and Social Council, the Youth Council, local civic councils), electronic platforms for legislative or budgetary proposals, such as *particip.gov.ro* and *bugetareparticipativa.ro*.

These initiatives contribute to increasing transparency, but effective citizen participation remains low. An OECD report [37] shows that Romania ranks below the EU average in the "inclusiveness of public consultations" indicator, although progress in the digitalization of the decision-making process is evident [37].

In the last decade, Romanian civil society has developed numerous voluntary and civic participation initiatives, which have contributed to raising public awareness, like advocacy campaigns for transparency and integrity, carried out by organizations such as Funky Citizens, ActiveWatch, Expert Forum (EFOR) or Freedom House Romania, spontaneous civic movements, such as the protests of 2012, 2017 or 2023, which expressed opposition to corruption and consolidated a new cul-

ture of public accountability, local participatory budgeting initiatives, launched in cities such as Cluj-Napoca, Braşov or Alba Iulia, which allow citizens to decide on a part of the local budget [16].

These examples demonstrate that civic participation in Romania extends beyond formal mechanisms, manifesting itself through a bottom-up dynamic and through the intense use of social networks as mobilization tools.

Although the regulatory framework is solid, there are several obstacles that limit the effectiveness of citizen participation. Among them, we mention the lack of a participatory administrative culture, in which public consultation is often perceived as a formality, the low level of civic literacy, especially among young people and rural areas, digital inequalities, which restrict access to e-participation platforms, the absence of institutional feedback, which leads to demotivation of citizens [39]. Thus, active participation is rather circumstantial and dependent on events with a strong emotional impact, rather than on a constant and predictable participatory mechanism. In recent years, Romania has begun to adopt measures to modernize public participation, in line with European standards. In this regard, the implementation of the unified digital public consultation platform, the development of a national framework for youth participation (National Youth Strategy 2023–2027), active involvement in the EUROPE DIRECT and Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV) programmes can be mentioned.

Looking ahead, strengthening citizen participation requires not only legal instruments, but also changes in mentality in the administration, investments in civic education and transparency in the decision-making process. As a recent report by the European Economic and Social Committee states, "genuine citizen participation is an indicator of democratic maturity, not just a procedural exercise" [20, p. 7].

Current Trends and Challenges of Citizen Participation in the European Decision-Making Process

Digitalization of Participation

The digital transformation of European public administration has generated the premises of a new paradigm of citizen participation, in which the virtual space becomes a fundamental tool for dialogue, con-

sultation and co-creation of public policies. Within the European Strategy for a Digital Society [12], digital participation (e-participation) is considered a pillar of open governance, along with transparency and free access to information.

The digitalization of participation is not limited to the use of technology for administrative purposes but aims to reshape the relationship between the state and the citizen, by stimulating direct involvement in the decision-making process, facilitating online debates and creating a connected democratic community at European level.

Digital tools democratize access to the decision-making process. Online consultation platforms, such as "Have Your Say" (European Commission) or "Particip.gov.ro" (Romania), allow citizens to formulate opinions, contribute to the evaluation of policies and monitor public decisions.

According to the OECD Digital Government Index report (2023), Member States that have developed integrated e-participation platforms have recorded a 30–40% increase in citizen involvement in public consultations.

Digitalization facilitates the traceability of decision-making processes and access to open data. Platforms such as the Open Data Portal or the EU Data Strategy Hub allow for real-time monitoring of institutional decisions. Thus, technology contributes to strengthening institutional accountability, reducing the risk of non-transparent decisions. A relevant example is the "Digital Democracy Network" initiative launched by the Council of Europe (2022), which promotes the use of technology for responsible and ethical public deliberation.

Digital tools also enable deliberative participation through innovative methods, such as interactive surveys, online participatory budgeting, digital deliberation forums or European Citizens' Panels in hybrid format. They foster a collaborative democracy, based on the co-production of public policies (co-design), expanding the sphere of influence of citizens on decisions. For example, during the Conference on the Future of Europe (2021–2022), over 50,000 citizens participated digitally in debates and proposals through the futureu.europa.eu platform [13].

Risks and Challenges of Digitalizing Participation

Although digital platforms promise inclusion, in practice, inequalities in access to technology (known as *the digital divide*) can amplify social exclusion. Elderly people, residents of rural areas or vulnerable groups participate significantly less in online consultations. In Romania, only 32% of citizens interacted online with public institutions in 2023, compared to the EU average of 70% [26]. These disparities affect democratic representativeness and can create an imbalance between active and marginalized voices in the digital space.

Online participation sometimes risks becoming superficial, limited to signing petitions or expressing brief opinions, without a deep understanding of the issues. The phenomenon of clicktivism or slacktivism transforms civic involvement into a symbolic gesture, with no real effect on public policies [33]. This tendency reduces the quality of deliberation and can lead to a form of passive participation, uncorrelated with concrete change in decisions.

The digital space facilitates the rapid circulation of information, but also the spread of disinformation and polarizing discourse, which can undermine trust in public institutions. According to a study by the European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO, 2022), 46% of European citizens have encountered false information related to EU political decisions. This reality requires the development of digital skills and media literacy, as well as ethical mechanisms for moderating and verifying information in the virtual public space.

Even when citizens participate digitally, the lack of clear feedback from institutions reduces trust and motivation. The European Court of Auditors report (2021) highlighted that only 37% of European online consultations include a public response on how citizens' opinions have been integrated into decisions.

For the digitalization of participation to reach its democratic potential, a balanced strategy between innovation and accountability is needed. Key elements identified in the literature and EU documents include digital and civic education, to increase skills in critical use of platforms, institutional interoperability, to integrate e-participation systems at local, national and European levels, transparent feedback mechanisms, to validate citizen engagement and data protection, and digital ethics, to guarantee trust in the online participatory space. As

the OECD (2020) points out, "digital participation must be designed not only for efficiency, but for inclusion, trust and democratic legitimacy" [37, p. 12].

Conclusions and Directions for Action

Citizen participation in European decision-making is both a democratic necessity and an institutional challenge. Strategies such as EDAP or civic education programmes provide a solid framework, but implementation must take into account digital trends, citizen diversity and structural barriers.

Recommendations for consolidation can be summarized as follows:

a) promoting European civic education from school and through public campaigns.

b) increasing institutional transparency and facilitating access to the decision-making process (documents, consultations, feedback on what has been done with suggestions).

c) using inclusive digital participation platforms, with attention to equal access and data security.

d) actively involving civil society and partnering with European institutions to mobilize citizens, especially young people and marginalized groups.

e) monitoring and evaluating participation strategies, with clear performance indicators to measure effects over time.

Ultimately, citizen participation cannot be just a formal objective, it must become an integral part of the EU decision-making process, to ensure legitimacy, efficiency and democratic cohesion.

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