

## CITIZENS' INVOLVEMENT IN PUBLIC DECISIONS: BETWEEN NORMATIVE FRAMEWORK AND ACTUAL FINDINGS (II – RESEARCH RESULTS)

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**Abstract:** *Local communities' needs must be addressed by an effective, loyal and transparent action of local institutions in the direction of ensuring participation of the citizens in undertaking decisions concerning that particular community. It is therefore necessary a good communication with the citizens of the local public institutions, and a proper and adequate information of citizens. After presenting in our previous research the main theoretical contributions in the theory of participatory democracy in local governance institutions, but also some practical considerations, including results and restrictions concerning how they are actually implemented in the Romanian public institutions, this paper focuses on presenting and analysing the results of our own researches. We present the results of the research carried out during 2014 on investigation relevant concerning the public governance in local administration, and particularly in this paper how local administration facilitates the involvement of citizens in decision-making process and their participation in debating the main community issues.*

**Keywords:** local governance; citizens' participation; transparency; decision-making; own research

**JEL classification:** H41; L33.

### 1. Introduction

As required by a democratic society and an effective local public administration, local institutions must address local communities' needs in a transparent and open way, by involving citizens in public decisions. To ensure these elements and to enforce the principle of citizens' participation in the local governance, local public institutions must proceed from the proper and prompt information of citizens regarding the community's issues. This paper is based on the results of a research carried out by us during 2014, with the overall objective to identify issues relevant to public governance in local administration, in terms of understanding and applying modern management principles, reform and changes required in the management of these institutions and in relation to the criteria and requirements of a modern administration, efficient and honest in relation to final beneficiaries - local communities and society as a whole. Within the specific objectives, we try to understand how local administration facilitates the involvement of citizens in decision-making and participation in debating the main problems of the community, the sufficiency, variety and effectiveness of the actions taken in this respect, the extent to which these concerns affect good local governance.

### 2. Research methodology

For setting the sample it was used a sampling technique in two phases. In the first phase there were inventoried all local government institutions (municipalities, cities, municipalities, county councils and metropolitan areas) in two counties in Northwest Region of Romania (Bihor and Salaj), choice based in particular on the availability of respondents in these two counties to answer to the questionnaires sent to them.

The questionnaire was administered from February to May 2014. In the first phase, respondents were explained the purpose and methodology of the research and how to complete the questionnaires, there were made available the printed questionnaires and

subsequently there were collected in their original form (on paper). In the next phase, their content was compiled into a database in electronic form, from which we extract the key information that will be used in this paper.

We had received a number of 49 questionnaires completed by people in local government management in 38 municipalities, as follows: 37 maires, 6 secretaries of maire, 4 economic directors / chief accountants and 2 managers of Budget and local taxes compartments. As geographical area, the municipalities are situated in the North-West Region of Romania, namely 24 towns in Bihor County (i.e. 4 towns and 20 villages) and respectively, 14 municipalities in Salaj (i.e. 2 towns and 12 villages). They represent 23.17% of the total population. The estimated error in the reference population is of 1%.

Concerning the type of municipality (urban / rural) and their size, most of the settlements are part of the municipalities (32 villages), followed by 5 towns and small cities (under 30,000 inhabitants) and a city / county seat with about 200,000 inhabitants.

The applied questionnaire consists of two parts. The first part (i.e. a structured interview) comprises of 7 questions referring to the identification, type, size and specific traits of the surveyed public institutions, respectively, a number of 6 questions with given answers referring to the services, infrastructure allocated and possibly introducing new, on line supported, services. The second part of the interview (i.e. the semi-structured interview) comprises of 25 questions, open questions and with alternative responses grouped under some guiding ideas - principles governing the professional conduct of civil servants (16 questions), public management reform and understanding change (5 questions) and finally 2 questions referring to personal options of the respondents on their own career in public administration. Although the questionnaire combines closed questions (Yes / No type), with the default multiple choice type, and open questions, it gives considerable freedom to respondents as to submit personal details and options, outspoken on the relevant issues on discussion.

### **3. Results and discussion**

In this paper we focus on the results of the research concerning the principle of participation of citizens in making and implementing decisions, one of the six principles mentioned in literature, i.e. the principle of equality and inclusion (no discrimination), the transparency principle (clear and precise rules making and implementing decisions), the principle of the prompt response to citizens, the principle of the orientation towards consensus, the principle of effectiveness and efficiency orientation and spending of the public resources.

Returning to our research, we notice that citizens' participation in the decision-making process is, at least from the perspective of local institutions' managers, considered positive, i.e. qualified as positive „in a large extent” or „completely positive” by more than 60% of the respondents. „Neutral” or „satisfactory” is the opinion of 11 respondents (i.e. 22% of total) and 8 respondents (i.e. 16% of the total) have a reserved opinion (little) on such participation.

For a better understanding of that assessment we must, however, consider how, with what means and actions it is facilitated this involvement, and, above all, which is their frequency and the importance assigned to it by local representatives.

Being both about to promote and to make public the actions of the public administration, to remind the rights and obligations as members of the community while ensuring their involvement in the debate community problems, it is normal to witness a large number of modes of action and at the same time, simultaneous and combined use of several ways to achieve these goals. The question "By which forms of communication do you ensure citizens' access to knowledge and debating community problems?" with 6 response options suggested, giving to respondents the opportunity to add other actions that they

have used during such activities and also can choose several answers if they properly describe the actions taken (Table no. 1).

**Table 1.** Distribution of responses / choices on forms of communication used to ensure citizens' access to knowledge and debating community's issues

By which forms of communication do you ensure citizens' access to knowledge and debating community's issues?	Number of choices
Direct communication, face to face (meetings, workshops, public debates etc.)	44
By sending e-mails	10
By calling	19
Distribution of information materials by post mail	19
Advertisements in print media	25
Notices panels and boards	48
Others (list them):	8
- Distribution of materials by the employees on street	3
- Web page,	3
- Informal meetings,	1
- TV broadcasting	1

Source: responses to questionnaires

As a result, to the 6 proposed variants there were added 4 more, which, even if repeat to some extent previous options, can catch, in a positive perspective, both authorities' interest to ensure both the contact and involvement of citizens in community issues, and highlighting of their own initiatives. Concerning the general considerations on the answers got to this question, we notice a large number of responses (i.e. 173 options), which is the largest participation in the responses so far. At first glance we see that dominating are the boards informing method (i.e. 48 options), followed by direct face to face communication (meetings, workshops, community debates etc.) with 44 options. At a considerable distance (25 options) there are advertisements in print media and then, on par in terms of the number of options (i.e. 19 options each), there are find telephonic approach and respectively, distribution of information materials by regular mail. All other variants accumulate a smaller number of options.

Although the analysis of the responses can generate criticism among specialists in public communication / public relations regarding amateurism and lack of coordination of actions, inefficient or even mismatching etc., our opinion is that the involvement of local representatives in providing information and as far as possible, and in involving citizens in community issues is real and significant. Obviously there is not an optimum situation, but it is a good start to develop the relations between public authority and citizens, and to enhance the means to obtain maximum involvement given the limited resources (human, materials, time) available to local government institutions. In this regard, of the relation between undertaken actions and effective involvement can be understood the moderately optimistic answer to the previous question. It is possible that the public effects of personal and institutional efforts to be below the expectations of local representatives, and hence improving the quality (not necessarily quantitative) of these actions should be the next step of this process.

In a deeper analysis of this situation, we tried to capture the diversity of the actions undertaken by each institution by the number of actions used in informing and attracting the participation of citizens in the debating and solving community' problems.

The largest group are the 16 representatives (i.e. 32% of the total) declaring that they used four different actions, followed by the group of 10 representatives (i.e. 20% of the total) who declare they used 5 actions. Together, the two groups exceed half of the total number of respondents. They are followed by 9 respondents (i.e. 18% of the total) who admit the

use of 2 actions, 4 respondents (i.e. 8% of total) with 2 actions, 7 respondents (i.e. 14%) with one action, and 3 respondents (i.e. 6%) admitting they have used more than 5 different actions.

We note that almost two thirds of respondents had considered between 3 and 5 actions, which should ensure both adequate information to citizens, institutional obligations in this respect, but also to generate prerequisites for active involvement of citizens in debating and problem solving of the community's problems.

The many forms of communication which are mentioned – i.e. direct communication through meetings, roundtables, public debates, sending e-mails, phone contact, distribution of information materials by mail, print ads, information panels and boards, distributing materials by the employees and press announcements posted on the website of the institution, informal meetings and participating in TV-broadcasts and transmissions prints induce the variety of rhythms and procedures in which they operate. Sending emails ensures standardization and delivery of a message to a large number of people, but just the lack of customization reduces the chances of an immediate reaction. At the same time, round tables and public debates require prior training, have a lower frequency, their progress and conclusions are unpredictable, but they allow taking the pulse of the community (through its delegates) directly, unmediated. Typically, short messages and the ease of transmission / exposure of the institution (e.g. email messages, information on bulletin boards, or delivered by regular mail) generate a relatively low impact and little enthusiasm from the public, while others, which are more expensive – e.g. TV shows, public debates or interactive features of the electronic / virtual environment have a wider range of effects, are more modern and, in many cases allow measuring citizens' interest. For this reason, our research tried to capture the way and the frequency of using these communication means, and on this basis outlining the effectiveness of those actions (Table no. 2).

**Table 2.** The distribution of the frequencies of using communication means to ensure citizens' access to knowledge and discussion of community issues

Indicate, for each communication mean, the frequency of its use	At least monthly	Once at 1-3 months	Once at 3-6 months	Semi-annual or annual	Less than annual	Not at all
Direct face to face communication (meetings, workshops, debates etc.)	15	10	9	12	3	0
Sending emails	7	6	1	3	27	5
Phone contact	19	1	0	1	25	3
Sending informative materials by regular mail	5	1	6	7	22	8
Announces in print press	10	5	6	7	20	1
Information on boards	29	9	6	2	1	1
Others (indicate which):	5	2	1	0	0	0
Distributing materials by employees, on street, web pages,	3	0	0			
informal meetings,	2	1	0			
TV broadcastings	0	1	0			
	0	0	1			

Source: responses to questionnaires

Direct face to face communication, through round tables, public debates etc., was achieved monthly or even more often by 15 respondents (i.e. 30% of the total), quarterly / every 1 to 3 months by 10 respondents (i.e. 20%) and every 3-6 months by nine respondents (i.e. 18%). We note that such a type of communication, not very easy to

achieve, time and resources consumer, has an increased frequency among respondents' declared options. A quarterly frequency appears quite high, especially among small towns, where the need for such meetings (the formal, prepared meetings, not those spontaneous or occasional) has not the same meaning and does not reflect an accelerated pace of change as in the case of major cities. We can explain this high frequency, perhaps, by the propensity of respondents to include in this category the majority group meetings organized with the citizens within the institution or by regular activities "on the ground". Another explanation for the case of large towns, where more managers of the institution were interviewed is that it should also refer to professional meetings, conducted over a period of time (month, quarter, year) by each direction or compartment of the institution which are thus combined with regular meetings, organised the by elected representatives of the institution.

The second form mentioned, sending e-mails, is not a preferred mean of communication by local institutions. Only seven respondents (14% of total) declare that they use (for communication with citizens) monthly or more often, six representatives (12%) do it every 1-3 months, and one (representing 2% of total) makes every 3-6 months. 6 respondents use e-mail every six months or annually, and most of the 27 respondents stated that they did rarely less than annually. The first three categories cumulate less than a third (28% of total) of the number of representatives, and those who basically did not exceed 55% of the total! We say that basically they did not use emails sending The transmission of messages to citizens via e-mail less frequently than once a year is equivalent virtually with no use of this tool for communication! Of course, now we can not draw the conclusion that these representatives do not communicate with citizens, but simply they do not like this way of communication.

A third form mentioned, i.e. telephone communication, has clearly biased results. First, we mention a number of 19 respondents (i.e. 38% of the total) who use phone calls monthly or more often, one respondent uses them every 1-3 months, and also one uses the phone on a semestrial basis or less. On the other side, a number of 25 respondents (i.e. 51% of the total) use the phone less frequently than annually, and three respondents declared that they have no used phone calls a means of communication with citizens. Such polarization of using this method is not easy to explain, especially given the widespread telephony, ease of use and speed make phone communication mid favorite of most people. It can be, in institutional terms, the difficulty of standardizing messages for communication and reduced control of networking between employee and citizen that can easily turn into conversations or debates ineffective and the impossibility of following their effectiveness. Finally, there may be fear of high costs (although today there are many alternatives that can reduce these costs) or lack of control in terms of time spent and the nature of the messages sent, especially if this method is used systematically on term.

The following means of communication mentioned, the distribution of information materials by post is part of fewer adhesions, the majority of respondents, 28 in number (ie 57% of the total) saying they use this method less frequently than annually (22 of them) or not at all (6 respondents). Otherwise, it is widely used - monthly or more often - 5 respondents (ie 10%) every 1-3 months by a respondent, every 3-6 months by six respondents, respectively, half or less than 7 respondents. As mentioned, the method is quite expensive (cost of printing, the distribution), carries a high risk of obsolescence of the information before it reaches the addressee and have fewer opportunities for verification the message reception and evaluation of public involvement. However, it is used because it allows focusing on certain messages and campaigns, achievements and projects of community and representatives.

In print advertisements seem to enjoy a greater trust: 10 respondents (20%) declaring they have used this method monthly or more often, 5 respondents (10% of total) uses every 1-3 months, and 6 of them (12% of total) - every 3-6 months. These first three categories cumulates 21 responses (ie 42% of the total), a significant percentage. Beyond the pros



and cons, we consider print ads significant, with better impact compared with information materials distributed by mail or on the streets.

Informative communication through panels and boards is significantly frequent, 29 of the respondents (ie 59% of the total) declaring that they use method used monthly and more frequently. Further, we find that 9 respondents (18% of total) uses every 1-3 months, and 6 of them do it every 3-6 months. Overall, these three categories totaling 44 responses, ie 89% of the total. The explanation for this exceptional adherence to traditional means (we might say archaic compared to modern means of communication in the electronic world) consists only to a small extent in the absence of modernization of the state administration, or excessive prudence of local representatives to transparency and ubiquity posts virtual world. The explanation resides also in the ease of the procedure - printing and displaying an advertisement on the notice board located inside the institution or at the entrance are obviously easier than writing, sending and tracking of advertisements in the press, convening and moderating discussions at public meetings or making hundreds of phone calls. The explanation, much simpler, consists in the legal obligation of the administrative units bodies to make public the decisions, communications or announces at least by displaying them at the institution: e.g. sales announcements for agricultural land, foreclosures, minutes of City Council meetings, draft of local budget and annual accounts, decisions of the deliberative bodies, dates and agenda of public meetings etc. Finally, the number of 44 respondents (out of a total of 49) tells us not only that this method is preferred and not that it is better or more efficient than others, or that it has a better impact in ensuring citizens' involvement in community issues.

#### **4. Conclusions and recommendations**

The increasing quality of public services is the decision shows the effective functioning of the mechanism. Information, consultation on matters of local interest should not be confined to a small group of people with the same characteristics. The sample population should be characterized by diversity both in terms of age groups and in terms of social class, thus ensuring a high degree of coverage of the different needs of local community members. In the context of globalization, and strong growth needs considered essential members of society de-politicization of decision making, minimizing the influence of management structures and practices an increase active participation of citizens in decision-making interest.

We noticed that literature and, especially, research reports and conclusions made by various national and international organizations, on the conditions and the effectiveness of the application of this principle in Romania presents a rather contradictory picture. On the one hand specialists reveal a rather worrying phenomenon within the population, that shows little interest in matters involving political and administrative decisions. The deficiencies in information, the reduced flexibility of the system and the interactions with government, suspicions of group interests etc. make citizens participation in the decision-making process to be rather consultative than deliberative. On the other hand, in the last decade we have witnessed important progress in facilitating the access of citizens to debate key issues of the community, but also differences in the perceptions of local government in terms of intensity and added value of discussions with various social partners. In our research we found that citizens participation in the decision-making process is evaluated positively by local representatives, facilitated by a large number of modes of action and at the same time, simultaneous and combined use of several ways to achieve these goals.

As majority, preferences turn to traditional means, but there is availability for modern means also. The conclusion of our research is that the involvement of local representatives to provide information and, where possible, involve citizens in community issues is real and significant. There is of course not an optimal situation, but it is a good start to develop the

relations public authorities - citizens and to improve the means to obtain maximum involvement, given the limited resources available to local government institutions. We found that some of this is to be explained by other reasons than the principles of the access of citizens in decision-making, i.e. legal obligations regarding transparency, publicity of legal proceedings and documents, and the traditional character of the chosen methods is strictly fueled by these procedural obligations. Although the law enables the alternation between traditional and modern means, apparently traditional means are still preferred by local representatives.

The interest and good results in compliance with the principle of ensuring citizens access is explained by the benefits of the authorities, beyond the legal requirements and ensuring a good public image of the local representatives. Our recommendation to the authorities is to maintain and improve the institutional and organizational framework that ensures the access of citizens in decision-making process and the participation in the discussion of the main problems of the community, with a greater emphasis on their involvement in the debate of important community issues, e.g. decisions of the local council, local development plans, local draft budgets and financial statements etc., and obviously a greater emphasis on the use of modern means for information and access.

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