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CITIZENS' INVOLVEMENT IN PUBLIC DECISIONS: BETWEEN NORMATIVE FRAMEWORK AND ACTUAL FINDINGS (I – THEORETICAL OVERVIEW)

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Abstract: *Public institutions should be driven both by effectiveness and financial targets, and by ethical rules principles governing their activities. In a democratic state, all public institutions and all public decisions should function based on mechanisms applying the principles of participation, accountability, transparency, rule of law, subsidiarity and equality of opportunity and treatment. This paper focuses on emphasizing main 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.*

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

JEL classification: H41; L33

1. Introduction

A modern public administration, which is of crucial importance also for Romania, involves multiple tasks for the reform of the public sector. Moreover, local institutions must reconsider their role in addressing the needs of local governments. Within this context, principles that should govern the process of provision and consumption of local public services involve: active participation of consumers of public services in making decisions of common interest, promoting transparency in the governance of public institutions, ensuring efficiency and effectiveness of public services, promoting good common consensus and equal treatment. As seen, the principle of citizens' public participation plays an important role in ensuring both an effective and a moral process of management and governance. In this paper we are approaching the theoretical background and previous researches on this issue – in the first part, and in the second part we are presenting the results of our own researches on the topic.

2. Theoretical background

According to Surendra Munshi (2004), a good governance is characterized by a "participatory governance, operating responsibly, transparently based on principles of efficiency, legitimacy and consensus to promote individual rights of citizens and public interest to ensure the material well-being and sustainable development of

society". Other specialists consider democratic governance model is based on principles such as participation, accountability, transparency, rule of law, subsidiarity and equality of opportunity and treatment (UN, UN 2006).

Good governance of local public institutions means more than providing quality public services, means preserving life and liberty of citizens, creating space for democratic participation and social dialogue, promoting sustainable development and improving local quality of life (Mila Freire, 2007). The U.S. experience reveals a governance model for public institutions based on active participation of civil society in decision making.

Creighton (2005) considers that citizens' participation is "involvement in the sphere of public concern, the needs and values are incorporated into governmental and corporate decision making. It consists of an interactive and two-way communications and end with the adoption of better decisions accepted by the public".

In the literature it is often the concept of "citizen-centred governance" obviously based on citizen involvement in public decision-making. Citizens participation in decision making is an important step in the modernization of local public institutions, rethinking the relationship between citizens and public institutions in providing public services, combating poverty and social exclusion and promotes social cohesion. The aims pursued by involving citizens in decision-making include:

- improving public services both in form and content to their terms so as to increase citizens' satisfaction;
- Increased vertical cooperation between local providers and beneficiaries and horizontal cooperation between community members thus promoting social cohesion;
- Improving the quality grounding local decisions of general interest and also promote legitimacy, accountability and democracy in the governance of local public institutions (Foot, 2009).

Although the basic goals of the active participation of citizens would be those mentioned above, in reality citizens in decision-making often have different ideas about what governance is often generating confusion and limitations of public legitimacy of its governance. Public participation in decision-making should be constructive, promoting rapprochement between the management structures of public institutions and citizens. According to real opinions, public participation in decision-making should be a definite aspect, meaning more than mere idle observation and participation of citizens. The public is not a passive actor therefore must intervene to influence the management of "public affairs" (Arnstein, 1969).

The participation of citizens should be emphasized in the planning stage of a project forecasting of local interest. In this regard, public institutions and local governments must create early participation mechanisms (United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, 2008). The quality of citizen participation is enhanced by the knowledge and experience that are endowed persons involved in the decision justification. According to the functional approach, participation is seen as a process of obtaining all relevant knowledge to the problem considered in making and implementing decisions (CIPFA, 2004). No pattern of governance of public institutions could provide maximum protection against bankruptcy risk management process. Risk mitigation can be achieved with the inclusion of a maximum number of participants in substantiating and implementing the decisions of common interest (Renn and Schweizer, 2009) and thus avoiding corruption and

unfair practices (Badulescu, 2012). Participation in decision-making should not only stop the involvement of citizens, taking into account the recommendations of employees, auditors, representatives of the private sphere can increase the efficiency of public governance. According to Pierre and Peter employing several authors in decision making is the cornerstone of a style of governance based on promoting the company priorities, coherence, and accountability (Pierre and Peters, 2005).

3. Previous researches: a critical assessment

Arnstein (1969) classified interaction between citizens and public institutions on eight levels. The author presents the eight levels in the form of ladder, i.e.:

the lowest level is the participation style characterized by (1) the handling and care. This level is in fact non-participation, participation illusion;

the second level is characterized by (2) information and consultation at which emphasizes the possibility of involvement of the marginalized or excluded;

the next level is (3) reconciliation and advice citizens that level decision makers in the public sphere, the degree of consideration of their proposals is definitely higher than the previous level;

at the next level (4), citizens can initiate partnerships with public institutions. This facilitates active involvement in specific activities of the public sphere and public accountability;

the last level is occupied by (5) delegation of power and control level is characterized by partial or total delegation of management tasks and exercise exclusive control (Arnstein, 1969; Haruța and Radu, 2010).

Participatory democracy is a concept and a practice also increasingly used in developed countries. This is based on the direct involvement without intermediaries' citizens in solving local problems. Important role of this model of participation is to increase transparency and accountability in decision making in the public sphere (Anirban Pal, 2007). In Romania last years, experience relevant public institutions without the involvement of citizens in the decision justification interest.

Following a study of local communities in Romania has outlined the most important role in decision making of local interest is owned by the mayor and the county council. An equally important role in decision-making is played by local council, deputy mayor and council president. As long as local board members, chairman of the county mayor are elected by public vote and they perform an important role in decision making and the exercise of control we can say that there is a tendency partial consideration of options local citizens (Haruța and Radu, 2010).

Emerged from this study, the degree of direct participation of citizens in decision making Romanian local interest is low. The study found that the relationship with the local council's citizens closer relationship compared to the county council. The study also shows that the level of participation of citizens in decision-making and implementation of public institutions in cities is higher as opposed to the level of public involvement in policy.

Although Law 52/2003 on transparency in public administration underlines the importance of timely information to citizens on the substantiation of decisions so that they have the opportunity to issue recommendations regarding possible in reality things are not so.

A stage marked the history of the relationship between citizens and local institutions are profound changes that occurred after the reform of 1990. Since the 1990s, the modernization of the administrative system has become a priority for the Government of Romania. Thus modernization of public institutions dragged itself a new approach to participatory decision-making process of local interest.

Definitely cannot deny the involvement of citizens in making and implementing the decisions of local interest, emphasizing that this phenomenon of 1990, but we must recognize that its influence is a moderate one. According to Arnstein's classification, Romanian citizen participation practices can be judged to be more consultative in nature. This suggests an early practice of involving citizens in decision-making of public policy, which reinforces the need to strengthen communication, cooperation and partnership relationship between local institutions and citizens. In the interest of promoting the common good is paramount "breaking the walls" and eliminate conflicts between community members and local institutions. The role of public participation and private sector representatives is increasing the provision of public services designed to meet local interests. In the context of the rise of competitive influences in the provision of public services, information, consultation and consideration of the needs and preferences of citizens should be a priority.

What are the effects of stimulating the participation of citizens, of the community in general, in the decision-making process, beyond legal obligations, and, in a more subtle measure, beyond providing a good public image of the representatives, always necessary in the upcoming elections? What advantages (and disadvantages) were highlighted by the field research among the population or representatives of public institutions regarding the application of the principle of citizens' participation? To address this issue, we refer to the research titled "Is there public participation in Romania? Public participation in legislation and efficiency ", issued under the Resource Center for Public Participation in 2007, by presenting below an adaptation of the comparative picture realized by the authors (Preda et al., 2007) (see Table 1).

Table 1: Advantages / disadvantages of citizens' participation in undertaking and implementing decisions

Advantages of citizens' participation in taking and implementing decisions	%	Disadvantages of citizens' participation in taking and implementing decisions	%
Achieving objectives according to specific needs	26	Difficulties / delays in taking decisions	28
Better understanding / knowledge of the issues / more transparent decision-making	27	Multitude of issues / diverse perspectives	10
Ideas / suggestions / proposals / new projects / expressing citizens' opinions	9	Organisational issues	8
More effective management / more effective solutions	8	Emerging personal / group interests	6
Taking responsibility / accountability and community involvement in decision making	8	Lack of participation / involvement / interest from citizens	5

Advantages of citizens' participation in taking and implementing decisions	%	Disadvantages of citizens' participation in taking and implementing decisions	%
Identifying disadvantages of certain decisions	5	There are no disadvantages	19
Better communication / harmony	5	Others	24
Others	12		

Source: Preda, Oana; Olteanu, Sînziana; Presadă, Florina, *Există participare publică în România? Participarea publică între legislație și eficiență*, Centrul de resurse pentru participare publică, 2007

The interpretation of these figures does not generate major changes from the existing expectations. Obviously, following legal obligations and the philosophy of ownership in the community, it was expected that they will dominate the advantages: the objectives, understanding the problems and ensure a more transparent decision-making and finding as many ideas, projects, alternatives etc. As disadvantages, authorities are obviously concerned that involving citizens in knowledge, debate and participation in decision-making would lead to lengthening the period of decision making, practical difficulties regarding the way they will organize these debates and consultations, the difficulty of collecting proposals from the community but also the fear of "the emergence of personal / group interests". Notice the somewhat curious position, according to which "greater diversity of perspectives" appears as a disadvantage rather than an advantage (probably related to delay in decision making). Equally confusing (but understandable if we consider the "filter" retrospective analysis of these actions) is "lack of participation, involvement, interest of citizens" which should not appear as an obvious disadvantage, but rather as a consequence or subsequent disappointment implementation of the principle, but conformist or disinterested answer "no disadvantage".

Before proceeding to analyze our research questions related to this principle, we bring to attention a series of statistical data provided by the World Bank reports, present on the AGI Portal (Actionable Governance Indicator), respectively, the results of research conducted by Oana Preda, Sînziana Olteanu, Florina Presadă, cited above.

Referring to World Bank data, we considered selection and processing of data relating to Romania (and the comparison with the average member "Europe and Central Asia" and "above average income countries") presented in Figure 1. In this case, we chose a series of three indicators related to the sub-chapter "Control and balances", namely: (1) "Civil society participation in the political process" (2) "Political Participation", respectively (3) "Control of conflict of interest" (see Fig. 1).

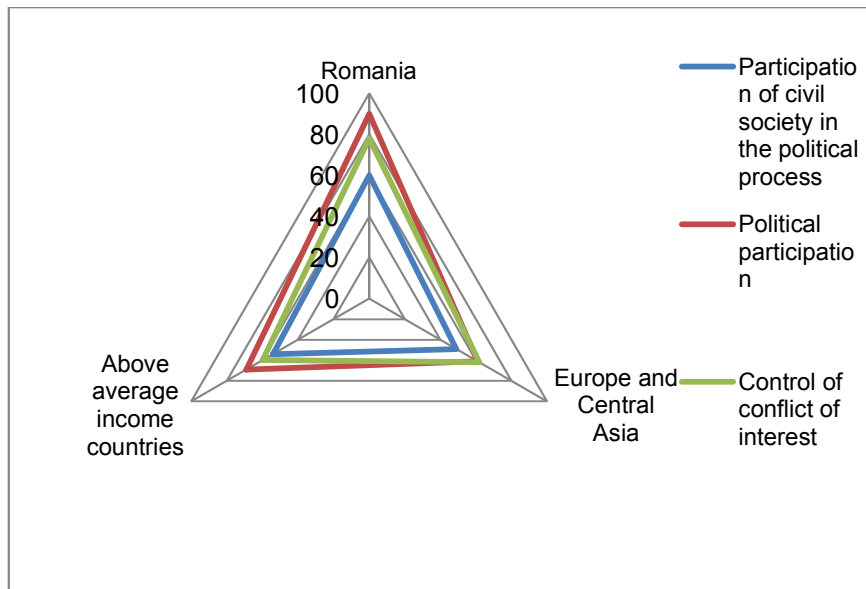


Figure 1: Control and balances

Obs. * 0=minimum, 100= maximum

Sursa: Own adaptation from AGI DATA PORTAL Romania: Governance at a Glance,

https://www.agidata.org/site/Report.aspx?report=IDA_REPORT&country=168

We note that, for all three selected indicators, Romania achieve higher scores both than the average of countries in Europe and Central Asia, and countries with above average income. If the indicator (1) "Civil society participation in the political process", which is the closest to the purpose of our analysis, Romania gets a score of 60 points out of 100 (where 0 = lowest, 100 = highest) compared with 49 points obtained by group of countries in Europe and Central Asia, and, respectively, 54 points obtained by the group "above average income countries". Under these circumstances, and with the possibilities offered by comparison, we have reasons to believe that the principle of citizens' participation in making and implementing decisions is on the right path in public administration in Romania.

Referring to the research conducted by Preda et al (2007), they found (see Figure 2) that local authorities have noticed an increase in the level of public access to decision-making process (note, not necessarily actual involvement or participation in decision making), followed by mass media and associations / NGOs (Preda et al., 2007).

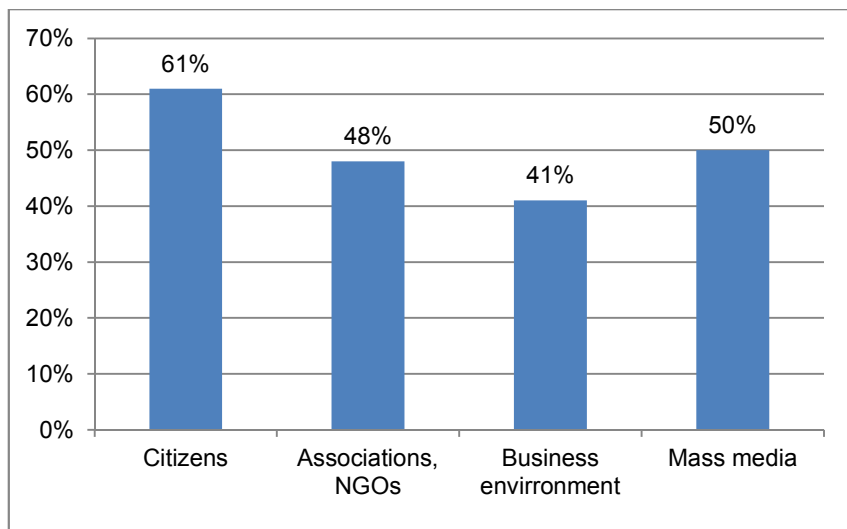


Figure 2: Evaluation of the degree of access of... to the decision taking process within public administration

Obs. After implementation of Law 52/2003

Source: Preda, Oana; Olteanu, Sînziana; Presadă, Florina, *Există participare publică în România? Participarea publică între legislație și eficiență*, Centrul de resurse pentru participare publică, 2007, p.34

All these authorities consider that not all partners in the discussion, all segments of civil society are equally useful and important within the consultations related to decision-making process, the most popular collaborations being the collaboration with business environment, NGOs and ethnic groups, and in a smaller extent with the unions and the media (Preda et al., 2007, p. 40).

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