

# CITIZEN PARTICIPATION IN THE DECISION MAKING PROCESS AT LOCAL AND COUNTY LEVELS IN THE ROMANIAN PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS\*

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## Abstract

The article examines the aspects related to citizens' involvement in the decision-making process at local and county levels in Romania from the point of view of the top level civil servants and public officials. The research interest for this issue is part of a larger research effort aiming at determining the main patterns of decision-making process in the Romanian public institutions, including the characteristics of the interactive decision-making models. Our paper seeks to find out who are the policy actors that participate in different stages of the decision making process, the level of their involvement and the degree of citizens' involvement in public decisions making. The research was conducted on a representative sample at the national level and the sample included top level civil servants and public officials working in county councils and local councils from county seats, municipalities, cities and communes. The response rate was approximately 30% and it is based on 381 questionnaires filled in and sent back by the respondents. The novelty of the research lies in the fact that only local public institutions were analyzed and that we focused exclusively on the public officials' and top level civil servants' perception about citizen participation. The research shows a low level of citizens' involvement in the decision-making process, even though public institutions from local and county level provide them with the necessary means for participation. However, when the citizens submit suggestions in the policy formulation stage, their suggestions are taken into consideration by the public officials. The research provides us with enough evidences to characterize the public participation in Romania at local and county level as a form of consultation according to the Arnstein's ladder of participation. Even if citizens have a chance to be heard, the political elected officials hold the control over the decision-making process.

## 1. Introduction

Undoubtedly, few voices will rise against the idea that stands for the importance of public participation in a real democracy. During the last decades, certain aspects related to the participation, empowerment and involvement of the citizens in the policy or decision making process have raised fierce and heated debate. This issue is even more stringent when we place it in the political, economic and social contexts of a young democratic state such as Romania that has a very limited experience in civic engagement in the public sphere during the communist regime.

We will begin by stating that up until recently the most common and largely accepted form of public participation in Romania was voting (the referendum is another classic instrument of public participation placed along voting). The capacity of the citizens to elect public officials and to mandate them the right to represent the *vox populi* comes hand in hand with other basic democratic principles, of extreme importance for a “sound” and effective government, such as accountability and transparency (Dragoş and Neamţu, 2009; Haruţa, Radu and Radu, 2009; Haruţa and Radu, 2010). Nonetheless, voting is not the only form of public participation: public debates, public meetings, citizens juries, citizens polls, written notices, comments and suggestions, mailings etc. do not even manage to exhaust the list of all possible instruments either citizens or officials can use in order to enhance the public participation dimension of the policy making process (Koontz, 1999; Golden, 1998; Edelenbos and Klijn, 2005; Fishkin, 2009). Public participation brings the government closer to the people. It enables citizens to set policy goals and priorities, oversee the actions of the politicians and administrators and hold them accountable for their actions, express points of view, share information and point to their needs and problems, get involved in the decision-making process and many others.

Notwithstanding the idealistic allure of those advocating for the deliberative democracy<sup>1</sup>, the participatory approach towards public policy can indeed foster the shift from government to governance. Governance implies a whole array of actors that are involved in the making and implementation of the public policy. Inasmuch, governance refers to new emerging institutional entities that have been transformed from established forms of government or that have evolved independently of the state, including different models of governing and coordination where public and private

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1 Fishkin (2009) differentiates between three democratic values: deliberation, political equality and participation. By deliberation the author means the process by which individuals sincerely weigh the merits of competing arguments in discussions together. Therefore, “democratic deliberation is about questions of collective political will – about what should be done.” (p. 34). For the sake of the theoretical elaboration on this topic, we could mention as well Baccaro’s and Papadakis’s (2008) work. The two authors advance the theory of a deliberative public administration. Their theory emerges “by advocating the devolution of as many decision-making prerogatives as possible from centralized public bureaucracies to policy-making fora in which citizens participate either directly or through their membership in intermediate social groups or “secondary associations”.” (p. 5).

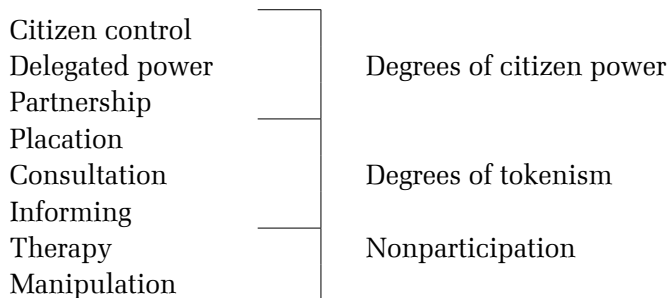
institutions and actors are involved (Pierre and Peters, 2000; Hanberger, 2009; Hajer and Wagenaar, 2003). Multi-actor decision-making helps to embrace the cornerstone characteristics of governance mentioned by Pierre and Peter (2005): articulating a common set of priorities for society, coherence, steering and accountability.

Much in the same vein but far behind on the time scale, according to some genuine opinions, citizens' participation is a "categorical term for citizens' power", as it has to go beyond the mere citizen observation and inactive participation, because the public is not a passive actor, but an agent who has the power to change and influence how public affairs are managed (Arnstein, 1969, p. 216).

From where we stand, we acknowledge that the simple attempt to provide a theoretical break-through in this matter is impossible, since even the theoretical approach that we are using is rather obsolete. Hence, in this article we use as an operational definition for citizens' or public participation the following assertion: political or social involvement in the community or government in order to improve or maintain the status quo or to have impact on policy formation and decision-making. Creighton (2005) argues that "public participation is the process by which public concerns, needs and values are incorporated into the governmental and corporate decision-making. It is a two-way communication and interaction, with the overall goal of better decisions that are supported by the public." (p. 31). We could as well use the working definitions forwarded by OECD in one of its Policy Briefs. According to OECD (2001) the government-citizen relations cover an array of interactions at each stage of the policy cycle, from policy design, to implementation and evaluation. Public participation is composed of: a. information or a one-way relation in which the governmental officials produce and only deliver information for use by citizens; this type of interaction provides passive access to information upon demand by citizens and active measures by government to disseminate information to citizens; b. consultation or a two-way relation in which citizens' role consists in providing feedback to government; c. active participation or the relation based on partnership with government, in which citizens play an active role and engage in the policy-making process. This last tier admits the important role of the citizens in proposing policy alternatives and in shaping the policy dialogue; nonetheless the responsibility for the final decision or policy formulation rests with the public administration entity.

Arnstein (1969) offers a typology of eight levels of citizens' participation (Figure 1). The eight rungs of the citizens' participation ladder were perpetuated and largely agreed upon by other scholars during the decades, so we use the classification as well to underpin the empirical findings of our research. The bottom levels of the ladder – (1) *Manipulation* and (2) *Therapy* – portray the covered of "non-participation", the illusive participation, which according to the author limit completely the chances of the citizens to participate as these "manipulation" and "therapy" tactics enable the power holders to "educate" or "cure" the participants. The next two rungs – (3) *Informing* and (4) *Consultation* – make up the level of "tokenism" and allow those

marginalized or excluded to have a say. Even if on the third and fourth rungs the citizens have a chance to be heard, the power holders retain the monopoly over the decision-making. *Placation* (5) is the upper continuation of “tokenism” and on this level the citizens can advise the decision-makers to a larger extent than on the previous two levels. The last extreme upper levels of the ladder depict citizen power with increasing progress of decision-making influence capacity. Citizens can either engage in (6) *Partnerships* with the public institutions which fact enables them to negotiate and bargain in trade-offs with those in charge of the situation, either benefit from the delegation of the power or hold exclusive control or full managerial power over the public matters – (7) *Delegated Power* and (8) *Citizen Control*.



**Figure 1:** Eight Rungs on a Ladder of Citizen Participation

**Source:** Adapted from Arnstein (1969, p. 217)

No matter how alluring and tempting the idea of an enhanced citizen participation in the decision-making process may appear, we are forced to admit that the advantages of citizen participation are numerous for the governments, communities and citizens as well, but the enthusiasm for incorporating citizens in every public decision fades away when the disadvantages of this process are acknowledged. In this sense, Irvin and Stansbury (2004, p. 56; p. 58) provide a comprehensive and to our opinion meticulous list of advantages as well as disadvantages of citizen participation in government decision-making for both parties involved (Table 1).

**Table 1:** Advantages and disadvantages of citizen participation in government decision-making

Advantages			Disadvantages		
	Advantages to citizen participation	Advantages to government		Disadvantages to citizen participation	Disadvantages to government
<i>Decision process</i>	Education (learn from and inform government representatives); Persuade and enlighten government; Gain skills for activist citizenship;	Education (learn from and inform citizens); Persuade citizens; Build trust and allay anxiety or hostility; Build strategic alliances; Gain legitimacy of decisions;	<i>Decision process</i>	Time consuming; Pointless if decision is ignored;	Time consuming; Costly; May backfire, creating more hostility toward government;
<i>Outcomes</i>	Break gridlock; Achieve outcomes; Gain some control over policy process; Better policy and implementation decisions;	Break gridlock; Achieve outcomes; Avoid litigation costs; Better policy and implementation decisions;	<i>Outcomes</i>	Worse policy decision if heavily influenced by opposing interest groups;	Loss of decision-making control; Possibility of bad decision that is politically impossible to ignore; Less budget for implementation of actual projects;

Source: Irvin and Stansbury (2004, p. 56; p. 58)

Considering the disadvantages mentioned above, we are constrained to pose the question if citizens' involvement and participation is worth the institutional, financial and human efforts. But before tackling this particular aspect, for each context we have to determine whether the citizens are actually willing to act in the name of their rightful opportunity to be involved in policy making and whether the administrators are willing to react and positively respond to the public's suggestions.

The contribution of the citizens resides within their political and civic engagement, through which they effectively hold political leaders accountable and demand a greater degree of responsiveness from them. In a real democracy, citizens' involvement is possible for three reasons: because they can, because they want or because they were asked (Verba *et. al*, pp. 3-6 *apud* Badescu, Sum and Uslaner, p. 323). Nevertheless, the inherent characteristics of the bureaucratic apparatus impose serious impediment on the willingness of the administrators to be responsive, i.e. the "willingness of administrators to be responsive is constrained by their inability to take action on one hand and their unwillingness to do so on the other. Inability results from lack of empowerment, whereas unwillingness results from a "bureaucratic experience" – a condition of working in bureaucratic organizations." (Hummel, 1994 *apud* Alkadry, 2003, p. 184).

## 2. Research methodology and results

In our attempt to establish a decision-making pattern within the Romanian public institutions, we empirically explored the perception of top level civil servants and public officials' views towards citizens' involvement in decision-making. Our scientific endeavor is based on examining how top level civil servants and public officials in local and county councils perceive and evaluate citizens' participation in relationship with their institutions. This study is based on a survey conducted in late winter 2009 and early spring 2010 at national level on a representative sample of local and county councils. In the case of local councils, we submitted questionnaires to the people occupying the positions of mayor, vicemayor, secretary of the administrative unit – in the Romanian administrative system the secretary is the person responsible for guaranteeing that the decisions adopted by the local council and the mayor comply with the existing legislation –, city manager or public administrator – if such positions existed in the institution –, and top level civil servants – heads of departments or offices. In the case of county councils, we submitted questionnaires to the people occupying the positions of president of county council, vicepresident of county council, county manager or public administrator, secretary of the county and top level civil servants – heads of departments or offices. The response rate of the survey was approximately 30%, the anonymity of the respondents was ensured with no identifiers placed on the questionnaires. Out of the total number of questionnaires received back, 65.8% are from local councils and 34.2% from county councils. Just to stress it out, all of the respondents of the survey are civil servants, except the mayors/vice-mayors of the local councils, and the presidents/vice-presidents of the county councils who are directly elected by citizens for a four-year mandate. We chose to survey primarily the top level civil servants because we considered them people knowledgeable of the decision making process within a public institution, being an interface between the deliberative body (city or county council) and the executive body that gets more often in contact with citizens and other groups within the community. The main reason for which only decentralized institutions were chosen for this study lies in the exclusive legislative power at the local level of these institutions. A ratio of 42.5% out of the respondents who declared their gender was composed of women and 55.1% of men.

In terms of other demographics, the average age of the respondents is 46.8 (the youngest public official indicated the age of 28 and the oldest 75), which fact is not surprising since the respondents occupy executive positions in their institutions that require having a certain number of years as working experience in the public sector. The education of the civil servants suggests their high qualifications, since 59.7% of them are in the possession of a MA and a large number (32.8%) were enrolled in a BA program; only 1.6% of the respondents pursued PhD programs. The civil servants law requires people willing to occupy a managerial position in the public sector to hold a MA degree. The specialization of the public officials surveyed cannot be characterized as homogeneous since at least four majors are highlighted in the statistics (Table 2).

Approximately 13% of the respondents are double-major graduates, and more than a half of those have a degree either in law or in engineering.

**Table 2:** The educational qualifications of the respondents

Specialization (first major only)	Valid Percent (%)
Engineering	28.4
Economics	23.8
Public Administration	21.9
Law	19.7
Other (including sociology, psychology, political sciences, philosophy etc.)	6.2
Total	100

The public officials work in a variety of functional areas and this aspect speaks again about the extensive pool of public officials the survey managed to cover. Therefore, 19.6% of the respondents are in charge of the financial departments in their institutions, 9.8% – social departments, 16.2% – construction, urbanism and local development departments, 1.7% – community police units, 11.1% – customer relations, external relations and/or European integration departments, 7.2% – public utilities and public property units, 3.4% – waste management and environment protection departments, 12.8% – judicial and appeal departments, 3% – HR departments, and 15.3% of the respondents mentioned some other department or unit.

In order to trace closely the decision-making patterns we were interested in establishing the type of the administrative unit the respondents come from (Table 3). As Table 3 shows, the majority of the respondents come from large administrative units that have between 100.001 and 400.000 inhabitants (36.8%). Even though we expected the size of the community to influence the degree to which the citizens are involved in the decision-making process we did not find any statistically significant correlation to support this assumption.

**Table 3:** The size of the community

No. of inhabitants	Valid Percent (%)
Under 2.000 inhabitants	3
Between 2.001 and 10.000 inhabitants	16.9
Between 10.001 and 50.000	14.2
Between 50.001 and 100.000	15.9
Between 100.001 and 400.000	36.8
Between 400.001 and 700.000	12.9
Over 700.001 inhabitants	0.3
Total	100

In our research we differentiate between pre- and post-decision-making processes. According to some classifications, agenda setting, policy problem structuring and forecasting expected policy outcomes are the main components of the pre-decision-making stage (Dunn, 2008). Meanwhile, implementation, policy evaluation, learning and policy dynamics are parts of the policy cycle which develop in the post-decision-

making stage (Majone, 2006). We were interested in investigating the initial stages of the pre-decision-making process since unrevealing the general pattern of decision-making in the public sector is the aim of our research. Therefore, the respondents of the survey were asked first to determine which are the main stakeholders resting at the origin of a decision in the institution they work and, second, who influences the most the decision by having a final say in its adoption, i.e. an effort was made to delineate between agenda setting and policy formulation. We considered that these aspects are of extreme importance if we want to compare the findings of our research with the Arnstein's rungs of citizen participation or the OECD classification.

First, the respondents were offered a list consisting of 12 eventual actors that might in different policy contexts and environments shape a decision in the public affairs domain and they were asked to specify how often these policy actors rest at the origin of a public decision. The respondents declared that in the majority of the situations the mayor and the president of the county council initiated a public decision (the cumulated percentage of the responses falling in the categories often and all the times is 88.6%). Local councilors and the county councilors also play an important role in initiating decisions (the cumulated percentage of the responses falling in the categories often and all the times is 49.2%), followed by the vicemayor(s) and the vicepresident(s) of the county council (the cumulated percentages is 43.6%). These are the main set of policy actors that are entitled by the law of local public administration (Law no. 215/2001) to initiate public decisions. The research also showed that civil servants and other public employees have the initiative for some public decisions taking into consideration that they identify policy problems during the implementation process and when communicating with citizens. 31.2% of the respondents declared that often and all the times civil servants initiate public decisions, while 20.5% declared that sometimes they are at the origin of a decision. Citizens' involvement in initiating public decisions is reduced. 17.9% of the respondents declared that citizens often and all the times have the initiative for public decisions, while 20.5% declared that only sometimes they have such an initiative. However, we found that citizens tend to bring more issues on the public agenda of the local council and to initiate more decisions at local level than they do in the relationship with the county council. A plausible explanation would be that city councils have the responsibility of solving problems that affect people in their daily life than county councils, and city councils and city halls are institutions perceived as being more close to citizens.

The representatives of mass media, nonprofit organizations, business sector or of the unions rarely initiate public decisions at local and county level. In addition to all the types of actors mentioned in the survey about 1% of the respondents have mentioned the Church as an actor which plays a role in initiating a public decision.

**Table 4:** Please specify how often the following types of actors/stakeholders rest at the origin of a public decision? (%)

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	All the times	Total
The local councilors/county councilors	5.0	18.2	27.7	24.9	24.3	100
The Mayor/President of the County Council	0.6	3.6	7.3	31.3	57.3	100
The Vicemayor(s)/Vicepresident(s) of the County Council	5.5	17.6	33.3	26.3	17.3	100
The political parties	29	26.1	19.6	17.6	7.6	100
The civil servants and the employees of the public institutions	11.3	26	31.1	23.1	8.2	100
Other central and local public administration institution	21.4	31.3	29.3	13.3	4.6	100
The citizens	27.6	34.1	20.5	9.7	8.2	100
Mass media representatives	46.8	32.4	15.3	4.3	1.2	100
Nonprofit organization representatives	43.3	33.6	13.7	7.3	2.0	100
Business sector representatives	40.4	33.2	16.9	8.3	1.1	100
The unions	38.6	34.8	18.6	7.4	0.6	100
The European Union and its institutions	31.3	31.0	17.7	14.2	5.9	100

Secondly, the respondents were asked to specify to what extent the same 12 policy actors actually influence how public policies are formulated during the decision-making process. Table 5 shows the average score obtained by each group of policy actors on a 5 points scale.

**Table 5:** Please specify, on a scale from 1 to 5 (where 1 means “to a lesser extent” and 5 “to a larger extent”), to what extent the following types of actors actually influence in a certain manner the decision-making process in the public sector?

	Average score
The local councilors/county councilors	3.57
The Mayor/President of the County Council	4.4
The Vicemayor(s)/Vicepresident(s) of the County Council	3.29
The political parties	2.41
The civil servants and the employees of the public institutions	2.49
Other central and local public administration institution	2.13
The citizens	2.04
Mass media representatives	1.5
Non-for profit organization representatives	1.45
Business sector representatives	1.56
The unions	1.52
The European Union and its institutions	2.00

The answers to this question indicate that, at local level, the mayor, the local councilors and the vicemayor(s) have the largest influence on the formulation of

public decisions. Similarly, at county level, the president of the county council, the county councilors and the vicepresident(s) of the county council largely influence the decision-making process. These findings indicate that these political actors tend to control both agenda-setting and the formulation of public policies. Our research also shows that the mayors and presidents of the county councils exert a large control over the different stages of the decision-making process. According to the public administration law, people occupying these positions are directly elected by citizens and usually they are the most powerful people within a community.

Table 5 shows that the citizens' influence over the policy formulation process is rather weak. This finding is consistent with the findings from the previous question, indicating the weak role that the citizens play in the decision-making process. However, the citizens tend to get involved more in influencing the decisions from local level than the decisions from county level. We found a statistical significant difference between the average means of citizens' involvement in the decision-making at local level comparatively with county level. Our research shows that citizens participate more in the relationship with the public institutions from cities – county seats, while the lowest level of public participation is in communes (the smallest administrative units in which rural communities are organized).

The results for the agenda setting were confronted against the results for the policy formulation (Table 6). When comparing the influence of different policy actors over the agenda setting and policy formulation, we identify that the scores are similar in many cases. A statistically significant difference of 0.24 was identified between the citizens' involvement in the agenda setting and in the policy formulation. Even though the scores are rather low (1.8 in the first case and 2.04 in the second case), the research indicates that the citizens tend to get involved more in the policy formulation stage than into the agenda setting. We can explain this finding by the fact that in the last years, several mandatory requirements have been made for local public institutions to open the decision-making process to citizens and other interested stakeholders. The main focus of these legislative changes was to inform better the citizens about the decision-making process and to give them the opportunity to get involved in the identification of policy alternatives and in the policy formulation. Some of the problems that the citizens identify and bring on the public institutions' agenda tend to be more specific problems caused by the deficient implementation of existing public policies or new public needs that do not require public intervention through new public policies. The findings show that the respondents (top level civil servants) perceive that the civil servants and the other employees of public institutions in which they work are more involved in identifying problems than in formulating public policies. The final form of a decision is drafted by politically elected officials at local as well county level.

**Table 6:** Agenda setting – Policy formulation. Average scores compared

	Agenda setting	Policy formulation
The local councilors/county councilors	3.45	3.57
The Mayor/President of the County Council	4.41	4.4
The Vicemayor(s)/Vicepresident(s) of the County Council	3.32	3.29
The political parties	2.48	2.41
The civil servants and the employees of the public institutions	2.91	2.49
Other central and local public administration institution	2.36	2.13
The citizens	1.8	2.04
Mass media representatives	1.91	1.5
Non-for profit organization representatives	1.91	1.45
Business sector representatives	1.96	1.56
The unions	1.96	1.52
The European Union and its institutions	2.32	2.00

The survey applied to the public employees used an adapted to literature scale of citizens’ participation to evaluate the involvement of citizens and other societal groups in the public matters, which the local and county public institutions address according to the local public administration legal framework. As much as possible, we tried to differentiate among various tiers of citizens’ participation in order to evaluate how participatory is the public policy process. A 10-point scale was used to measure the degree of citizens’ participation in public decision-making. The average scores obtained after the calculation are presented in Table 7.

**Table 7:** Please specify on a scale ranging from 1 to 10

(where 1 is “totally disagree and 10 “totally agree”) to what extent do you agree with the following statements referring to citizens’ involvement in decision-making process that take place in the institution where you work?

	Average score
The citizens can notify about potential problems in the community	8.33
The citizens are being offered all the necessary information regarding the decisions pending adoption.	7.73
The citizens can propose solutions regarding community problem-solving	7.56
When the institution makes a decision the citizens’ suggestions or opinions regarding the matter are taken into consideration by the public officials.	7.34
The institution is actively trying to facilitate the involvement both of the citizens and other society groups in the decision-making process.	6.81
Citizens are only notified about the decision the institution makes without being granted the opportunity to influence the decision-making process	4.29
The decisions are made without informing and consulting the citizens.	3.49

The answers provided by the respondents to this question indicate a participative decision-making process in the surveyed institutions. The survey showed that when

citizens participate in the decision-making process, they have the power to influence the decisions made by public institutions because their suggestions or opinions are taken into consideration by public officials (the average score obtained is 7.34 out of a 10 points scale). However, citizens' participation in different stages of the decision-making is moderate as the previous findings indicated. The majority of the respondents perceive that in the institutions where they work, citizens are provided with the necessary tools and opportunities for a meaningful participation in the decision-making process. The public institutions established communication channels that citizens can use to notify the public institution about the potential problems in the community. The respondents also declared that the public institutions provide the citizens with all the necessary information regarding the decisions under deliberation at local or county level. Even more, the majority of the respondents declared that public institutions are actively trying to facilitate the involvement of citizens and other societal groups in the decision-making process.

At the opposite side, the respondents declared that in few cases decisions are made without informing or consulting the citizens (the average score is 3.49 out of a 10 points scale) or without granting the citizens the opportunity to influence the decision-making process (the average score is 4.29). Someone can expect these scores to be higher considering the low level of public participation and civic engagement in post-communist countries. We can assume first that the respondents wanted the public institutions where they work to be perceived transparent. However, the public institutions are required by the Law on the decision-making transparency (Law no. 52/2003) to inform the citizens about the decisions under deliberation and to give them the time and the opportunity to make recommendations on the drafts of the decisions. The adoption of transparency law provided the nongovernmental organizations and mass media with a very powerful tool to monitor the activity of public institutions on implementing the law, and they used this tool to discover any breaking of the law and to disclose it to the public. Therefore, the public institutions attempt to implement diligently all the provisions of the transparency law and if citizens or other groups within the community want to get involved in the decision-making process they can do so.

In conducting our research, we were also interested in finding from the top level civil servants' point of view why some decisions adopted by local and county public institutions encounter resistance and dissatisfaction from the citizens. Table 8 shows that 45.7% of the respondents perceive that often and all the times citizens believe that the decision-makers choose to address the problems of some interest groups and not the general interest of the community. This finding indicates a low level of trust of citizens in the honesty and good intention of the decision-makers in managing equitably all the issues within a community. However, 59.3% of the respondents declared that rarely or never the decision-makers pursue their own interest. Also, the top level civil servants perceive that the citizens are dissatisfied with some decisions

because they are not properly informed about the pending public issues (the cumulated percentage of answers falling in categories often and all the times is 38%). It is difficult to identify the cause of dissatisfaction based on this statement; either the citizens do not inform themselves about issues affecting their community, they are not provided with the necessary information by the public institutions to completely understand the public issues, or the information provided by public institutions do not reach the population. However, a previous research, conducted in 2008 (Cobârzan, Dragoş and Neamţu, 2008), concluded that public institutions from rural areas in Transylvania region implemented only in a formal way the requirements of the law on decision-making transparency, without reassuring that people have access to information that they provide, and that people indeed use the information offered in a meaningful way, capable of enhancing the decision-making process.

30.7% of the respondents believe that citizens are dissatisfied with the decisions public institutions made because often and all the time the decision-makers do not inform them correctly about the aims and the advantages of a certain decision. This finding contradicts what we found previously, that the majority of the respondents believe the citizens are offered all the necessary information regarding the decisions pending to be adopted. We can conclude that the citizens do not inform themselves properly, the information provided by public institutions is incomplete or ambiguous, or the information is provided, but it is not received by citizens.

**Table 8:** There are cases when certain decisions encounter resistance from the citizens. How often are these kinds of situations due to the following aspects? (%)

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	All the times	Total
The decision-makers fail to understand the needs and difficulties of the citizens.	20.5	18.8	33.5	15.9	11.4	100
The citizens are not properly informed about the pending public issues.	5.7	19.9	36.4	21.0	17.0	100
The citizens believe that the decision-makers choose to address the problems of some interest groups, and not the general interest of the community.	9.7	17.7	26.9	24.6	21.1	100
The decision-makers do not inform correctly the citizens about the aims and the advantages of a certain decision.	19.1	19.1	31.2	19.1	11.6	100
The decision-makers pursue their own self-interest.	34.3	25.00	15.1	11.0	14.5	100

Within the larger goal of finding how rational or incremental is the decision-making process at local and county level in Romania, we were interested also in finding the sources decision-makers use to inform themselves before making a decision. Our research indicated that, when adopting decisions, public institutions from local and county level aim firstly to comply with the guidelines or the requirements specified in the national (92.6%) and the European legislation (74.8%) (see Table 9). Romania is a

unitary state and the law on local public administration (Law no. 215/2001) requires all public institutions from local and county level to follow national legislation when adopting decisions. If a decision is in contradiction with the national legislation, the prefect, who is the representative of the national government at county level, can bring the case to the administrative courts that can declare the decision null. Therefore, in order to prevent a decision to become null, the decision makers aim firstly to comply with the national and European legislation. Also, Romania is a member state of the European Union, and public institutions are required to comply with the European legislation.

73.4% of the respondents declared that often and all the times in institutions where they work the decisions are based on reports, statistics and analyses provided by civil servants. Our research shows that other information come from the citizens (35.4% of the responses fall in the categories often and all the times). This finding is consistent with what we found previously, that when citizens submit suggestions to public institutions, their suggestions tend to be included in the final decisions. Decisions are based less on the information provided by nongovernmental organizations, because either these organizations submit less recommendations to public institutions than other interest groups or, even if they submit recommendations, public institutions do not include them into the final legislation. The respondents perceive that decisions are based less on information originating from mass-media.

**Table 9:** How often the decisions made are based on the information provided by the following? (%)

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	All the times	Total
The citizens	10.0	29.6	25.0	23.4	12.0	100
Mass media	24.8	33.8	29.2	9.6	2.6	100
NGOs	10.6	29.0	32.2	21.0	7.2	100
Reports/statistics/analyses provided by civil servants	1.7	6.9	18.0	38.8	34.6	100
Public surveys and polls	27.5	28.1	25.2	14.5	4.7	100
National legislation	1.1	3.0	3.3	19.8	72.8	100
European legislation	3.4	8.2	13.6	26.8	48.0	100

Much in the same vein, we were interested to identify the main factors that constrain on how public officials make decisions at local and county level. The respondents were provided with a list of seven types of constrains and were asked to score, on a scale from 1 to 5, the degree in which these factors influence the decision-making process in the institution where they work. The budgetary (the average score received was 4.37 out of 5) and legislative constrains (4.22) are the most stringent factors on the decisions adopted at local level. The procedures that public institutions are required to comply with (such as timeframes, legal steps, consultation of other public institutions or civil society groups, etc.) that have to be followed also constrain the decision-making process (3.53). The respondents perceive that the members of the community,

either individuals, businesses, NGOs or other groups within the community, exercise a moderate constrain over the public policy formulation at local and county level (2.63). The respondents also declared that one of the goals public officials want to achieve when making decisions is to gain the agreement on the decisions they adopt of as many members of the community as possible (on a scale ranging from 1 to 10, the respondents gave an average score of 6.47). Even more, the values and the norms existing in the community (7.18), gaining the understanding and the support of the people affected by a decision (7.15) and weighting the benefits over the costs of an alternative (8.91) are other important goals for decision-makers when deciding on matters regarding the community.

### **3. Discussions and concluding remarks**

Our research project aimed to answer a few simple questions about the decision-making process in Romania at local and county level, in order to be able to describe it in general terms. We wanted to find out: who are the policy actors that set the agenda of public institutions and formulate public policies at these administrative levels, what is the degree of citizen participation in making decisions, why certain decisions encounter resistance from citizens, how important is the information provided by citizens for public officials when making decisions, and which are the major constrains in public policy formulation process. We asked these questions the top level civil servants and public officials working in local and county councils throughout Romania that we considered as knowledgeable persons of the decision-making process. We were aware from the beginning that the information provided by our respondents might be distorted, as they would want the institutions where they work to be perceived open to citizens' participation. However, we thought that submitting a questionnaire to a representative sample of public institutions from where we selected the respondents was the only way to collect information about the decision-making process at national level. In the future, we intend to improve the quality of the information that we collected by conducting interviews with individual public officials and focus groups with citizens.

The findings of our research confirm many expectations that someone might have about the policy process in a former communist country that struggle to consolidate and develop a democratic and participative decision-making process. We found that the politically elected officials (the mayor, local councilors, president of the county council, and county councilors) exert the strongest influence over the agenda-setting and the policy formulation. The citizens and other groups within the community participate in the decision processes, but their involvement is moderate. The respondents declared that public institutions inform the citizens about the decisions pending to be adopted and that the citizens can notify about potential problems in the community. When citizens involve in the decision-making process, their suggestions or opinions are taken into consideration by public officials. The main cause for the cases when certain decisions encounter resistance and dissatisfaction from citizens is that the

citizens believe that the decision-makers choose to address the problems of some interest groups, and not the general interest of the community. Public officials from local and county level base their decisions on the information provided by national and European legislation, and on the conclusions of reports, statistics and analysis provided by other public officials. However, the budget is the major constrain when making decisions at local and county level. Information provided by citizens and the pressure they put on public institutions is of moderate importance in the decision-making process.

We argue that the degree of citizens' participation in Romania at local and county level falls in the second category according to the OECD classification, meaning that the relationship between public institutions and citizens is based on consultation in which citizens' role consists in providing feedback to government. We can not characterize this relationship as active participation because our research sketches a portray of a moderately involved citizen, who is sometimes poorly informed about public issues and tends to believe that public officials address the interests of some interest groups, and not the general interest of the community. Even though we have not collected all the information about citizens' participation according to the ladder of participation proposed by Arnstein (1969), we have enough evidences to argue that, according to this classification, public participation in Romania at local and county level falls in the fourth rung of this classification, namely consultation. Even if citizens have a chance to be heard, the political elected officials hold the control over the decision-making process.

The findings of the research show the weak power the citizens have over the public institutions at this moment in Romania. However, if we analyze the position of citizens in the relationship with public institutions we see the great transformations it went through over the last 20 years since the fall of the communist regime. On the Arnstein's ladder of citizens' participation, this relationship went from no form of information or consultation of the public, meaning manipulation (the bottom rung of the ladder), to a certain degree of consultation. This change involved institutional transformations, new legislative measures, changes in the administrative culture and in the position citizens occupy in the relationship with public institutions.

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