

CITIZEN PARTICIPATION AFTER THE FALL OF COMMUNISM IN ROMANIA: EVOLVING PERCEPTIONS AND PRACTICES IN LOCAL DECISION- MAKING AND GOVERNANCE

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Abstract

The paper examines the perceptions of Romanian local public institutions' representatives regarding citizen participation in the decision-making process in Romania. We examined the decade-long changes regarding citizen participation in the decision-making process in Romania. To this end, we conducted a survey in late winter 2009 and early spring 2010 on a representative sample of City Halls and County Councils in Romania, collecting 381 valid surveys. We replicated the same survey from March 2024 until July 2024 and collected responses from 621 institutions. The research revealed moderate development in local government toward a more participatory culture, involving citizens more actively in the decision-making process in Romania. However, this progress is not evenly distributed across the local public administration, and the degree of citizen participation appears to be influenced by the size of the local communities. The larger the size of local communities, the higher the degree of citizens' involvement in the decision-making process is.

Keywords: citizen participation, decision-making process, local public institutions, Romania, participatory governance.

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1. Introduction

This study investigates how citizen participation has evolved in Romania after the fall of the communist regime in 1989. Presently, Romania is a democratic state and a member state of the European Union, but it was under a communist regime for 42 years. During communism, citizens could not exercise their right to speak freely, and criticizing the communist regime was harshly punished. Citizens' participation in some civic organizations, such as labor unions or youth organizations, was mandatory but highly regulated (Pop-Eleches and Tucker, 2013). Almost all mechanisms of citizen participation in the decision-making process were outlawed, and, when allowed, they only mimicked the democratic process. Therefore, citizens distrusted and feared public authorities. Bădescu, Sum and Uslaner (2004) argued that in post-communist Romania, distrust was the main barrier preventing individuals from participating in civic associations, and, as a consequence, it lengthened the development of the democratic participatory processes. The fall of the communist regime generated 'a large initial civic participation deficit' (Pop-Eleches and Tucker, 2013, p. 45) that gradually diminished as new democratic practices of civic engagement developed and consolidated over time. However, the process of rebuilding democratic institutions was slow because the cultural habits developed during communism were difficult to change (Denhardt *et al.*, 2009). Moreover, the transition to democratic governance has resulted in the creation of numerous institutions that have failed to meet citizens' expectations, prompting many to become disengaged from public life (Rose, Mishler and Haerpfer, 1998). Gradually, accession to the European Union and participation in various international donor organizations contributed to the consolidation of citizen participation in the decision-making process (Guasti, 2016; Matei and Dogaru, 2011).

More than three decades after the fall of the communist regime, we aim to analyze how the forms of citizen engagement have transformed in Romania and whether democratic participatory practices have consolidated. More specifically, we aim to analyze the perceptions of public employees from local public institutions regarding citizen participation in the decision-making process in Romania. With respect to this, we replicated a survey conducted in 2010 that investigated civil servants' perceptions of the decision-making process in their institutions/ communities (Haruța and Radu, 2010). The purpose of replicating the survey was to identify how citizen participation has evolved in Romania between 2010 and 2024. Research conducted in 2010 revealed that representatives of Romanian local public institutions perceived a low level of citizen involvement in the decision-making process, primarily viewing this participation as a form of consultation. Building on this finding, we aimed to investigate whether public institutions have progressed toward a more participatory approach to involving citizens in the decision-making process.

The present paper is organized as follows. In the next two sections, we analyze the theoretical frameworks that explain different forms of citizen engagement; this endeavor will help us assess the level of citizen participation in Romania and its progression over time. In the fourth part of the article, we will present an overview of how citizen participation has evolved in Romania since the fall of communism. In the next section, we will explain

the data collection methodology. In the sixth section, we will provide an analysis of the research findings by conducting a comparative analysis of citizen participation in decision-making at the local and county levels in Romania between 2010 and 2024. In the last section of the paper, we will present several concluding remarks and discuss the research limitations.

2. Scholarly perspectives on the advantages and disadvantages of citizen participation

Building genuine democracies requires the consolidation of participatory mechanisms that ensure the representation of diverse opinions and voices within society (Dahl, 1972). According to Dahl, citizen participation is the cornerstone of democratic governance as it allows citizens to influence policy-making outcomes, advocate for reforms, keep elected officials and policy-makers accountable, and enrich the political landscape by making it more dynamic and participatory. Therefore, participation is a fundamental right of citizens in democratic states. On the other hand, participation is a means to increase the quality and effectiveness of public decisions (Pretty, 1995; Irvin and Stansbury, 2004; Ianniello *et al.*, 2019). When civic engagement creates mechanisms for the broad consultation of all groups in society, including the marginalized ones, the overall representativeness and legitimacy of the decisions are much improved (Fung, 2006; Cooper, Bryer and Meek, 2006). Developing a participatory decision-making culture enhances citizens' confidence in government (Campbell, 2023), improves the prospects of successful policy implementation, avoids litigation costs (Irvin and Stansbury, 2004), promotes rational decisions based on public reasoning, and increases the legitimacy of decisions (Michels, 2011). Even the one-way communication of providing information to citizens, often called 'pseudo participation' (Shin *et al.*, 2024), is important for educating citizens to understand the complex issues under discussion, the goals, and the constraints of the decision-making process, and, therefore, to become more active participants in the decision-making process.

Although public participation brings numerous advantages to the consolidation of democracy and enhances the quality of governance, researchers have highlighted the drawbacks of citizen participation (Irvin and Stansbury, 2004) and the tensions that participatory mechanisms create (Michels, 2012). They pointed out the issue of representation. Although participation should be open to everyone, in many cases, participants are not representative of the general public (Fung, 2007, 2015). Citizens who are better educated, have more resources, and stronger interests tend to participate more often than those who belong to marginalized and disadvantaged groups of society (Freudenburg and Olsen, 1983). Other obstacles to citizen participation are their unrealistic expectations about the influence of participation on decisions (Ianniello *et al.*, 2019; Michels, 2012; Michels and De Graaf, 2010), the demand for immediate results (Denhardt *et al.*, 2009), and a marginal sense of community belonging (Cornwall, 2008). Irvin and Stansbury (2004) noted

that organizing public consultations is challenging and time-consuming, and the feedback provided by citizens is difficult to ignore. In addition to that, sometimes decision-makers have little understanding that some participation mechanisms are better suited for certain types of problems and local contexts (Reed *et al.*, 2018), and produce different democratic effects (Michels, 2012; Michels and De Graaf, 2010), and, as a result, the desired outcomes of the participatory initiatives can be jeopardized (Ianniello *et al.*, 2019).

Understanding the advantages and disadvantages of different forms of participation is crucial, but equally important is understanding the nuances of citizen participation, including its various forms, characteristics, and implications for fostering democratic governance. The following section will differentiate between various forms of citizen participation based on different approaches to citizen engagement.

3. Advancing from Arnstein's 'ladder of participation' to more comprehensive typologies and approaches for citizen participation

Over time, several typologies have been proposed to conceptualize different forms and levels of citizen participation. They help us understand the interaction and dynamics between citizens and public officials. Many typologies share the representation of citizen participation on a continuum, ranging from the forms of least engagement to the highest levels of citizens' engagement (ladder of citizen participation). Even though all these typologies have in common these two extremes, most forms of participation occur in the middle ground. More recently, authors have advanced from continuum models to typologies that combine two or three dimensions to create multiple combinations of participation forms (wheel of participation and democracy cube). Some typologies have a descriptive approach to the forms of participation (Arnstein, 1969; Pretty, 1995), while others have a normative approach (Connor, 1988; Reed *et al.*, 2018). Normative typologies offer a set of choices for participation, explain the contexts in which they can be used, and leave the actors freedom to choose the most suitable participation form depending on the specifics of the situation (Bishop and Davis, 2002).

Probably the most well-known framework on participatory democracy that has influenced the theoretical frameworks and guided empirical research for countless practitioners and scholars worldwide is Sherry Arnstein's 'ladder of citizen participation' (1969). She distinguishes between two levels of non-participation (manipulation and therapy), three degrees of tokenism (informing, consultation, and placation), and three degrees of citizens' empowerment to make decisions (partnership, delegated power, and citizen control). Following the publication of this seminal work, authors have proposed alternative approaches and typologies for citizen engagement, aiming to categorize the variety of newer participatory practices more efficiently and bring clarity and consensus to the subject of public participation. Therefore, in what follows, we will summarize some of the newest academic perspectives on citizen participation and emphasize their theoretical value for our research.

Connor (1988) proposed a new ladder of citizen participation, intended to apply to various participatory contexts and orient public officials to the many choices available for engaging citizens. This continuum of choices includes the following forms of participation: education, information/ feedback, consultation, joint planning, mediation, litigation, and resolution/ prevention. Connor (1998) argues that each form of participation includes the following one, and they have a cumulative effect.

The typology proposed by Pretty (1995) describes the forms of participation specific to development projects in agriculture; therefore, this typology has some particularities compared to the other frameworks. The model begins with manipulative participation, where individuals simply sit on official boards and have no influence. The next phase is passive participation, where citizens are informed about decisions that have already been made, but without the possibility to respond. At a higher level of participation, citizens are involved in the decision-making process through consultation, but they have no control over the final decisions. A form of engagement specific to agricultural projects is involvement for material incentives, where citizens participate by contributing labor in return for some material incentives; when the incentives end, people have no stake in continuing their involvement. Functional participation is a more meaningful form of engagement when citizens are involved in achieving predetermined objectives; it usually occurs when external stakeholders have already made major decisions. Interactive participation refers to cases where citizens are involved in the development of action plans, take control over the use of resources, and determine how to use them to achieve goals. Self-mobilization is the highest level of engagement, describing a situation in which people take the initiative to solve problems and have control over the use of available resources. An overarching conclusion of Pretty's typology is that the motivation of policy actors who adopt a participatory approach is one of the most critical factors for the success of the participatory process.

Sarah White (1996) examines the various types of participation in development projects and their distinct functions. The author discusses the political nature of participation, highlighting its potential for empowerment and exploitation. The main idea is that participation must be seen as a political process with various interests at play. White emphasizes the importance of understanding these different interests to ensure that participation is genuinely empowering and meaningful. She identifies four major types of participation based on the interests of those participating. (1) Nominal participation is purely for display and legitimation, often serving the interests of those in power. (2) Instrumental participation implies participation used as a means to achieve efficiency or cost-effectiveness, often at the participants' expense. (3) Representative participation allows citizens' voices in decision-making, but ultimately does not guarantee their empowerment. (4) Transformative participation is the most empowering form of participation, where the process leads to greater consciousness and action for change. Similarly to Arnstein's model, White views empowerment as the ultimate goal of public participation and proposes a highly normative classification of participation interests. In this sense, transformative participation is the most effective form of engagement.

An important framework for conceptualizing the varieties of institutional forms of public participation is the democracy cube proposed by Fung (2006). This theoretical framework organizes mechanisms of participation along three dimensions: (1) selection mechanisms of those who participate, (2) communication and decision-making mechanisms during public discussions, and (3) the authority and power of those who participate. From the perspective of the first dimension, the selection methods can range from the least restrictive ones, which are open to everyone who wants to participate, to those that invite participants from specific subgroups of the general population, such as disadvantaged groups, or those that randomly select individuals from the entire population. From the perspective of the modes of communication, in some public meetings, citizens can be just mere spectators or recipients of information, while other forms of participation allow them to communicate their problems, opinions, and suggestions. The more intense forms of communication involve participants in the deliberation and negotiation of the group decisions. The third dimension of the democracy cube examines whether the mechanisms of participation have an influence on the decision-making process. Often, citizens participate to derive personal benefits or fulfill a civic obligation, and therefore, they do not have a significant influence on public decisions. Through discussions of public problems and communication of their opinion, citizens can exert an indirect influence on public decisions, especially when they are consulted and invited to provide their advice. Citizens are co-opted as partners in creating policies and strategies at a higher level. At the same time, they can occasionally be entrusted to exercise full authority in making decisions on certain public issues. When combining all three dimensions of participation in the democracy cube, various combinations of participation mechanisms can be created to better address the challenges of democratic societies. Fung's conceptual framework of citizen participation acknowledges the complexity of modern governance and the necessity of multiple approaches to ensure legitimacy, justice, and effectiveness (Fung, 2006, 2007, 2015).

Another important framework for conceptualizing different forms of civic engagement is the wheel of participation proposed by Reed *et al.* (2018). The framework is formed of two dials regarding (1) who initiates and leads the participation process, and the distinction is made between top-down and bottom-up participation, and (2) the mode of communication, and the distinction is made between one-way communication and co-production. This framework is dynamic as the dials can span in both directions and create multiple combinations grouped into four categories. Some forms of participation can be grouped in the top-down, one-way communication category when public officials retain the power over the process, whose sole purpose is to inform citizens about a decision that has already been made. In other cases, participation is organized by public institutions from a top-down perspective, and citizens are involved in two-way communication, serving as partners in decision-making. Cases in which citizens gain enough power through mass mobilization to make their problems and demands heard fall into the bottom-up, one-way communication category. In a few cases, participation is initiated and led by the citizens who co-produce and implement the decision as part of the two-way communication

process. The authors argue that the context of participation is important for the outcomes of engagement.

Based on two dimensions — sociality and negotiability — Dean (2017) identified four modes of public participation in policy decisions: knowledge transfer, collective decision-making, choice and voice, and arbitration and oversight. Each of these four modes of participation is placed in a quadrant view. To understand Dean’s model, one must first grasp the meaning of the two dimensions. Sociality refers to whether participation is agonistic or solidaristic. Agonistic participation is viewed as conflictual, with individuals and groups primarily focused on promoting and defending their interests. Individuals who engage in agonistic modes of participation will display competitive behaviors. On the other hand, solidaristic participation views participants as interdependent members of a community, working towards common and shared goals with predominantly cooperative individuals (Dean, 2017, p. 217). Negotiability is seen as either prescribed or negotiated. Essentially, this dimension encapsulates the level of influence participants have in shaping their terms of engagement within the process; in a prescribed participatory process, contextual, circumstantial, and institutional factors determine who participates and in what public matter, while the participants themselves ‘have little scope to determine the condition of their participation’ (Dean, 2017, p. 217). It only seems logical that in a negotiated participatory arrangement, those who engage negotiate the conditions of participation for themselves. Knowledge transfer is prescribed and agonistic, and it is often used in bureaucratic settings where citizens are seen as a source of knowledge and expertise, but do not act as formal decision-makers. This mode of participation values the role of the public as individuals can improve policy outcomes by ensuring ‘epistemic quality’ and helping public administration to gather information about their needs, values, and preferences. A collective decision-making model of policy-making occupies the second quadrant, which is negotiated and solidaristic. It views citizens as co-creators of policy, working together to reach collective decisions. It is characterized by direct participation, consensus-building, and a rejection of hierarchy. Hence, it often echoes the characteristics of participatory democracy. Participation as choice and voice is rooted in economic thought and theory. In this agonistic and prescribed mode, citizens are consumers; they make choices and express their preferences within a market-based system, similarly to how they behave in the actual market. Finally, the last quadrant relies on arbitration and oversight (being negotiated and agonistic). This approach doubts the notion of a neutral state and, as a consequence, grants to the public both the role of an ‘impartial adjudicator’ (arbitration) and that of ‘an impartial critic of the state activity’ (oversight). This approach reflects Dahl’s opinion on the characteristics of a pluralist democracy where citizens can ensure that decision-making processes are fair and transparent, protecting the interests of all groups and individuals, and that politicians are not corrupt or abuse their power. Dean’s typology of modes of participation offers a valuable conceptual framework for understanding the different ways citizens engage in policymaking and the ideological assumptions that underpin each mode.

Some authors argue that typologies of participation, which categorize forms of participation along an axis, implicitly assume that some forms of participation are inherently good and others are inherently bad (Cornwell, 2008). However, there are many cases when participation at the top of the axis can fail (Reed *et al.*, 2018). Utilization of different forms of participation depends on the organizational capacity of individuals and public organizations, as well as the goals intended to be achieved through a participatory process (Head, 2007), and specific decisional context.

In the present paper, we categorize citizen participation into three categories, depending on the level of citizens' involvement in the decision-making process: information, consultation, and participation. *Information* refers to situations where public officials make decisions unilaterally and subsequently inform the public about these decisions. *Consultation* includes the citizens' consultation in the policy formulation, but citizens have no say in the final decision. *Participation* means that citizens are actively involved in the decision-making process, and their recommendations are included in the final decisions.

4. The varying degrees of citizen participation in Romania after the fall of the communist regime: from transparency and activism to public innovation

Over time, citizen participation in Romania transitioned through varying degrees of engagement. The deficit of democratic practices in the communist regime had long-lasting effects on civic engagement. At the beginning of the transition period from communism to democracy, citizens' distrust of politicians and public institutions was high (Tătar, 2016), and they lacked the courage to express their opinions or make recommendations (Pascariu and Buțiu, 2010). At the same time, public institutions were predominantly hierarchical and populated with former communist elites who resisted administrative reforms. They had no incentive to increase the openness of public institutions, and citizens' participation was perceived as an additional burden. During the transition period, civic engagement gradually progressed through the initial stages of the ladder of participation. It took time to institutionalize mechanisms of information disclosure and to increase the level of administrative transparency. Even more difficult and challenging was the transition of citizens' involvement in decision-making from protests against government decisions or sporadic consultation projects to more systematic and institutionalized forms of participation (Stringer, Scriciu and Reed, 2009). However, citizen involvement in any form of civic engagement remained low (Tufiş, 2014; Tătar, 2016).

The adoption of sunshine laws at the beginning of the 2000s contributed significantly to the consolidation of information disclosure and transparency in the decision-making process. These laws aimed to reduce information asymmetry, create a framework for two-way communication between public officials and citizens, and improve decision-making based on clear rules. However, in the first years of implementation, variations in the administrative capacity of public institutions significantly influenced the actual openness (Dragoş, Neamţu and Cobârzan, 2012), as many local public institutions complied only

with the façade of the law's provisions to signal their integrity (Schnell, 2018a). Research on urban municipalities has found that, despite an increase in transparency and the provision of more information to citizens, their participation in the decision-making process remains low (Radu, 2019). Access to information was more concerned with making information available according to law and less with how the information strengthened citizens' engagement in the decision-making process (Schnell, 2018b). In this context, civic society organizations, rather than citizens, were instrumental in demanding that public institutions conform to the sunshine laws (Radu and Dragoş, 2019). In Romania, especially after the fall of communism and during the preparation period for EU accession, NGOs and the media served as guardians to transparency, ensuring compliance with transparency legislation and empowering citizens to engage in decision-making when they chose to do so (Radu, 2019; Haruța and Radu, 2010).

While civil society matured and public institutions began to engage in more interactive forms of collaboration with citizens, some municipalities in Romania adopted participatory budgeting, which involves delegating power to citizens to initiate and decide on projects that City Halls will finance (Boc, 2019; Boc and Lazăr, 2022). Participatory budgeting is a form of participation in which citizens usually have a more direct say. Local administrations in larger Romanian cities (e.g., Cluj-Napoca, Alba Iulia, Bucharest, Sibiu) have enthusiastically embraced this innovative participatory practice, hoping that giving citizens more power over issues vital to them will bridge the gap between the public and the local authorities. Some cities adopted innovation labs to foster the empowerment of stakeholders and increase their involvement in the decision-making process. Innovation labs serve as collaborative platforms that bring together local public administration, citizens, representatives from the business sector, and academia to solve complex urban problems. Such initiatives are young and sporadic, and their impact is yet to be determined (Slave *et al.*, 2023). The development of ICT has changed the communication between citizens and the administration, leading to an increased use of social media and online platforms. Although these forms of civic engagement become increasingly important and enhance citizen involvement at various stages of the decision-making process, their representativeness is limited for the entire population (Slave *et al.*, 2023).

Over time, the researchers' interest in analyzing citizen participation rose in Romania. Most research is case study-based (Stringer, Scriciu and Reed, 2009) or is conducted on a small scale, such as in a community (Duțu and Diaconu, 2017; Vrabie and Ianole-Călin, 2020). Most research focuses on a specific form of engagement, or case studies are conducted on niche areas, such as urban and land use planning (Vrabie and Ianole-Călin, 2020; Slave *et al.*, 2023; Nae *et al.*, 2019), and the environment (Stringer Scriciu and Reed, 2009). There are few nationwide studies on participatory practices in Romania (Haruța and Radu, 2010; Radu, 2019), and none of them have been documented with data over a longer period. The study we conducted aims to fill in this gap and to investigate how participatory governance in Romania changed after the fall of the communist regime. The following section presents the research methodology that we used to collect and analyze the data.

5. Research methodology

The goal of this research is to analyze how the forms of citizen participation have transformed in Romania after the fall of the communist regime. To achieve this goal, we conducted two surveys on the perceptions of civil servants and public employees regarding citizen participation in the local-level decision-making process in Romania. The first survey was conducted in late winter of 2009 and early spring of 2010, and the second was conducted in spring and summer 2024. In this section, we intend to explain the methodologies of the two surveys. In both pieces of research, we studied citizen participation, focusing on the perceptions of civil servants/ public employees from three types of local public administration institutions: county councils, city councils (for municipalities and towns), and commune councils (Table 1 describes the 2010 and 2024 samples).

In our first study, we distributed questionnaires (by post) to individuals occupying key positions within the Romanian local public administration, specifically the mayor, vice mayor, secretary of the administrative unit, city manager, or public administrator, where applicable. Additionally, we targeted top-level civil servants, including heads of departments or offices. For county councils, we directed our questionnaires to individuals holding positions such as president of the county council, vice president of the county council, county manager or public administrator, secretary of the county, and top-level civil servants. All survey respondents were civil servants, except for the mayors and vice-mayors of local councils, as well as the presidents and vice-presidents of county councils, who, at that time, were all directly elected by citizens for a four-year term. The response rate for this survey was approximately 30%. In 2010, we primarily chose to survey top-level civil servants because we regarded them as knowledgeable individuals about the decision-making processes within public institutions at the local and county levels. They serve as a critical interface between the deliberative body (city or county council) and the executive body, which frequently interacts with citizens and other community stakeholders. In addition to their expertise and knowledge, civil servants and public employees can bring a long-term perspective to the implementation of policies and the evaluation of decision-making processes.

For our 2024 study, we changed the data collection approach in two main respects: we distributed the survey online (using Google Forms) and no longer focused on the top civil servants. Instead, we requested that the survey be filled out by an employee in a service responsible for public relations, media, or protocol, or by an employee who understands/ knows about citizens' participation in decision-making within the administrative unit served by the institution. We assumed that the individuals responsible for public relations, media, or protocol are more knowledgeable about aspects of citizen engagement. In the second stage of data collection, the overall response rate was 20.34%. The sample included 41 county councils, 41 county seat municipality councils, and Bucharest as the capital, 283 municipalities and towns (excluding the county seat municipalities and including the city halls of Bucharest's sectors), and 2,686 communes. A database containing email addresses of all county councils, municipality/ town halls, and commune councils was used to

Table 1: Sample characteristics (2010 vs. 2024)

Sample characteristics	Indicator	2010 (%)	2024 (%)	No. 2024	Δ 2024-2010 %
Gender	Female	43.3	68.9	426	25.6
	Male	56.1	31.1	192	-25.0
	TOTAL	99.4%	100%	618	
Administrative level of the institution	Local Council	65.8	95.2	594	29.4
	County Council	34.2	4.8	30	-29.4
	TOTAL	100%	100%	624	
Location of the public institution	Urban	87.5	33.0	206	-54.5
	Rural	12.6	67.0	418	54.4
	TOTAL	100%	100%	624	
Administrative unit	Commune	12.6	68.9	430	56.3
	Town	11.8	15.5	97	3.7
	Municipality	13.1	7.1	44	-6
	County seat municipality	32.1	3.7	23	28.4
	County	30.5	4.8	30	-25.7
	TOTAL	100%	100%	624	
No. of employees in the institution	Below 20 employees	9.4	33.3	208	23.9
	20-50 employees	9.7	36.7	229	27.0
	51-100 employees	14.6	12.7	79	-1.9
	101-200 employees	43.1	10.6	66	-32.5
	201-400 employees	12.4	4.5	28	-7.9
	Over 400 employees	10.8	2.2	14	-8.6
	TOTAL	100%	100%	624	
No. of inhabitants of the administrative unit	Below 2,000 inhabitants	3	17.1	107	14.1
	2,000 – 10,000 inhabitants	16.9	58.3	364	41.4
	10,001 – 50,000 inhabitants	14.2	15.1	94	0.9
	50,001 – 100,000 inhabitants	15.9	2.1	13	-13.8
	100,001 – 400,000 inhabitants	36.8	4.8	30	-32.0
	400,001 – 700,000 inhabitants	12.9	2.1	13	-10.8
	Over 700,001 inhabitants	0.3	0.5	3	0.2
	TOTAL	100%	100%	624	

Source: The authors

send an email asking the recipient institutions to forward the link to the survey to the employee/ department/ service that dealt with the public relations, media, or protocol affairs within the institution. The first emails were sent starting in March 2024, and the second follow-up emails were sent as reminders in July 2024. In total, more than 3,500 emails were sent. By the end of July, we collected responses from 626 public institutions, and 624 were considered valid.

It is worth noting that the adjustments to the data collection approaches resulted in some notable changes to the sample characteristics. Given the large proportion of communes as the smallest administrative unit in Romania, it comes as no surprise that the local council, as an institution type, and the commune, as an administrative unit type, are overrepresented (95.2% for local councils and 68.9% for communes) in the 2024 research. Despite this, the overemphasis on communes did not automatically result in an overrepresentation of the rural area, since about 33% of the surveys were still answered by employees from cities and towns. In 2010, the data depicted employees' views from county councils (30.5%) and urban areas (87.5%). However, that did not accurately represent the Romanian administrative setting — approximately 45–50% of Romania's total population resides in rural areas. From a methodological standpoint, the sample characteristics from 2024 provide a more precise and balanced representation of institutions split by rural-urban areas, type of institutions (local/ county council), and administrative units (be it commune, municipality/ town, or county). Even more, we consider that the response rates for the 2024 survey speak again of the relatively balanced representation of public sector employees' views: the response rate for counties and cities/ towns exceeds 50% or comes close to that percentage, while the response rate for communes is 16% which we regard as satisfactory given the disproportionately more significant number of communes in the sample. More than 20% of the survey respondents are employees in institutions in the northwest region, and the explanation for the highest response by region is that our university is in Cluj-Napoca, a municipality in the same region.

Our position is that the methodological changes outlined above do not impact the relevance of the findings or the validity of the comparisons drawn between the two surveys, provided that the data accurately represents the actual administrative and contextual settings in Romania as closely as possible. Given the limited scholarly knowledge about citizen participation in Romania, we believe an 'imperfect' sample representation does not prevent gaining valuable insights into the researched subject.

6. Research findings

We operationalized Arnstein's (1969) 'ladder of participation' into seven items measuring civil servants'/ public employees' perceptions of different levels of citizen participation and we asked the respondents to rate their agreement or disagreement with these statements on a scale from 1 to 5 (where 1 represented total disagreement and 5 total agreement). We used the following seven statements: (1) The institution actively seeks to facilitate the involvement of both citizens and groups of individuals in society in decisions affecting the community; (2) When the institution makes a decision, the views expressed by citizens on the matter covered by the decision are taken into account; (3) The institution provides citizens with the necessary information about the decisions made; (4) The institution allows citizens to report problems in the community; (5) The institution allows citizens to propose solutions to problems in the community; (6) Citizens are only informed about the

institution’s decisions without allowing them to influence the decision-making process; (7) The institution makes decisions about how to solve problems in the community without prior information or consultation with community members. Then, we grouped these statements into three categories: non-participation (statements 6 and 7), tokenism (statements 3, 4, and 5), and citizen power (statements 1 and 2). In creating these categories, we aimed to closely follow Arnstein’s definitions for the degrees of participation in her model. We calculated the Cronbach’s Alpha coefficient for each of the three categories for 2010 and 2024. All values are above 0.6, which indicates the reliability of the new categories. The Cronbach’s Alpha values for 2010 are: non-participation – 0.698, tokenism – 0.856, and citizen power – 0.724. The values of Cronbach’s Alpha for 2024 are: non-participation – 0.796, tokenism – 0.902, and citizen power – 0.746.

The research results showed an increase in participation at all levels, regardless of the category (non-participation, tokenism, and citizen power) (see Table 2). Both surveys showed a generally positive outlook on citizen participation. The increase in scores on the Likert scale did not exceed one point, while for two statements (2.1 and 2.2), the increase was less than 0.5 points. The order of scores in 2024 closely matches the order of views from 2010, with the highest and lowest-ranking statements remaining almost the same (see Table 2).

Table 2: An adaptation of the 'ladder of participation' to Romania (2010 vs. 2024)

To what extent do you agree with the following statements about citizen participation in the decision-making process in your institution? (1 = 'strongly disagree' and 5 = 'strongly agree') (Min = 1, Max = 5)	Avg. 2010	Avg. 2024	Std. dev. 2024	Δ 2024-2010
1.1. The institution actively seeks to facilitate the involvement of both citizens and groups of individuals in society in decisions affecting the community. (<i>citizen power</i>)	3.40	3.90	0.97	0.57
1.2. When the institution makes a decision, the views expressed by citizens on the matter covered by the decision are taken into account. (<i>citizen power</i>)	3.67	4.22	0.90	0.55
2.1. The institution provides citizens with the necessary information about the decisions made. (<i>tokenism</i>)	3.87	4.34	0.87	0.47
2.2. The institution allows citizens to report problems in the community. (<i>tokenism</i>)	4.17	4.53	0.76	0.36
2.3. The institution allows citizens to propose solutions to problems in the community. (<i>tokenism</i>)	3.78	4.39	0.83	0.61
3.1. Citizens are only informed about the institution’s decisions without allowing them to influence the decision-making process. (<i>non-participation</i>)	2.15	2.77	1.37	0.62
3.2. The institution makes decisions about how to solve problems in the community without prior information or consultation with community members. (<i>non-participation</i>)	1.75	2.50	1.38	0.75
Avg. scores for non-participation 2010 vs 2024: 1.92 vs. 2.63				
Avg. scores for tokenism 2010 vs 2024: 3.94 vs. 4.42				
Avg. scores for citizen power 2010 vs. 2024: 3.54 vs 4.1				

Source: The authors

We have measured non-participation by gauging public employees' attitudes about instances in which citizens are only informed about the institution's decisions (3.1 = 2.15 in 2010 vs. 3.2 = 2.77 in 2024) or the institution makes decisions about how to solve problems in the community without prior information or consultation with community members (3.2 = 1.75 in 2010 and 3.2 = 2.5 in 2024). The two degrees of non-participation registered the highest overall increases in respondents' agreement compared to the two surveys (0.62 and 0.75). Looking into explanations for these differences requires caution since these dimensions of citizen participation are actually 'negative' or, in a sense, detrimental to public administrations and their constituents. The scale measures the disagreement, rather than the agreement, of public employees. Contrasting the findings for this category of participation with the two remaining categories raises some questions about the actual improvement or decline of participatory forms of policy-making in Romania. Speculating on the reasons for these differences is unnecessary as the explanation becomes more apparent when examining the sample characteristics. The average scores are influenced by the type of administrative unit and a larger number of communes included in the sample, indicating that changes in citizen participation may be primarily influenced by the size of the community (see Table 3). Hence, from a methodological standpoint, the respondents' views from communes have weighed more in 2024 than in 2010 (12.6% in 2010 and 68.9% in 2024).

Data correspondingly indicates that public institutions have continued to a greater extent to facilitate citizen notices about public policy issues in their communities. This trend demonstrates that public institutions kept providing essential tools and opportunities for citizen involvement and establishing new or maintaining new communication channels for community members to express their concerns. Another interesting observation is that two out of three statements measuring tokenism saw the slightest increases in respondents' agreements (2.1. = 0.47 and 2.2 = 0.36).

In the context of Arnstein's participation ladder, creating mechanisms for citizens to bring public issues to the attention of authorities falls under the category of 'tokenism' in citizen participation. We'll reiterate that tokenism includes informing, consultation, and placation. These results highlight the efforts of public administrations to maintain consistent communication with citizens and to increase transparency. However, although these findings may seem optimistic, it is premature to praise the Romanian public administration for enhanced citizen participation. The survey findings may reflect respondents' desire for their institutions to be seen as transparent entities, consistent with the requirements of the Law on Decision-Making Transparency (Law no. 52/2003). This law requires public institutions to inform citizens about decisions adopted at the local level and equip them with opportunities to provide feedback.

We also notice an increase in the average score regarding the institution's efforts to facilitate citizen involvement in decision-making, rising from 3.41 in 2010 to 3.98 in 2024 (1.1). Another increase is distinguished in the average score for an institution's initiative to include more often the views expressed by citizens in decisions adopted on public matters

(1.2) (from 3.67 in 2010 to 4.22 in 2024). Since both statements have measured the degrees of citizen power, this change indicates a growing recognition of the importance of more closely engaging citizens and communities in decisions that impact them, promoting, in Arnstein's terminology, a sense of citizen power. In the analyzed time frame, these timid changes in citizen power can be interpreted as an evolution towards more participatory approaches employed by public institutions or, even more significantly, can be seen as signs of a slightly more consolidated local democracy. Either way, the mere confirmation through data of these rising trends in delegated and citizen power suggests an evolving landscape where public institutions gradually recognize the importance of engaging with citizens and incorporating their voices in the decision-making process at the local level.

One noteworthy methodological observation is that we do not consider the categories mutually exclusive, meaning that different forms of citizen engagement can coexist. Additionally, as mentioned in the previous sections, the fact that in some cases, citizens are only informed or consulted is not necessarily a bad practice, depending on the specific public issue under consideration. For instance, in some contexts, merely informing or consulting citizens might be sufficient or preferable, particularly for technical or time-sensitive matters. Pertaining to the above point of view, Cornwall (2008) mentions that while informing as a form of citizen participation 'might limit more active engagement [...], keeping a flow of information going is in itself important, rather than being simply a 'lesser' form of participation.' (Cornwall, 2008). Our scalar approach aims to capture nuanced extents in participation levels, adjusting Arnstein's framework to current governance contexts.

These results indicate a trend toward more openness of public institutions and the consolidation of citizens' importance in the democratic life of their communities; however, these developments are timid, and further efforts are needed to achieve significant citizen empowerment. We questioned whether this consolidation of the participatory process occurred in all public institutions from local public administration or is more prevalent in some institutions/ communities. Therefore, we broke down the results regarding the level of citizen participation based on the characteristics of public institutions (administrative level of the institution — Local or County Council, location of the public institution — urban or rural, type of administrative unit — commune, town, municipality, county seat municipality, and county, number of employees in the institution, number of inhabitants of the administrative unit served by the public institution), and we compared the results of the two surveys conducted in 2010 and 2024. Table 3 shows the comparative results.

In 2010, the only statistically significant difference for all three dimensions of citizen participation (non-participation, tokenism, and citizen power) was found between Local Councils and County Councils, indicating a higher level of citizen engagement with local-level public institutions compared to county-level institutions. One possible explanation is that the local-level administration has more responsibilities connected to the daily lives of citizens, while the county-level administration has responsibilities related to the planning and development of infrastructure at a wider geographical level, which has less visibility for citizens. This finding suggests that the content of issues under discussion

Table 3: Comparison of the categories of participation depending on the characteristics of administrative units (2010 vs. 2024)

		Non-participation				Tokenism				Citizen power			
		Mean 2010	Sig.	Mean 2024	Sig.	Mean 2010	Sig.	Mean 2024	Sig.	Mean 2010	Sig.	Mean 2024	Sig.
Administrative level of the institution	Local Council	1.86	0.035	2.65	0.026	4.05	0.010	4.40	0.005	3.69	0.01	4.09	0.060
	County Council	2.15		2.12		3.75		4.80		3.25		4.38	
Location of the public institution	Rural	1.69	0.149	2.74	0.001	3.88	0.592	4.33	0.000	3.53	0.933	4.02	0.000
	Urban	1.97		4.37		3.97		4.60		3.55		4.28	
Administrative unit	Commune	1.69	0.283	2.75	0.000	3.88	0.180	4.33	0.000	3.53	0.086	4.01	0.002
	Town	1.97		2.53		4.25		4.52		3.92		4.23	
	Municipality	2.16		2.40		3.88		4.60		3.57		4.31	
	County seat municipality	1.83		1.72		4.03		4.75		3.62		4.45	
	County	2.05		2.12		3.83		4.80		3.33		4.38	
No. of employees	Below 20	2.00	0.733	2.79	0.000	4.05	0.079	4.31	0.000	3.55	0.234	4.00	0.000
	20-50	2.13		2.73		3.57		4.35		3.34		4.02	
	51-100	1.95		2.61		4.21		4.49		3.85		4.15	
	101-200	1.88		2.20		3.97		4.69		3.57		4.42	
	201-400	2.16		1.82		3.94		4.69		3.34		4.44	
	Over 400	1.83		2.07		3.77		4.89		3.35		4.46	
	No. of inhabitants	Below 2,000		1.89		0.424		2.84		0.001		3.82	
2,000 – 10,000		1.83	2.72	4.13	4.35		3.77	4.02					
10,001 – 50,000		1.89	2.31	3.79	4.55		3.40	4.30					
50,001 – 100,000		2.24	2.38	3.82	4.86		3.50	4.61					
100,001 – 400,000		1.85	2.00	4.08	4.81		3.62	4.43					
400,001 – 700,000		2.06	2.03	3.75	4.66		3.25	4.26					
Over 700,001		3.25	1.75	4.00	4.83		3.75	4.25					

Source: The authors

mobilizes citizens' engagement in different ways. The citizens' interest in signaling issues on the public agenda of Local Councils is higher compared to County Councils, both in 2010 and 2024 (see Table 3).

However, in 2024, the picture of citizens' participation depending on the characteristics of communities and public institutions is much clearer. One important finding from the 2024 data is that the development of a more participatory decision-making process does not occur everywhere. The perception of a higher level of citizen involvement in policy formulation (equivalent to citizen power in our typology) is higher in communities located in urban areas, specifically those that are county seats and have between 50,001 and 100,000 inhabitants (see Table 3). Larger institutions with more than 400 employees are more open to more intensive forms of citizen engagement. We can conclude that the size

of communities and public institutions matters, and therefore, the availability of resources also matters for more intense levels of civic engagement.

We observe the distinctions between large and small communities even more clearly when examining the tokenism dimension, which involves public institutions informing citizens about decisions made, allowing citizens to report problems, and proposing solutions. Public institutions located in urban areas, county seats, and with between 50,001 and 100,000 inhabitants tend to have higher scores on this dimension. Larger institutions, with more than 400 employees, report higher transparency than those with fewer employees. Non-participation is more often encountered in very small communes located in rural areas, which have less than 2,000 inhabitants, and the City Hall has fewer than 20 employees (see Table 3). In these small rural communities, public officials predominantly inform citizens about the decisions they make without prior consultation.

7. Conclusions

The research revealed a moderate consolidation of participatory culture and an increase in citizen participation in the decision-making process in Romania between 2010 and 2024. Citizens tend to be more involved in making decisions in their communities, and there is a gradual transformation from one-way communication to more active forms of two-way communication and participation in community decisions. However, this development is not uniform across all local communities analyzed, as we found that the size of the local communities plays a significant role in this variation. The research showed that the larger the size of the administrative units analyzed, the higher the degree of citizens' engagement. This finding is similar to the conclusion reached by Pop (2005), who noted that the administrative fragmentation of the territory in Romania negatively impacts the capacity of public institutions to provide incentives for local public participation. However, this research finding should be interpreted cautiously because in small communities, citizens' interactions with public officials often occur in informal contexts, where people know each other and communication is more informal, as power distance is much smaller. Future analyses should investigate the mediating influence of civil servants' perceptions on citizens' involvement over the generally perceived level of civic engagement in communities. The study conducted by Radzik-Maruszak, Haveri and Pawlowska (2020) in Poland and Finland showed that local councilors' perceptions of the importance of citizen participation differ. Therefore, the use of civic engagement mechanisms is not only influenced by community size and resources but also by the importance of participation for public officials.

The legislation made mandatory the involvement of citizens in the decision-making process in Romania, and the local public institutions tend to comply with the legal provisions. This might be an explanation for the changes we observed. However, a more meaningful participation process should extend beyond information and consultation, aiming instead for more effective forms of citizen empowerment. A study conducted in Spain

and Germany showed that in the absence of additional requirements to use internet-based technologies or other more interactive forms of participation, local public institutions comply minimally with public participation requirements (Royo, Yetano and Acerete, 2011). In this regard, a more detailed analysis of civic participation in Romania should investigate the impact of digital tools on civic involvement.

Our study has some research limitations. The samples from our 2010 and 2024 surveys differ in size and characteristics. These differences present both challenges and opportunities for analysis. Obviously, the variation in sample composition may reflect changes in survey response patterns over the 14-year period. While this limits direct comparability, it also offers insights into how perceptions of citizen participation have developed across different types of public sector institutions and employees. Our study captures the views of public sector employees regarding decision-making processes and citizen participation, which are primarily subjective. This subjective measure is helpful as it reflects the perceptions of those directly involved in establishing and implementing participatory practices (Groves *et al.*, 2009). However, it is essential to acknowledge that these perceptions may not align with the objective dimensions of participation or citizens' actual experiences. We chose to investigate civil servants'/ public employees' perceptions because they have a broader perspective on the participatory processes organized in their communities, and their motives and beliefs on the usefulness of some innovative civic engagement methods can sometimes be even obstacles to adopting them (Pretty, 1995; Aikins and Krane, 2010).

We did not assess the effectiveness of citizen participation forms. Evaluating effectiveness would require a different methodological approach, potentially including case studies, and future research could address this gap by examining how different forms of participation translate into improved governance at the local level and into which types of decision-making outcomes. Finally, a more comprehensive understanding of citizen participation would require examining both its advantages and disadvantages. Although our approach was more oriented towards the benefits of citizen participation, we acknowledge that, depending on the context, citizen engagement can also pose some potential risks or negative impacts from the perspective of public administrations (Michels, 2012; Irvin and Stansbury, 2004). Increased resources, excessive time allocation, lengthy negotiation or deliberation processes, and a lack of consensus regarding policy options or effects (Gaventa and Barrett, 2012) are some impediments that could interfere with placing a high or higher emphasis on citizens' input in decision-making processes.

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