

Active Participation of Citizens in Administrative Decision-Making Process

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Abstract. The article is a case study on active participation of citizens in administrative decisions-making process, starting with a presentation of general coordinates of public administration and Solutions in the Romanian legal system. Constanta City Hall involves actively and transparently its citizens in making decisions by applying procedures that enable the public to intervene in decision-making process until the influence and control stage. Thus, under a partnership with the Center for Studies and Socio- Humanistic Surveys "Andrei Șaguna" (C.S.A.S.U.), the town hall periodically carries out population consulting on various topics of general interest, including those related to Town hall budgeting. In the following lines, we will present the research conducted to identify the priorities for budgetary allocation for 2011.

Keywords: Framework of public administration, Citizens, Decision-Making Process.

1. *Local public authority in citizens' service*

About the Romanian democratic system can currently be said that it meets most of the standard requirements regarding the legal **frame** and form aspects (organization), at the local public authorities' level.

Unfortunately, the distrust and discontent of the citizens towards how the responsive elected officials respond to local community **problems** shows that, with respect to the "background" of the system (its functioning) at the local level, many of the mechanisms are dysfunctional, remaining only on paper. The active participation of citizens in making administrative decisions and in the process of drafting regulations are established by Law no. 52/21 January 2003 regarding decisional transparency in public administration, aiming to:

- Establish minimum procedural rules applicable to ensure decisional transparency within local and central public administration authorities, elected or appointed, and also other public institutions that use public financial resources, in the relations established between them with the citizens and their legally established associations
- Increase of the responsibility of public administration towards the citizen, as a recipient of the administrative decision
- Stimulate the active participation of citizens in making administrative decisions and in the process of drafting legislation
- Increase transparency in the entire public administration

It should be noted that in big cities, because of urban congestion and the pace of life nowadays, there is no community regarding the communication but also the lack of union of energies for a common interest. Therefore, it becomes vital the role of civil society which takes on the role of bridge between citizens, assuming the common problems of citizens, which are then put on the table of local authorities in a professional manner, ensuring in this way, maximum attention from them.

Many times, public participation in decision-making is incorrectly defined, and because of this, it is often considered ineffective. Some people believe that simply informing citizens can be defined as a process of public participation. Sometimes, public participation stops in the consultation phase. Consulting citizens on decisions to be taken can only be effective when it takes place in the stage of **conception**, when the options are open. However, there are procedures that allow the public to intervene in decision-making until

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the influence and control stage. In this respect, it is necessary to know the legal procedures for access to information and the effective public participation techniques.

An objective process of public participation in decision-making involves the following main steps:

- Identify the public or group of people affected by a particular decision which is intended to be taken, namely the separation of people and institutions directly involved in obtaining or making the decision
- Receiving of the public opinion, building consensus within the affected group, namely: access to information to all interested parties, interest groups separation, negotiation, acceptance of issues, delegating people to represent group interests
- Action itself, respectively usage of public participation techniques for obtaining the decision

The fundamental principles of public participation are stipulated in laws and are generally related to three issues: access to information, participation rights and framework, the right of petition and appeal in court. Besides legal requirements (formal), there are many non-formal (non-legal) ways.

Local authorities can play a vital role in supporting public participation - mainly by creating an open and transparent atmosphere. Some local authorities have defined their role as "resource providers" rather than "leaders" in solving community problems, supporting citizens' initiatives to solve problems by identifying available resources. Local authorities can support the involvement of citizens through: clear definition of the mission and objectives of local authorities; educating citizens about making decisions and how they can be involved; convocations of the interested groups to address community problems, instead of maintaining control over problems; engaging citizens in the process of achieving a vision on the community, setting objectives, identifying problems, and developing new solutions; stimulate public discussion on values, aspirations and fears; making collective actions and recognizing that everyone - citizens, local authorities, employees of the administration, the media - has civic responsibilities and a unique contribution to achieve; empower citizens by supporting them in developing knowledge, skills, and ability to become a partner in decision-making.

2. The Active Participation of Citizens in Making Administrative Decisions - Case Study Constanta City Hall

2.1. Objectives and Methodologies

Constanta City Hall involves actively and transparently its citizens in making decisions by applying procedures that enable the public to intervene in decision-making process until the influence and control stage. Thus, under a partnership with the Center for Studies and Socio- Humanistic Surveys "Andrei Şaguna" (C.S.A.S.U.), the town hall periodically carries out population consulting on various topics of general interest, including those related to Town hall budgeting. In the following lines, we will present the research conducted to identify the priorities for budgetary allocation for 2011. Before asking people on budget allocation, Constanta Town Hall was required to identify, from their own perspective, top priorities for the town to see if there are common opinions between the local government and the citizen.

For the study development, three research hypotheses have been proposed:

H1. There are differences between public administration opinion and real needs of citizens.

H2. Needs of citizens are still closely related to solving social problems.

H3. There are significant opinion differences between people below the age of 35 and people over 60.

The research was conducted using the survey technique, included nine questions and two ways of application were used:

- The questionnaire administered to a sample of 1,600 **people at the residence of the surveyed**; the sample is representative for over 18 years old people from Constanta, who were chosen randomly from the electoral lists based on a statistical step
- Questionnaire applied On-line. An on-line application was made and posted on the site of Constanta City Hall and was accessed 1825 times

We selected two ways of applying in order to enable a greater number of citizens interested in the topic of budgetary resources, to express their opinion and to enable a comparative analysis between the two population samples.

We specify that the sample resulting from application of on-line tests is not representative for Constanta, because it does not respect the statistical methodology of sampling, but represent only the opinion of a specific group, whose members fall in the following pattern: informed young people who use the internet daily, usually with higher education.

The following analysis presents the results of the two samples.

2.2. Analyses results

Subjects of sample 1 - 1600 subjects (interviewed at home) were asked to identify, based on a reduced budget of Constanta Town hall, the priorities of citizens, being able to choose three options from a list of areas, and to rank them in order of importance (place 1, place 2, place 3).

Table 1: Prioritizing

CATEGORIES	rank 1	rank 2	rank 3	Average opt.
Increased security of citizens by establishing local police	38,5	10,5	10,8	19,93
The continuation of asphaltting of streets and sidewalks	24,2	19,7	9,3	17,73
The continuation of cheap housing program for young people	16	19,5	10,5	15,33
Maintenance and taking care of green spaces	2	10	7,8	6,60
Continuing the delivery of packages for pensioners and disadvantaged	9,8	21,2	14,6	15,20
Supporting sports and the teams of Constanta	1,1	4,5	6,4	4,00
Gathering stray dogs	2,9	3,6	8,7	5,07
Peninsular area development	4,1	9	17,9	10,33
Maintaining the clubs for pensioners	1,4	1,1	10,7	4,40
NS	0	1,1	3,3	1,47

Source: Authors' calculations based on C.S.A.S.U data.

There is a small percentage of the population who could identify only one priority, considering that there is only one field where money should be allocated in 2011.

In accordance with the question wording, it should be considered the highest percentage obtained for each specific place, in which people's options foreshadow as shown in Table 1.

We believe, however, that taking into account only the largest value for each place is a simplistic interpretation, which does not reflect fully and accurately people's option, which is why we chose to analyze cumulatively the first three options expressed for each site.

This interpretation reveals that there are areas that are not priorities for Constanta people concerning the allocation of funds in 2011. The questionnaire did not allow the identification of reasons: not important, do not care or not applicable because it works very well.

The fields that we will exclude from the analytical processing are:

- Maintenance and care of green spaces - 6.60 average score (sample composed mainly of women aged over 35 years)
- Supporting sports and teams of Constanta - 4.00 average score (composed mainly of men aged less than 35 years)
- Gathering stray dogs - average score 5.07 (formed mainly of women aged over 45 years)
- Maintaining clubs for pensioners - 5.07 average score (composed mainly of people aged over 40 years)

This exclusion allows a clearer picture of Constanta people's options. With one exception, *the development of the peninsular area*, all other areas selected for analytical processing have been among the top choice, two places out of three.

The *development of the peninsular area*, although obtained for the third position the highest percentage, cannot be rated as priority because of the general low percentage obtained, generated by very low scores recorded at places I and II. Among the priorities of Constanta people, *the increased security of citizens by establishing local police* is the most important, followed by continuation of the asphaltting of streets and sidewalks. *The continuation of cheap housing for young people program and Continuing delivery of packages for pensioners and disadvantaged people* are tied (in terms of average), but the second area got better positions in the places 2 and 3 (Option 1 or 2).

Even though the average scores smoothes the differences of opinion between age and gender groups, taking into account the way the options were expressed for the first place (assuming that people put first what concerns them particularly), we should note that women are more concerned with safety while men with continuing the asphaltting and the housing program for youth.

The questionnaire sought also to find people's perception of the existence of corruption facts within Constanta City Hall, and they were asked whether they believe mayoral employees take bribes. The percentage of those who think that municipality employees take bribes is 54.4% higher among women and young people aged less than 35 years.

Sample II included 1826 subjects (surveyed on-line) consisting of 42.25% men and 57.75% women with an average age of 35 years, making this sample be unrepresentative, formed of young (with a higher proportion of men reported to the general population, with an average age of 35 years, with average and above training level, active). Interpreting results based on cumulative analysis of the first three options for each place, as in the first sample, we note that the first priorities of this group are the *Increased security of citizens by establishing local police*, followed by *Continuation of the asphaltting of roads and sidewalks* and *Peninsular area development*.

The first two places overlap with the results obtained from sample I, the only difference being encountered at place 3. At the online sample, with an average age of 35, the 3rd place in priorities is the *Peninsular area development*. (This field, in the first sample, obtained the highest percentage in place three - from people aged 45 years; however, it was not classified as priority because of the low general percentage obtained, generated by very low scores recorded at places I and II).

If in the *Continuing of delivery of packages for pensioners and disadvantaged people* is evident that it could not be priority choices for young group, it is interesting that the *Continuation of the cheap housing for youth* obtained significantly lower scores online. This score can be explained on the one hand by the fact that online sample has certain features that may exclude the need for housing for group members, on the other hand over 54% of those in sample 1 who considered a priority *the Continuation of the cheap housing young people* were aged over 36 years. This demonstrates the effectiveness of the campaign and adults' concern for young people to have a house (concern stemmed from necessity and from the Romanian mentality: the parent is responsible for the child until he "settles down at his house").

It appears in young people's concern the *Support and care of green spaces*, with a significant percentage, the third option at positions 2 and 3. When asked about the perception on corruption in City Hall, the percentage who felt that this phenomenon exists in Constanta City Hall was 67.89%, a percentage much higher than in sample I, meaning the category of active population who gets in contact more frequently with City Hall employees and implicitly, have their own experience of this aspect. In Q1 question there were not recorded significant differences in the fields *Sports Supporting*, *Gathering stray dogs*, *Maintaining clubs for pensioners*.

The areas where there were differences above the significance degree are represented in the following table. The differences in scores occurred in areas of positions 2, 3 and 4 of the table are justified by different preoccupations of the age groups. The higher percentage obtained in the general sample than in the online sample, concerning the *Continuation of the cheap housing for young people* is justified by the effectiveness of the campaign and the concern of adults for young people to have their own home.

Table 2: Priorities of citizens – comparison between samples

CATEGORIES	Online sample young people	General representative sample
The continuation of cheap housing for young people program	9,79	15,33
Maintenance and care of green spaces	10,32	6,6
Continuing of granting packages for pensioners and disadvantaged people	9,61	15,2
Development of the peninsular	14,78	8,13

The two samples identified, on the first two places, with very similar percentages, the same areas. Regarding the third place there were differences between the two samples: the general sample chose the *Continuing of granting packages for pensioners and disadvantaged people*, the on-line sample (young) chose the *Development of the peninsular*. After comparing the obtained percentages, taking into account the fact that the online sample is not representative, from a scientific point of view, the priorities of Constanta people can be represented as follows: I. Increase public safety by establishing local police, II. Continuation of street and sidewalks paving program, III. Continuing to grant packages for pensioners and disadvantaged.

3. Conclusions

At the basis of citizen involvement there are several factors, among which, a particularly important role is played by local government, which needs to be transparent for citizen involvement in complex activities of the governing process. An effective governance process should ensure a continuous transfer of information from administration to citizens, thus developing an important channel of communication that will also allow gathering information from citizens. Citizen involvement, a core element of good governance concept, is relevant for the different communities, by ensuring their access to decision-making process and to policy making which directly affects them.

According to the results of the research, hypothesis 2 and 3 were fully validated and hypothesis 1 partly (66% of the opinions of citizens and public administration have coincided)

A mention is to be made, that the research results were made public by Constanta Town Hall and its results were found entirely in the budgetary resources allocation.

Four issues were fundamental for achieving this degree of citizen participation in Constanta: transparent Local Administration for involving citizens in the governance, continuous flow of information from administration to citizens and vice versa, effective methods according to which the administration gathers information from citizens, well-informed citizens, who, understanding the issues, honor their obligation to participate as equal partners in government activities.

4. References

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