Half Engaged": Citizens and the Uneven Transformation of Local Governance in Romania. Fifteen Years of Changing Perceptions of Citizen Participation

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Abstract: The paper explores how citizen participation (CP) in Romania has evolved over the past 15 years, tracing the changing relationship between local public institutions, public sector employees and the communities they serve (counties, cities/ towns, communes). Using 2 nationwide surveys of local public institutions – conducted in 2010 and 2024, encompassing over 600 local/ county administrations – the research investigates how public officials perceive citizens' involvement in decision-making and how participatory practices have changed in Romania. With an overall response rate of 20.34%, the goal of the survey conducted in 2024 was to map citizen participation by examining the following:
1.Which policy actors are involved in the different stages of the decision-making process, and to what extent are citizens included?
2.What benefits of citizen participation in decision-making processes are recognized by public sector employees?
3.Which channels do public institutions most often use to communicate with citizens and which channels do citizens use to express their concerns to public institutions?
4.How do civil servants and public employees perceive the reasons behind citizen discontent or opposition to decisions made by local authorities?
We also looked into how ICT-based communication channels facilitate interaction between PA and citizens. This aspect is of utmost importance as it underscores the increasing role of technology in enhancing CP. The comparative results of the surveys reveal a continual increase of participatory culture. Citizens are increasingly viewed as informed partners rather than passive recipients of policy decisions, and their input is more often integrated into agenda-setting and policy formulation processes. While public decisions continue to rely heavily on legal and bureaucratic frameworks – cited by more than 9 in 10 respondents as a main information source – citizens' feedback and public consultations now play a visibly greater role (50% of decision-making processes are based on information from citizens). Moreover, participation through public surveys/ online platforms has gained ground, complementing traditional channels such as council meetings and public debates. Half of officials observe active engagement in their communities, pointing to an encouraging, even if uneven, deepening of local participatory governance.
Digital communication has transformed interaction between authorities and citizens. Institutional websites, email correspondence, and social media have become central to how information is distributed, enhancing transparency and responsiveness. Yet, forms and methods of citizen participation remain uneven: smaller localities often depend on basic, legally required methods of communication, while larger urban areas experiment with broader and more interactive formats (citizen councils/participatory budgeting/living labs). Persistent barriers as information asymmetry, limited access to information, eroded civic interest in public matters, and distrust toward institutions are sources of tension between institutions and citizens according to public employees.
Ultimately, we argue that Romania's local governments are undergoing a slow but meaningful shift toward a more participatory governance. Citizen engagement, though inconsistent, is expanding in scope and importance. Strengthening these practices through improved communication, digital inclusion, civic education, and institutional openness could consolidate a more transparent and collaborative model of local participatory governance in Romania.