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Public Participation in the Decisional Process in Bucharest

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Abstract: The public participation process represents the foundation for the development of a sustainable democratic society. This research paper focuses on the relation between the citizens and public authority throughout cooperation. The concept of public participation is understood here as the interaction between different kinds of actors, through available communication channels, in order to identify needs, opinions and beliefs with the purpose of adopting and implementing them in the form of public policies and decisions. This research paper highlights a communication rupture between the public administration and the citizens in Bucharest. Given the context provided by the COVID-19 pandemic, this research paper highlights the need to modernize the public administration in order to better communicate with the population. Some of the possible causes for the miscommunication, that appeared repeatedly throughout the survey, were the disappointment of the population with the public authority, lack of civic education or difficult procedures for public participation. Some of the possible solutions mentioned by the respondents are digitalization of the process of public participation, implementation of the proposals that come from the population, better informing the citizens with respect to the projects that are to be implemented in the community and online anonymous surveys. The survey technique used in order to obtain these data was the online survey, a questionnaire applied to the population of Bucharest, from all the 6 sectors of the Capital.

Keywords: *Public participation; cooperation; civic education; technology; community; public authority.*

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1. Introduction

This paper aims to understand and analyze how the public participation of the citizens of Bucharest is conducted in the decisional process. The COVID-19 pandemic has taught us, among other things, that technology represents an essential asset for the communication era, an asset that we constantly need to improve. The research starts from two case studies. The first one was conducted in 2007 by the *Resources Center for Public Participation* and focuses on the subject of consulting and public participation in Romania. Named *Does it exist a public participation in Romania? Public participation between legislation and efficiency*, the study which was at its second edition scans the legal and social systems of Romania with a focus on the public participation, aiming to understand *"the spirit of the consulting processes"* (Preda et al., 2007, p. 5), the way in which the law is applied and last but not least, the degree of implication of the citizens. The study also includes in its second edition a chapter dedicated to the problem *Why don't the citizens participate in the decision making?* thus, referring from the start to the fact that the public implication and participation in the deciding process is rather low, at its beginnings.

The second study is a component of a project financed by the SEE 2009-2014 grants in the ONG Fond in Romania. The project is named *Transparency and quality in the public administration through social media*, being carried simultaneously in Bucharest, and Cluj, Mehedinți, Suceava and Tulcea counties, between 1st May 2014 – 30th April 2015. The studied report is named *The public administration closer to its citizens through social media* and aims to support of the *"increase of the role of the civic society in promoting the principles of a good government and the public participation of citizens in the process of elaboration and public participation at a local level"* (Bucheru, 2014, pp. 5-6).

While the first mentioned study scans the level in which is found the public participation of citizens and identifies the motives why the citizens are not more implicated in the process of decision making, the second study has a more pro-active approach. It searches to identify ways to increase the involvement of the citizens throughout the new-generations technology. Thus, in this report we will not only present the level of participation of the population in Romania but we will also present efficient ways to make the participation better. The 2020 context, throughout the COVID-19 pandemic that changed the dynamic of the entire world, forced us to see technology as one of the assets that we need to improve in order to remain in contact with

each other. This is appliable not only for individuals, but also for companies and public administrations.

The empirical component of this report represents a research conducted in the specific context of the Coronavirus pandemic, which also challenges the Public Administrations and the specific theme of public participation of decision making through isolation. This research will show the level of participation of the population today and how will technology and social media contribute to increase the public participation of the civic society.

Research questions:

[1] *Which is the level of public participation of citizens in the decision-making process?*
[2] *Which are the main reasons why citizens choose not to get more involved in the decision-making process?*
[3] *How could the citizens be motivated to get more involved in the decision-making process?*

2. Literature review

The public participation is a concept strongly related to democracy. This is a new concept *"and it doesn't have a single definition"* (Miulescu, 2017). The term has its roots in the Antiquity. Since then, it has been revigorated during the last few decades and, in the meantime, it has gained more and more notoriety and strength, together with the evolution of societies and democratic principles. *The public participation* is today a symbol of democracy and its strength, being, as a matter of fact, one of the strongest principles of the European Union. *"More and more organizations, weather they are administrative, politic, governmental economic or of another kind, consider that the entire process of adopting a new decision has to be taken together with the public which could contribute in the shaping of the decision and/or in its implementation"* (Miulescu, 2017). The principle of subsidiarity, which is based on the guaranty of the fact that the decisions inside the European Union are taken as close as possible to the citizens, at national, regional or even local levels, is strengthened by public participation and the implication of the citizens in the process of decision-making.

One possible definition that could be given to the concept of public participation is: *"The public participation is a process through which different categories of actors, weather they come from the government, the civic society, the economic environment and so on, try to interact throughout the public communication channels, with different kinds of public, in order to identify needs, opinions or beliefs, with the declared*

purpose of associating them (top-down approach) or of being associated with (bottom-up approach) the process of adopting of some decisions/public policies, in order to increase the degree of transparency and subsidiarity of public decisions or respective public policies." (Pricopie, 2010, as cited by Miulescu, 2017). The practices vary and, also based on the subsidiarity principle, are left in the hands of each European Union member. Even so, the European Union offers some basic principles regarding the participative approach in the decision-making processes. Thus, the participative approach is guaranteed by the European Union through the Treaty of Lisbon in 2007. Here are specified, in the 8th article, that *"Every citizen shall have the right to participate in the democratic life of the Union. Decisions shall be taken as openly and as closely as possible to the citizen."* (Treaty of Lisbon, 2007).

Even before the Treaty of Lisbon, the European Union was preoccupied by the participative approach, known from 2001 as the *White Book of a Good Governance*, which highlights the 5 principles of a *good governance*, mentioning that these can only be applied together by a public institution. Thus, these 5 principles are: *[1] Openness – an active communication regarding its activity and decisions; the use of an accessible language; [2] Participation – insured in all the stages of a public policy, starting from the initiation up until its implementation and evaluation; [3] Responsibility – the clarification of the roles of different institutions and ownership of the responsibility by each institution; [4] Efficiency – the public policies need clear objectives in order to evaluate the future impact and the use of anterior experience in order to provide what is needed at a required moment and [5] Coherence – the public policies need to be coherent, easily understandable and consistent.* (Preda et al, 2007, p. 13)

2.1. Public participation in Romania

> *„Romania is among the few countries that have a law destined to public consultation. The law 52/2003, Law of the decisional transparency, is applied "to authorities from the central and local public administration, chosen or named, as well as to other public institutions which use public financial resources". Basically, to this law are subject the public municipality, the Local and County Councils, as well as Ministries, Supreme Council of the Magistracy and so on"* (Preda et al, 2007, p. 9)

Even though Romania benefits from different laws that can ensure its transparency in terms of decision-making and public participation, the studies have revealed that there is a very low participation rate from the citizens. *"Only 30% of the citizens that have voting rights [over 18 years of age] participated in all the elections that were organized during the past 4 years"* (Bucheru,

2014, p. 14). Among the causes identified by the research mentioned above are: *[1] reduced performance of the public institutions* – a fact that can be translated into a deprecated image and a crisis of capital and image for these institutions; *[2] failure of the governors to combat corruption and to respect the principles of the democracy* – the economic and financial crisis affected both institutions and citizens, thus leading towards a number of problems which reflect as a decrease of the living conditions in the public space. This fact leads us to the third identified cause, *[3] the leaning of the citizens towards their personal problems rather than to those of the community.*

2.2. The civic culture

The education of the young citizens and their attitude towards the active implication in the life of the community is obtained starting from the first years of schooling, as part of the civic education that children receive. When we approach the subject of the civic education of young citizens, we speak, in fact, about the formation of the youth as citizens of the state they belong to, as unique and dignified human beings, that know their rights and obligations. As the children grow into men, they become active parts of the society, being capable through their attitudes and actions to influence the society and community they belong to.

In order to speak about the *civic culture* of an individual we must, in fact, decompose this concept according to the two terms that form it. Thus, to have *a civic culture* means, in fact, *to be conscious of your role as a citizen,* to know your rights and obligations. There are three components that can be identified here: *[1] the civic component; [2] the political component; [3] the social component*. The civic culture represents *the fundamental rules of the life in the society, the independence, the responsibility, the human rights and so on.*

Almond and Verba speak about a culture of participation, considering that exist three conditions which influence and condition the active participation of the individuals in the society (Almond & Verba, 1996, as cited by Preda et al, p. 21):

[1] Cognitive conditions – how much do the citizens know about the public system that governs them;
[2] Affective conditions – how satisfied are the citizens by the system, how much do they trust the public administration, the politicians, how satisfied are they by the way in which the decisions are made or implemented and so on
[3] Evaluative conditions – how do the citizens evaluate the results that the governing system produces (positive, negative or indifferent)

2.3. The current state of knowledge

According to the research conducted by the *Resources Center for Public Participation*, coordinated by Oana Preda, Sînziana Olteanu and Florina Presadă, the data regarding the importance of public participation show as an increased interest in the interaction between Municipalities/Councils and NGOs. At least at a declarative level, 80% of the respondents declared that the interaction between the Local Public Administration and the Civic Society or its representatives is very useful. The representatives of the Local Public Administration (LPA) state that *"the stipulations in the transparency law – the main law that regulates the public participation, influence positively the activity of the institution (67.9%)"* (Preda et al, 2007, p. 41).

When asked *Why isn't there a better implication from the citizens?* most of the respondents mentioned *the lack of trust from the NGOs and from the citizens in the sincerity of the public authority* (Preda et al, 2007, p. 47). This information is mentioned also in 2014, when a study conducted by *the "Assistance and Programs for the Sustainable Development – 21st Agenda" Association* highlights the same problems of trust. *"Previous studies, conducted on the same theme by the "Assistance and Programs for the Sustainable Development – 21st Agenda" Association highlight possible causes invoked by the citizens for this behavior*[1]*: the formalistic nature of the process of consulting, the lack of trust in the deciding factors, lack of time of the citizens, general disregard for the citizens' proposals"* (Bucheru, 2014, p. 20).

The lack of trust in the public administration, the main cause mentioned in regard to the low degree of involvement of the population in the public decisions, is observed and described by other representatives of the civic society as well. Thus, the NGOs highlighted that the lack of trust from the population towards the public administration can be described through: *[1] lack of honesty* (the public administration is interested in the opinion of the population only at a declarative level, while, in fact, the authorities have a formalistic attitude with regard to the consultations and present a patronizing behavior, as if the deciding process belonged to them); *[2] the authorities function in a sterile environment* (the public authorities do not desire to get closer to the population and present a reactive attitude towards their problems and needs; the decisions are not designed to meet the real needs of the inhabitants); *[3] outdated mentality* (there is still an obvious seclusion in the old habits, an outdated mentality, and the public participation has very little impact on the community. The important

[1] *The participants in the study were asked about their desire to get involved in civic activities at a local level*

decisions with regard to the community are not really influenced by the public participation, which leads to disappointment and frustration). *"The earlier mentioned facts show us that the NGOs are distrustful in the results that their actions and participations in different consultations might have."* (Preda et al, 2007, pp. 48-49)

A second reason invoked by the citizens is represented by the *difficult procedures*. There is a guide regarding the *Participation of the civic society in the decisional process,* created in 2013, which describes a few of the mechanism that we have in Romania for ensuring the public participation. *"The communication channels and the methods of persuasion are very diverse and it is necessary that an organization which intends to influence different public policies will develop competences for activities such as: writing and editing texts; researches and studies; organization of events; public discourses; publishing and production of audio and video materials and so on"* (Dinu et al, 2013, p. 30). It is noticeable that, from these *mechanisms* mentioned earlier in the guide regarding the participation of the civic society, are missing the ones that are accessible directly to the simple citizens, those that have a voting right and which, normally, should have also the civic responsibility to express their opinion regarding different decisions that affect their society/community. This remark is also present in the study conducted by the Resources Center for Public Participation: *"Is there public participation in Romania? The public participation between legislation and efficiency"*. The study mentions that *"although everybody appreciates the two main laws that regulate the public participation in Romania, most of the participants in this research understand them mainly as instruments for the NGOs, considering them too complicated for the citizens"* (Preda et al, 2007, p. 49).

The third and last reason invoked for the low implication of the citizens in the decision-making process was *the weak cohesion of the civic society*. Thus, there are mentioned two types of organizations: on one hand, there are [1] the large organizations, powerful and with great visibility and influence over the public decisions, which can pressurize the public authorities and, on the other hand, there are he [2] small organizations, with less experience and preparation, which don't have much influence and that cannot manage to make their voices heard. In addition, the organizations recognize the fact that *"the public participation requires costs: time, human resources, money"* (Preda et al, 2007, p. 50), elements that the small organizations or the individual citizens don't dispose of. This reality leads to a *public participation*, in fact, *limited to only those NGOs that dispose of sufficient influence and resources in order to make a mark on the public decision*.

2.4. Self-evaluation of the public institutions

A study regarding the impression that public institutions have on the citizens highlighted the fact that the population have a very low interaction with the public institutions in order to solve problems. *"50.3% go to the Municipality less than once a year or never"* (APDD, 2010, p. 10), shows the mentioned study. At the same time, the NGOs have very low interaction with the citizens. Approximately 85.4% of the people who participated in the study go less than once a year or never to an NGO in order to solve a problem (APDD, 2010, p. 10). The results mentioned earlier, together with the information that most of the laws are perceived as being rather for the NGOs than for the citizens (Preda et al, 2007, p. 49), lead us to the conclusion that, in fact, the public participation of the citizens is practically missing.

On the other hand, a study regarding the self-evaluation of the public institutions shows us that *"three quarters of the civil servants that were questioned believe that the citizens trust the services offered by the public institutions very much"* (Bucheru, 2014, p. 29). This highlights the existence of a major disparity between the perception of the citizens over the public institutions in Romania and the perception of the public institutions over themselves. In addition, when asked *how much do they think that the services offered by the institution in which they worked are focused on the citizen*, the employees of the public institutions answered, in a large majority of 90.9%, *in a great and very great extent.*

Nevertheless, as previously stated, most of the citizens declare themselves *distrustful in the public authorities* (Preda et al, 2007, p. 47), accusing a *formalist character of the public consultations, lack of trust in the deciding factors, carelessness for the proposals and opinions from the citizens* (Bucheru, 2014, p. 20).

3. Methodology

This research paper is based on the analysis of various empirical researches, mainly aiming to understand the way in which the Romanian population perceives the public participation process. Thus, we started by analyzing the way in which the public participation process is perceived and understood and afterwards we studied if there really is a participation process in Romania. An important part of this research was dedicated to the question *Why don't the citizens get involved?* starting from the results identified in the previous studies. In order to find answers to these questions, we analyzed different empirical researches and articles, thus generating a series

of arguments that have the role of elucidating the problem of the disinterest of the population in getting involved in the decision-making process.

Another important part of the study is dedicated to methods, techniques and instruments identified by the citizens in order to improve the public participation in the decision-making process. Thus, we analyzed a series of documents destined to the *improvement of the quality of the public administration* and which mainly aimed to identify different measures that could improve the decisional transparency. In addition, this research paper focuses on the improvement of the communication process through the use of different means of communication, instruments that could facilitate and hasten the connection between the citizens and the public administration.

Complementary to the analysis of the documents and previous studies regarding the public participation in the decision-making process, an important part of the study is dedicated to the empirical research. This part has a mainly descriptive component. The instrument in this part of the research is the questionnaire, aiming to identify possible responses to questions such as *"Which is the level of public participation of citizens in the decision-making process?", "Which are the main reasons why citizens choose not to get more involved in the decision-making process?", "How could the citizens be motivated to get more involved in the decision-making process?"*. The research will highlight not only the level of interest of the citizens in the public participation process, but also the way in which they could be motivated to participate, thus increasing the level of participation.

The survey was conducted between the 6th and the 13th of April 2020, on a population over 18 years of age, from Bucharest. The population that participated in the survey covered all the Sectors of the Capital, according to a *convenience sample*. Given the *social distancing period* (caused by the COVID-19 pandemic) and the purpose of the survey, the technique used was that of an *online survey*, generating a non-probabilistic sample. Nevertheless, the research managed to create a general image of the implication of the population of Bucharest in the decision-making process and to highlight reasons for disinterest, respectively possible ways of motivation that could be useful for the Public Administration.

The sample comprised 420 respondents, inhabits of Bucharest inhabitants of all the 6 Sectors of the Capital. The demographic structure of the respondents is equilibrated in terms of gender, with a slight inclination towards women: *52.4% of the respondents are women, while 47.6% are men*. The age group of the population is mainly between 30 and 65. A significant percentage of the respondents (23.8%) chose not to declare their age.

Concept triangulation – administration, participation, cooperation

From the juridical perspective, the *administration* act is equivalent to *"the management act by which it is sought to enhance the value of something, according to its nature or usual destination"* (Juridical Dictionary). In the case of the present research paper, the chosen methodology aims to understand the administrative act as coming from the Public Administration in relation to the action of participation in the decision-making process, coming from the Civic Society. These two concepts are brought together, their interconnection generating *the cooperation process* between the civic society and the public administration. The main purpose of the cooperation between the two elements which were earlier mentioned is to lead to a sustainable, equilibrated society.

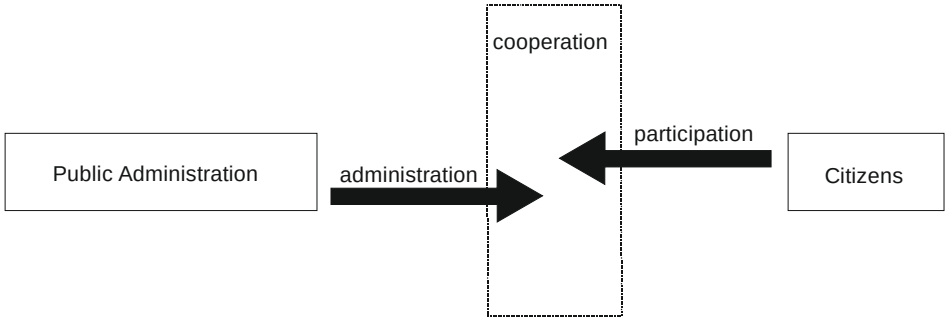


Figure 1: The cooperation process as result of the interaction between the public administration and the citizens
Source: Authors' own conception

4. Results

The importance of public participation and information of the citizens

When asked if the participants are aware of the existence and content of the law regarding the decisional transparency within the public administration (no. 52/2003), only 45% of the respondents answered affirmatively. The rest of the respondents did not know about it or about what it contained. Even if all of the respondents consider the public participation in the decision-making process very important (65% of the answers) and fairly important (35% of the answers) for the development of the society, they don't consider that public implication is equally important at all levels. Most of the respondents consider that the public should every time be informed on the projects and decisions of the local authorities, but

they don't find it as important to participate in the meetings organized by the local administration. 4.5 out of 5 consider that the population should make recommendations via other means of communication. When asked in which of the areas of the public administration they feel that they should be more involved, the first place in the ranking of the population was listed *the education*, followed by *infrastructure/transportation, housing* and *health*. In the view of the people who participated in this survey, the least important domain of consultation should be *agriculture, justice* or *workforce*.

The state of public implication in Bucharest

The participants in the survey were asked to characterize the *public participation in Romania*. According to the responses received, 42% of the answers define the public participation in Romania as *poor*, while 32% say it's *missing*. Only a small percentage of the responses say that the public participation is *normal*, while other small percentages say that *it is formalistic* but *should be very useful to exist*.

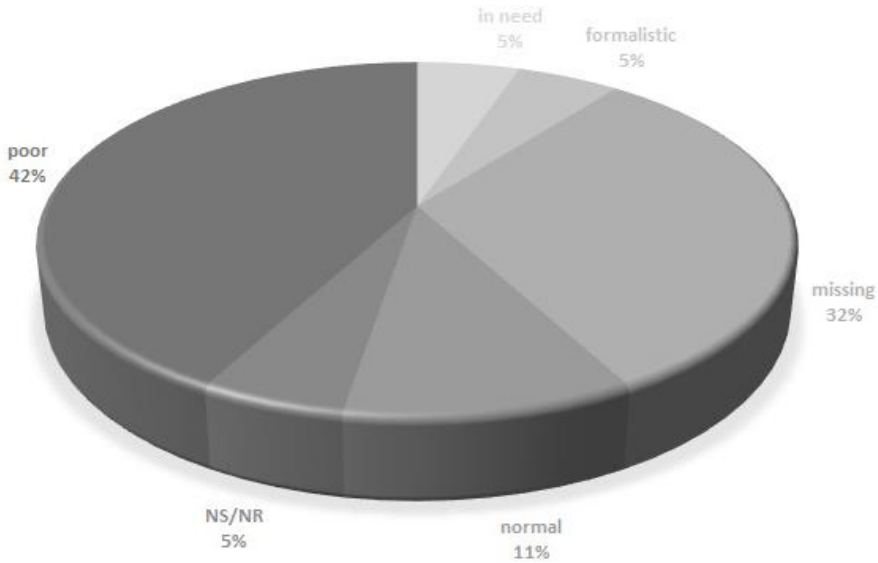


Figure 2: Description of the public participation in Romania according to the population
Source: Authors' own conception

When asked how would they grade the level of implication of the population in the public decisions, the respondents gave a final grade of only *3.25* (out of 10), which leads us to believe that the general opinion of the population regarding the public participation process is very low. The

respondents said that they participated in most of the elections that took place during the past 4 years, but apart from that their implication in the decision-making process was limited to *signature of petitions* or *protests*.

When asked how often did the respondents go to the Municipality in order to solve a problem, 70% of the answers said *almost never*, reporting a very low connectivity of the population with the local authorities. Even though the population thinks that *public participation* is very useful and important for the development of a sustainable society, the respondents said that the *it is not very encouraged in Romania* (70% of the respondents said that they thought that the public participation was not encouraged, while 20% said that the public participation was fairly little encouraged). When the respondents were asked to remember what was the last public initiative they responded to, a percentage of 55% of the population said that *they didn't know of such initiatives*. Among the ones that answered affirmatively, a majority percentage of 85.7% said that the implication *took the form of a public survey (questionnaire)*.

The trust in the public authorities

The communication of the population with the local authorities is currently *fairly low* (45% of the answers) and *very low* (30% of the answers). Thus, the trust that the population puts in the authorities is also reduces, receiving a grade of only *3.35* (out of 10). As previously stated, most of the respondents *almost never* go to the Municipality to solve a problem they might have in their communities/districts/city.

Motivation of the disinterest of the citizens in the public participation and ways to increase the involvement

When the respondents were asked to give three motives for the low implication of the population in the decision-making process, interestingly enough, most of the responses leaned towards *blaming the population*. The first three reasons for the lack of implication of the population are: *[1] people are more oriented towards their own problems rather than the ones of the community; [2] people are not educated towards the implication in the decision-making process; [3] people are not informed*. Other responses mentioned also that *the procedures are too difficult and don't really offer the possibility to the population of participation* and *the impact of their implication is not really evident to the population*.

The answers received from the respondents point towards two main issues that appeared repeatedly during this research. On one hand, there is the lack of education of the population in terms of civic culture and implication in the problems of the community. That is because of the

relatively incipient state in which the democracy of Romania is found, a fact that leads to a permanent state of transition and change, insecurity and doubt. On the other hand, the issues mentioned by the respondents *highlight a sort of disappointment and lack of faith* in the intentions of the public authorities, an element that became a constant in this survey. The minimal information that the population receives, the difficult procedures and the constant lack of impact that their needs and proposals have in the public space seam to contribute to the constant *mistrust from the population in the public authority,* thus resulting in a *minimal implication* and public participation.

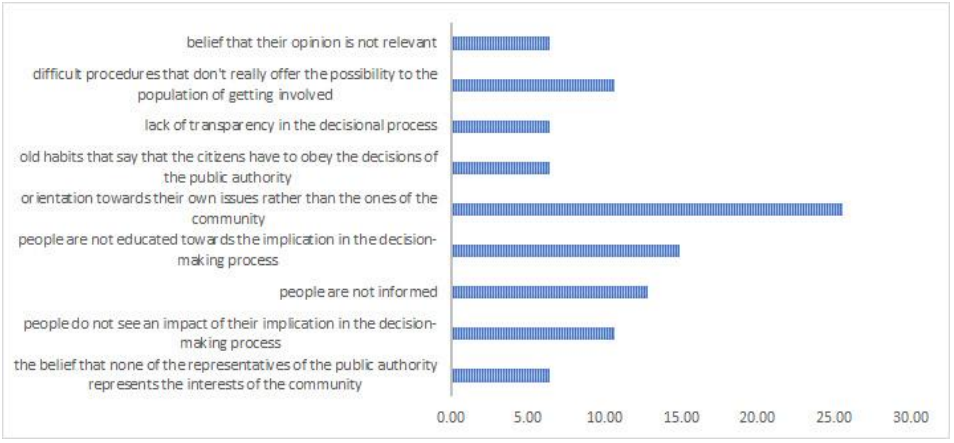


Figure 3: Motives for the disinterest in the public participation according to the citizens
Source: Authors' own conception

To the question How can the population be persuaded to get more involved in the public decisions? most of the respondents answered civic education of the population. The second solution proposed by the participants at the survey was the promotion of the projects and information for the citizens, as well as the implementation of the proposals that came from the population and online anonymous surveys.

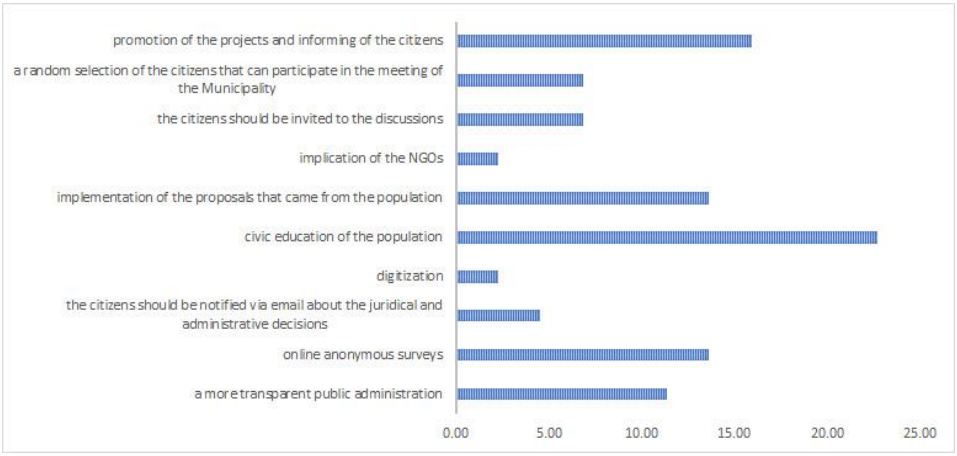


Figure 4: How to persuade the population to be more involved in the decision-making process
Source: Authors' own conception

Role of the NGOs in the process of public participation

The knowledge of the citizens regarding NGOs that could represent them in relation with the public authorities isn't very good. It seems that less than half of the respondents know or follow the activity of an NGO. Those that do, mainly use the online technology to inform themselves on the activity that the respective NGO is performing and the projects it's involved in: *72.7% of the respondents say that they follow it on its Facebook page, while 54.5% of the population that participated in the survey follow the website of the NGO.*

5. Limits and discussions

The present research paper focused on the stage in which the public participation finds itself at the present moment in Bucharest. Nevertheless, because of the general conditions in which the global society is today, many changes might be expected in the near future. The results of this research paper highlight the fact that the *public participation in the decisional process* in Bucharest is weak, at the present moment, and that the reasons for it are diverse, coming form both the citizens and the authorities. It is necessary that, in order to increase the involvement of the population in the public decisions, the authorities develop their level of *transparency, create policies that both educate and invite the citizens to express their opinions*. In terms of technology, the respondents believe that less complicated procedures and digitalization of the Public Administration will also increase the public participation. As a result and given the present *social distancing* tendencies that seem to take over

our society for an undetermined period of time, we can easily say that public participation, as well as information and discussions could be easily obtained through *technology*, an instrument that proved to be most useful in the public space since the beginning of 2020 pandemic period.

This research highlights a general state of the society in terms of public participation, but at the same time, it opens the path to an adaptation of the Public Administration as well as of other components of the society through instruments such as *digitalization and technology*. It is evident that without them, today, the spreading of the virus that affected the entire world in only a few months would have had unimaginable proportions. At the same time, technology has the capacity of making things *easier and faster*, essential elements for the public participation of the citizens of today's society.

6. Conclusions

The public participation is a long and complicated process, which requires to be built throughout time, finding itself hand in hand with the *education of the young citizens* as well as with the *formation of the civic spirit* and with the *adaptation of the juridical and legal context of the society in order to* facilitate and require the involvement of the citizens. The public participation is both the responsibility of the citizens as well as the public administration, in its quality of facilitator of the implication of the population in the decision-making process. The pandemic in which the world is found since the beginning of 2020 has forced us to find innovative ways to remain in contact, highlighting the development of technology as one of the most important elements of the world today. For more than half of year, technology has been the main engine of the society. The world is relying on in for education, socialization, business and even health services.

Building an agreeable environment for the citizens requires cooperation between the public administration and the public opinion, a process that involves obligations and responsibilities from all the implicated actors. In addition, the public participation requires also the design of a legal context which has at its center the citizen, an essential component of the community and the basic element, determinant for the identity factor.

This research paper can serve as basis for identifying the pros and cons of the participatory system in Bucharest, being maybe the first step towards the improvement of the social bonds between the inhabitants and their communities.

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