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Citizen Participation in the Public Decision-Making Process at the Level of the Local Public Administration

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Abstract: Through citizen participation in public decision-making, the real needs of the community are and should be included in decisions that cover those needs and are thus publicly supported. From such a direction, this micro-research aims to examine the concrete situation regarding the participation of citizens in the decision-making process by interpreting the perceptions of residents and local public administration staff in Dărmăneşti commune, to highlight the effectiveness of citizen participation in adopting an administrative decision. The approach showed that both the majority of workers in the city hall and most of the locals in the commune, who provided us with answers in the survey, appreciate that the involvement of citizens in the public decision-making process is key to democracy. Most of both respondents categories states that the main arguments for consulting the public in the process of making a public decision are: the right of citizens, ensuring the effective adoption and implementation of decisions, the decisions taken are accepted/supported by society, promoting the transparency of the decision-making process. Expressing own choice, submitting requests to the local public administration, submitting written suggestions, informal discussions tend to be considered by both the surveyed staff and the responding residents as effectve and very effective ways. On the other hand, we have found that opinion polls are one of the least effective ways for citizens to participate, with most opinions, in the case of both categories of respondents, being recorded for the small and very small response varieties.

Keywords: *public decision-making process; local public administration; human resources; town hall institution; residents; arguments for consultation; ways to participate; effectiveness.*

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1. Introduction

"Citizen participation" refers to the involvement of citizens in public decision-making, the phrase that is used to refer to remedial efforts to involve inactive citizens or clients in government activity, but may also include autonomous citizen activities in society, such as locality or community development, social planning and action (Baum, 2001).

Public involvement requires an effort to ensure that citizens have a direct voice in public decision-making (Khisty, 2000). It is difficult to imagine anything other than positive results from joining citizens in the public policy process, collaborating and reaching consensus to bring about positive social change (Irvin & Stansbury, 2004).

Public participation is a framework of policies, principles and techniques that ensure that citizens and communities have the opportunity to be meaningfully involved in making decisions that will affect or interest them (Smith, 2003).

The main purpose of this micro-research is *to examine the concrete situation regarding the participation of citizens in the decision-making process by interpreting the perceptions of residents and local public administration staff, in order to highlight the effectiveness of citizen participation in adopting an administrative decision.*

In order to achieve the above purpose, the following objectives must be achieved:

O1: Highlighting the role of citizen involvement in democratic decision-making

O2: Identify the reasons why it is advisable to consult citizens in the process of making a public decision

O3: Determining in terms of effectiveness the main ways in which citizens can participate in the decision-making process.

In order to achieve the stated purpose and objectives, it is necessary to consult both the local population and the human resources of the local administrative apparatus, in order to obtain an overview of the decision-making process and the involvement of citizens in it.

In order to ensure the comparability of the opinions of the locals with those of the staff of the local public institution Dărmăneşti City Hall, regarding the citizen participation in the administrative decision-making process, it is necessary to apply two questionnaires, the results obtained as a result of their application highlighting these opinions.

The universe of micro-research consists of residents of the administrative-territorial unit of Dărmăneşti Commune and of workers who are part of the City Hall institution in the same commune.

Dărmăneşti commune is located in the eastern part of Suceava county, at a distance of 15 km from Suceava Municipality, 16 km from Rădăuţi town and 22 km from Siret town (Commune City Hall Institution, n.d.). Dărmăneşti is an old commune, with strong historical resonances, which has continued to evolve over the years, now becoming a modern commune, both in terms of organization and activities (Cossaris, 1993).

The data collection took place between September 12, 2021 - September 16, 2021, for micro-research among local public administration staff and between September 19, 2021 - September 23, 2021, for micro-research conducted at the level of residents. Following the application of the two types of questionnaires, out of a total of 2,996 locals, 173 residents responded, and out of the population of 48 civil servants, contract staff, dignitaries and local councilors within the local administrative apparatus, 42 people answered (see Table 1):

Table no. 1. The structure of the researched populations - residents and staff of the local public administration

RESIDENT POPULATION					STAFF POPULATION				
SAMPLING BASE			**SAMPLE**		**SAMPLING BASE**			**SAMPLE**	
Total inhabitants No.		%	Respondents No.	%	Total staff no.		%	Respondents No.	%
20-29 years	568	18.96%	38	21.97%	Leading civil servants	1	2.08%	1	2.38%
30-39 years	580	19.36%	32	18.5%	Execution civil servants	12	25%	11	26.19%
40-49 years	656	21.90%	40	23.12%	Execution contract staff	18	37.50 %	16	38.10%
50-59 years	632	21.09%	35	20.23%	Dignitaries	2	4.17%	2	4.76%
60-69 years	560	18.69%	28	16.18%	Local councilors	15	31.25 %	12	28.57%
TOTAL	**2,996**	**100%**	**173**	**100%**	TOTAL	**48**	**100%**	**42**	**100%**

Source: Authors' own conception

Opinions on the involvement of citizens in the decision-making process - key of democracy

Regarding the involvement of citizens in the public decision-making process, as a key to democracy, most of the staff in the local public administration (81% = 24% + 57%) consider participation as fundamental to a democratic regime to a large and very large extent. An exception is only 19% of human resources respondents who argue that community involvement in decision-making would be a "cornerstone" of democracy to a small extent.

From the point of view of the residents, a percentage almost identical to that of human resources (87% = 25% + 62%) claims that the involvement of the community in the decision-making process is the key to democracy to a large and very large extent. On the other hand, 13% of local respondents believe that their participation in public decision-making is fundamental to the democratic regime to a small extent (12%) or not at all (1%) (see Figure 1):

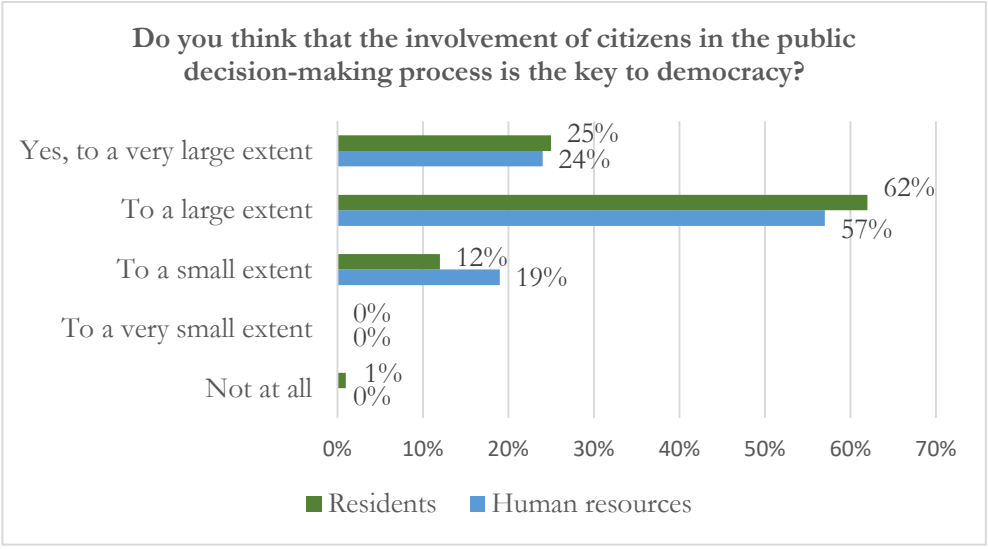


Figure no. 1. Opinions of residents and staff on *the involvement of citizens in the public decision-making process - key of democracy*
Source: Authors' own conception

Perceptions on arguments for consulting citizens in adopting public decisions

The following figure shows the perceptions that the main arguments for the consultation of citizens in the process of making a public decision are appreciated. Citizens' consultation is considered by almost all respondents - human resources (95%) as their right to a large extent (45%) and to a very large extent (50%). More than half of the workers surveyed (55%) believe that, if citizens are consulted, they contribute to the reform process neither small nor large extent. However, the other half (45%) say that public administration reform does not depend only on citizens at large (26%) and to a very large extent (19%). In terms of ensuring effective adoption and implementation, almost 2/3 of the respondent staff (62%) consider that this would be an argument for the involvement of citizens at large (24%) and to a very large extent (38%), given being that there are other factors that influence this process. If citizens are involved in making a decision, almost all human resources respondents (93%) consider that it is accepted and supported by society at large (69%) and to a very large extent (24%). By involving citizens in the decision-making process, its transparency is promoted, and this view is also supported by almost all respondents (96%) (36%) and to a large extent (60%) (see Figure 2):

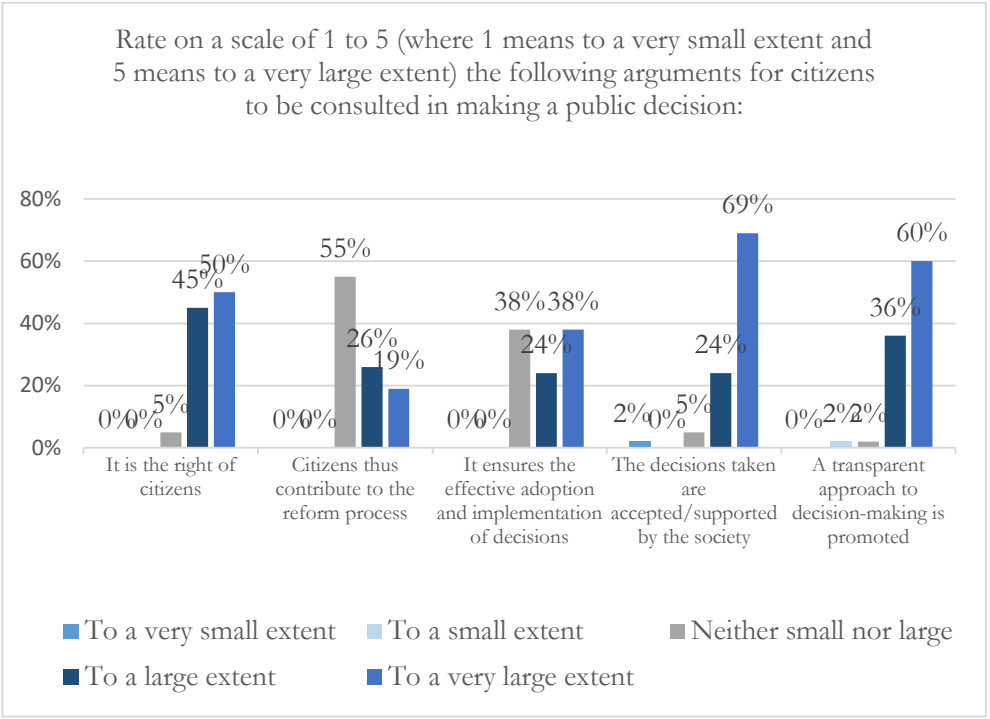


Figure no. 2. Opinions of the human resources of the City Hall regarding *the arguments for consulting the citizens in the adoption of public decisions*
Source: Authors' own conception

From the point of view of the majority of the surveyed residents (86%), the consultation of citizens is considered as their right to a large extent (25%) and to a very large extent (61%). If citizens are consulted, they contribute to the reform process (39%) and to a very large extent (34%), although almost ¼ of the local respondents (23%) state that the reform does not depend only on citizens. Also, in terms of ensuring the effective adoption and implementation of decisions, more than half of the residents (54%) consider that this would be a reason for the involvement of citizens in large (25%) and very large (29%). In addition, 39% of the respondents state that they are in a neutral position, considering that the public consultation ensures that the decisions taken are neither small nor large. If citizens are involved in making a decision, the majority of the population surveyed (86%) appreciate that the decision is accepted and supported by society at large (37%) and to a very large extent (49%). By involving the citizens in the decision-making process, its transparency is supported, this point of view

being declared by the majority of respondents (85%) to a large extent (27%) and to a very large extent (58%) (see Figure no. 3):

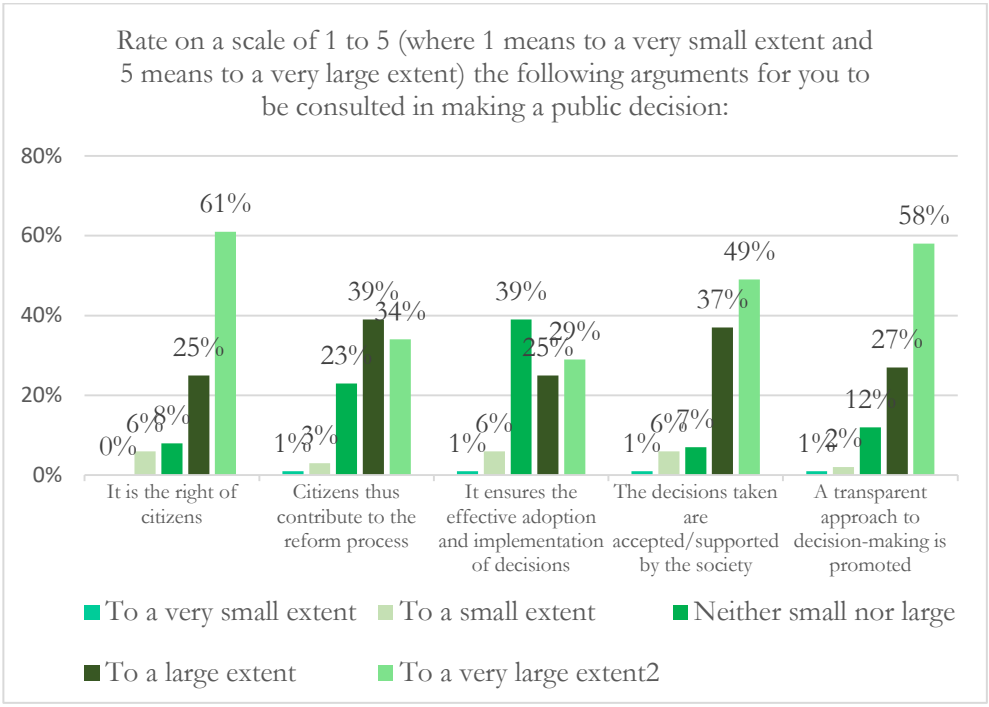


Figure no. 3. Residents' views on *arguments for consulting citizens in making public decisions*
Source: Authors' own conception

Opinions on the effectiveness of the ways citizens can participate in the decision-making process

The effectiveness of the ways in which a citizen can participate in the decision-making process was appreciated by the staff of the local public administration. As can be seen, according to the following chart, the expression of own choice in the elections is appreciated by the majority of human resources (91%) as being large (31%) and very large (60%) effective. Submitting requests to the local public administration seems to be an effective method, being considered as such by almost all working respondents (93% = 29% + 64%). More than half of the human resources surveyed (55%) state a neutral position regarding attendance at public meetings or debates. Also, almost 2/3 of the respondent workers (62%)

consider that submitting written suggestions is an effective way to a large (48%) and to a very large extent (14%). This result can be explained by the fact that these suggestions can be received, analyzed and applied if they prove to be effective. However, more than 1/3 of the human resources surveyed (36%) of respondents claim that this method is neither small nor large effective. These answers can be attributed to the fact that either the suggestions do not lead to improvements in the decision or are not received in time. Opinion polls are one of the least effective ways for citizens to participate, with 76% of surveyed human resources reporting that it is effective to a small (64%) and very small extent (12%). The explanation for these results may consist in the fact that opinion polls have an ascertaining role, the changes being difficult to impose. Informal discussions tend to be considered effective to a large (55%) and to a very large extent (17%), which may provide an opportunity for citizens to express their dissatisfaction accurately (see Figure 4):

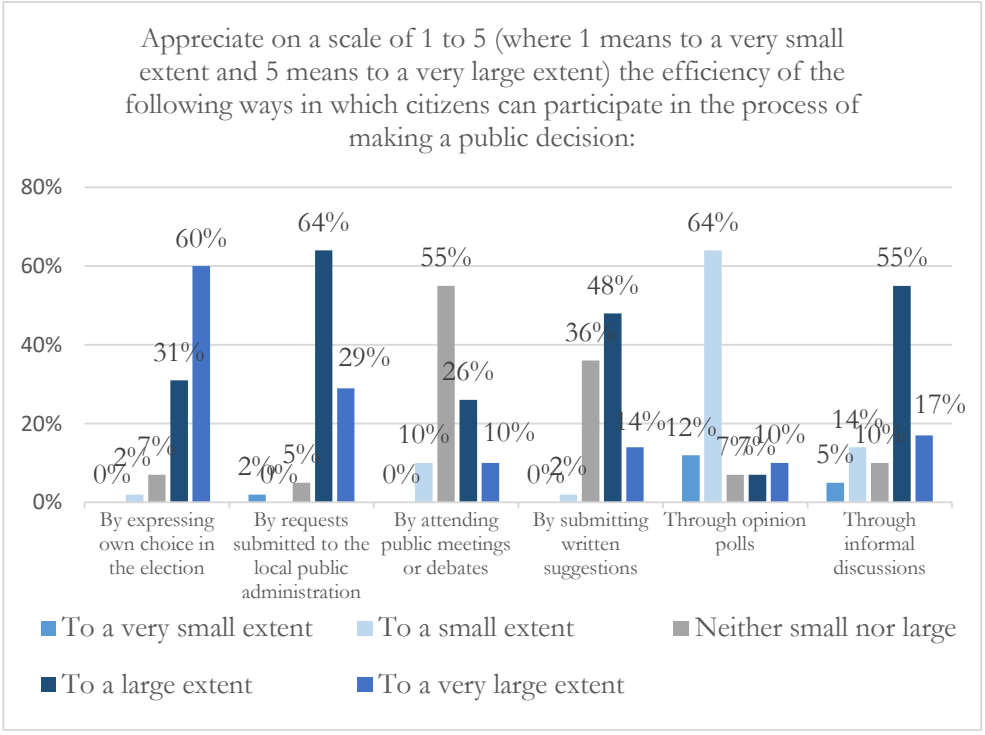


Figure no. 4. Opinions of the human resources of the City Hall *regarding the effectiveness of the ways in which the citizens participate in the adoption of public decisions*
Source: Authors' own conception

From the following graph, you can see how residents have appreciated the effectiveness of the main means by which a citizen can participate in the public decision-making process. According to the recorded data, the expression of own choice in the elections is considered to be effective by the majority of local respondents (82%) to a large (31%) and to a very large extent (51%). On the other hand, only 7% say that this method is effective to a small (6%) and to a very small extent (1%). These results can be explained by the fact that, following the elections, the changes needed to solve concrete local problems fail. Submitting requests to the local public administration seems to be an efficient method, thus appreciated (50%) to a large and to a very large extent (21%). For almost half of the surveyed residents (47%) attendance at public meetings or debates is considered to be effective to a large (16%) and to a very large extent (31%). However, for an almost similar share (44%) of locals, there is a neutral attitude, stating that it is neither small nor large. The submission of written suggestions is appreciated by approximately 2/3 of the residents (62%) as being effective to a large (45%) and to a very large extent (17%). The results show that suggestions can be received, analyzed and applied if they prove to be effective. However, almost 1/3 of the locals (32%) approach a neutral position regarding the submission of suggestions, such a response being either due to the fact that the suggestions do not lead to improvements in the decision, or that they are not received on time. Opinion polls are one of the least appreciated ways for citizens to participate, accounting for 37% of respondents who say they are effective to a small (33%) and to a very small extent (4%). On the other hand, 43% of the surveyed residents consider the surveys to be effective to a large (30%) and to a very large extent (13%). One explanation for these results may be that opinion polls are limited to an ascertaining role, being difficult to impose changes. Informal discussions tend to be considered by almost 2/3 of the locals (64%) effective to a large (47%) and to a very large extent (17%), in which the real dissatisfaction of community members can be highlighted (see Figure no. 5):

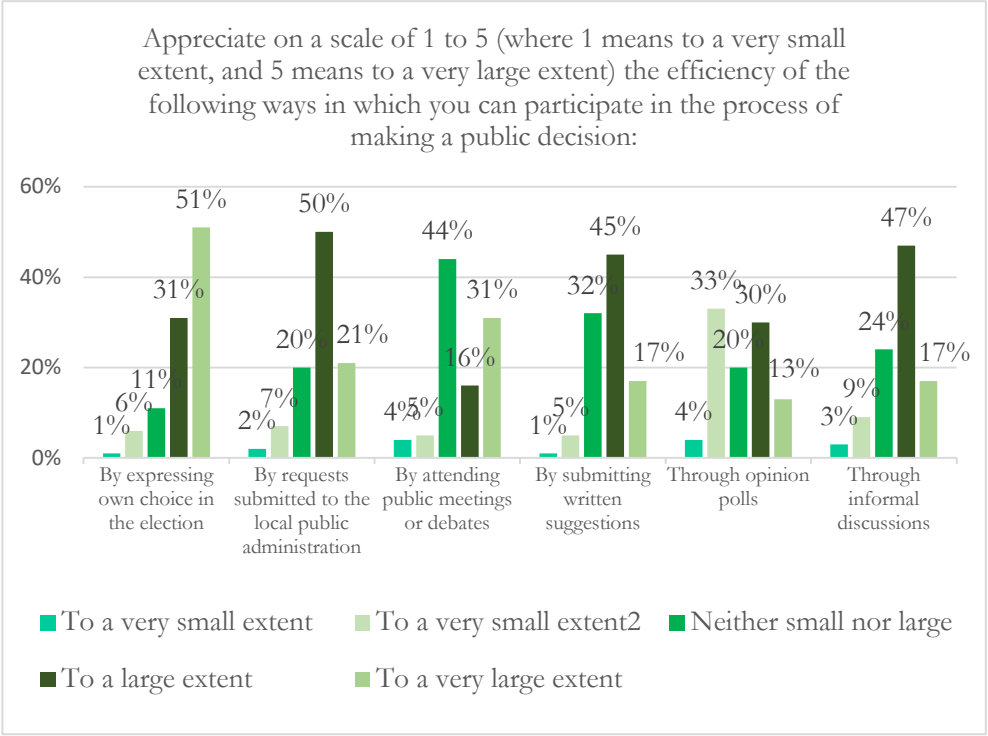


Figure no. 5. Residents' views on *the effectiveness of the ways in which citizens participate in public decision-making*

Source: Authors' own conception

Conclusions

Based on what was written in the previous lines, at this point in the micro-research we can extract a series of conclusive ideas, as follows:

Regarding *the involvement of citizens in the public decision-making process, as a key to democracy*, the majority of respondents - both City Hall workers (81%) and locals (87%) appreciate participation as fundamental to a democratic regime to a large and very large extent. These results can be explained by the fact that any democratic system is supported by the possibility for citizens to take part in public debates and decisions.

umane şi rezidenţi - (96%/85%) în mare şi foarte mare măsură.

With regard to *the main arguments for which it would be advisable to consult citizens in the process of making a public decision*, the micro-survey showed that most of the staff and residents surveyed (95%/86%) consider the consultation of citizens as a right of to a large and very large extent. More than half of the workers surveyed (55%) believe that, if the citizens are

consulted, they contribute to the reform process neither in small nor to large extent, an answer that indicates a neutral attitude. Unlike workers, the majority of residents (73%) appreciate that if they are consulted, citizens contribute to the process of reform to a large and very large extent. In terms of ensuring effective adoption and implementation, most of the respondents, both human resources and residents (62%/54%) consider that this would be an argument for the involvement of citizens to a large and very large extent. If citizens are involved in making a decision, the majority of surveyed human resources and workers (93%/86%) appreciate that it is accepted and supported by society to a large and very large extent. The involvement of citizens in the decision-making process is supported by its transparency, this point of view being stated by the majority of respondents - human resources and residents - (96%/85%) to a large and very large extent.

Regarding *the effectiveness of the ways in which citizens can participate in the decision-making process*, the expression of their choice in the elections is appreciated by the majority of respondents - staff and workers (91% / 82%) as effective to a large and to a very large extent. Submitting requests to the local public administration seems to be an effective and very effective method, thus appreciated by most of both categories of respondents (93%/71%). Different answers were given regarding the presence at public meetings or debates, with more than half of the staff surveyed (55%) declaring a neutral position, unlike almost half of the residents (47%) who consider this method to be effective to a large and to a very large extent. Identical percentages were recorded both among human resources and among residents (62%) who consider that submitting written suggestions is an effective way to a large and very large extent, results that can be explained by the fact that those suggestions can be received, analyzed and applied if they prove to be effective. Opinion polls are one of the least effective ways for citizens to participate, with 76% of human resources surveyed and 37% of residents saying they are effective to a small and very small extent. One explanation for these results may be that opinion polls are limited to an ascertaining role, and it is difficult to force change. Informal discussions tend to be considered very and very effective by both the surveyed staff (72%) and the local respondents (64%), and in such discussions, real dissatisfaction of citizens can be declared.

In total, this micro-research made it possible to fulfill the initial goal, namely to examine the concrete situation regarding the participation of citizens in the decision-making process by interpreting the perceptions of residents and local public administration staff in Dărmăneşti commune, to

highlight the effectiveness of citizen participation in adopting an administrative decision.

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