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Public versus Political Decision in Administrative Space

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Abstract: *This article aims to make a brief review of some important issues related to the "opening" of the administration to citizens in Romania and to describe, briefly, some recent decisions taken by various local councils in large cities of Romania (such as Cluj-Napoca, Iasi, Craiova or Galati) and which testify to the willingness of local and central authorities to really address those on whom their decisions will really produce their effects. To our pleasant surprise, we found that in most cases the decisions taken in recent years at the local level in our country have dealt with issues that demonstrate the connection of local councils and mayors to issues of greatest interest to the community: urban planning issues, environmental quality, air quality, support for disadvantaged and sensitive groups in society or issues related to the chances of involving young people in the community. In the last 20 years the public sector offered citizens the opportunity to be actively involved in the life of the city and in the decision-making process, which demonstrates the approach of the Romanian authorities to the European trend of transparency in the decision-making environment, but also the application of the principle of subsidiarity as a fundamental principle of the Romanian administration.*

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Introduction

Public administration reform in Romania cannot be conceived without reshaping managerial mentalities and promoting a new type of specific culture and a new type of specific public service culture (Hintea, book preface in Junjan, (2001):4).

Decision-making is "the mechanism by which decisions are made which are then reflected in behaviour, individual, group and institutional actions" (Ticu, (2014):7).

Those who work in the budgetary sector have the opportunity to serve the public and to improve the quality of life of citizens in general. Another opportunity in this sector is to give members of society the chance to be actively involved in the life of the city and in the decision-making process. (Loucks Daniel. P, (2022):1-11).

On the other hand, politicisation is," predominantly, seen as a constraint." However, in recent times, the political factor has given citizens the chance to take a stand and create legitimacy in the decision-making process, which decades ago was unimaginable in much of Europe today (Bressanelli et al. (2020), Bressanelli, Koop & Reh,, (2020):329–341, Koop, Reh, Bressanelli, (2022):46).

However, the problems faced by any manager who wants to promote the diagnostic stage of decision making, and hence problem structuring, are quite common for anyone trying to promote change at the organizational level - where do they get resources from? How do I get the support I need? How do I put the decision into practice? (Junjan, (2012):56).

Decision-making, whatever its nature, means vision, strategy, courage and anchoring in social, economic and political reality. After all, "decision is the engine of action, and action means dynamics, evolution "(Ticu, (2014):7).

Usually, the state and its representatives are better highlighted during election periods in order to attract electoral capital. The increase in the role of the state is particularly relevant now precisely because "politicians often resort to increasing the number of benefits offered to citizens" (Ţicu, (2014): 34-40).

Political decisions are characterized by the fact that they express the will of a party or an alliance of parties regarding the realization of general state policies (Parlagi, (2013):15), while administrative decisions are made by managers or appointees at the head of public authorities, institutions or services and are usually of a concrete execution nature of laws (Parlagi, (2013):15).

There is a distance between the political decision-maker and society, which has led to the impression that in most cases the elected government is "unduly"/excessively involved in the decision-making process (Mulgan, (2006):3).

The weight of decisions (whether political, administrative or of a mixed nature) lies in the effects they have in the social environment. This impact is particularly important during election periods, when candidates have a greater chance of success if the campaigning proposals have been converted into rational, viable and socially relevant decisions. Public information is, in fact, a one-way process in which the public is presented with data on decisions and actions already established by those in political power (Răceanu, (2013):141).

It is quite easy for political figures to use propaganda to promote their own messages to support messages that benefit them (Răceanu, (2013):141).

To this end, politicians use language (which sometimes has a manipulative tinge n.n) to implement "social, economic and certain political acts" (Haider, (2016):11-29, Almahasees & S Mahmoud S, (2022):2.).

In fact, politicians try to convince their electorate both through facts and by using concrete arguments that define 'the most efficient solution' in order to solve the central problems (Almahasees Z., & S Mahmoud S., (2022):2-3).

Big public decisions are closely linked to the political environment and the "big political trends", which is happening both locally and at European level (Hinţea, Şandor, (2000):30).

Public policy development aims to engage citizens in the process of adopting and implementing decisions that affect them. This type of policy-making is carried out by politicians to satisfy the citizens' interest and often to gain electoral capital (Anderson, (2014), (2015): 131–147).

The importance of consulting citizens in the decision-making process

Immediately after 1990 and the fall of the communist bloc in Eastern European countries, the process of transition from a totalitarian society to a democratic system also involved "reducing the distance between the citizen and the political power", both at national and local level (Claret, Sinescu, (2010):770).

With the development of society, the demand for more complex and quality public services has also increased, which has placed great demands on both politics and administration. In this context, the importance of

interest groups has increased significantly, as they can influence both the political environment and the way the state acts, precisely because they are the owners of significant resources, which can exert political pressure on those who take decisions on behalf of citizens (Țicu, (2011):34-40).

Involving citizens is achieved by calling for information, consultation and active participation, so that they become active players in the process of adopting and implementing decisions. As the literature also states, there is also "the idea of participation in community life through self-organization", which brings to mind the initiative groups that are involved in solving local problems, in most cases (Preda, Olteanu, Presadă, Bujder, (2010):21-26).

In addition to greater accountability, citizen participation in the democratic process through civil society organisations can also improve the responsiveness of government (Tatar, (2021):12).

"Dependent political culture" is characteristic of Romanian society, in the sense that citizens have a passive attitude towards involvement or participation in public (and political, as the case may be) life. Perhaps also because of the pre-December totalitarian system, the citizens of Romania have been rather conceptually imprinted that it is advisable "to delegate the problems of their freedom and initiative to a strong leader, in exchange for protection" (Dima, (2010):39).

However, in Europe, since the 1960s/1970s, the transparency of decision-making by public authorities has reached a much higher level than in previous years, and their openness to the citizen has also led to the involvement of citizens in the decision-making process, which was considered "essential for the implementation of good governance" (Young, (2005):423, Tatar, (2021):61).

It is very important to involve ordinary citizens in public decision-making, as the consultation stage gives decision-makers the chance to confront their real preferences (needs), which would otherwise be difficult to establish, especially as long as there is pressure from political and interest groups to interfere in the decision-making process. The presence of citizens in this landscape also has the important role of counterbalancing commercial interests that are not related to the real needs of the communities (Nørbech, (2023):3).

It would also be normal for the phenomenon of citizen consultation to be a serious democratic phenomenon and "an effective arena for negotiation"(Roberts, (2004), in Choi, Wong, (2023)

With the consultation of interest groups, a mechanism is created for gaining experience in the elaboration of policies beneficial to the population,

but also a remedy for the "democratic deficit" specific to the contemporary world (Lundberg, Hysing, E, (2016):1).

Moreover, there are also specialists who consider that the process of citizen consultation is "costly", insignificant and even carried out in a superficial and apparent way, giving "a false impression" of "authority" of the masses, because the opinion of the masses rarely has a concrete influence on the process of adopting public decisions"(Arnstein, (1969), Goodin & Dryzek, (2006), Irvin & Stansbury, (2004), Lundberg, Hysing,(2016): 4).

Public decisions that have a political basis, but are of maximum public interest

Accountability and transparency are necessary for governments to be able to adopt and implement realistic and useful decisions from a citizen's perspective, making a "good team" with the nomination/appointment of public persons who best represent the "voice of the people/ vox populi"(Dragoş, Neamţu,„(2009), Haruţa„ Radu, (2009), Haruţa, Radu„ (2010) in Haruţa, Radu, (2010):77).

Citizens should not be treated as a passive actor, but as one who has the power to influence governance and decision making as well as the conduct of "public affairs" useful to public authorities (Arnstein, (1969):216, Haruţa, Radu, (2010):78).

Each Romanian municipality has worked hard in recent years to involve citizens in several projects concerning different areas of life and activity, from urban forests, proposed in the participatory budgeting project in Cluj, to the establishment of a youth strategy in Dolj County and other interesting measures concerning digitalization and its impact on the environment in Galati. Considering the way they have been adopted, decisions of this kind taken at the local authority level are living proof of the transparency of decision-making but also of the realism of decision-makers, willing to implement modern methods to bring to fruition the real and actual interests of various communities.

Thus, I found that one of the best examples that can be given here would be the option of building digitized ecological islands is the optimal solution both to comply with the obligation to set up separate municipal waste collection facilities.

The Municipality of Galati is constantly looking for solutions for the most civilized collection of household waste, with the lowest possible impact on environmental factors and the elimination of discomfort for citizens. The current method of collection entails risks to the health of the population and

animals as well as substantial financial costs derived from their degradation, theft, vandalism, etc.

Galati Local Council Decision no 1 of 13.01.2023 on the approval of the submission of the project "Establishment of digitized ecological islands in the municipality of Galati" derives from the obligation to implement selective collection... ensuring the necessary spaces for separate waste collection, taking into account urban planning regulations and those issued by the Ministry of Health, equipping them with specific containers for each type of waste."

Through the project, the Municipality of Galati will purchase and install a number of 150 Type 2 and 125 Type 1 digitized ecological islands. The ecological island is a set of digitized containers designed for separate waste collection and access is provided by electronic card.

Another example of adapting the policy to the needs of citizens would be the one given by the municipality of Cluj-Napoca, where, after consultation with stakeholders, it was concluded that it is useful to adopt a normative act to provide dental medical support to various vulnerable groups - pensioners with very low incomes, children with disabilities or disabled old people.

Cluj-Napoca promotion of oral health increasing accessibility of disadvantaged people to dental services through Local County Council Decision no 596/2021 which aimed to support people from disadvantaged or vulnerable groups, through collaborative programs between Iuliu Hatieganu University (of Medicine and Pharmacy) and Cluj-Napoca City Hall. The objectives pursued by this decision are primarily to increase the accessibility of poor people to health services, especially quality dental services, to promote a healthy lifestyle and a healthy oral hygiene, to make the local authorities responsible for public health and to support vulnerable groups, but also the community in terms of involving citizens in the process of developing such policies, to create an active partnership between public administration authorities and academic stuff.

According to Local City Council of Cluj-Napoca's decision no.126/2016 and amended by Local City County of Cluj's Decision no. 880/2017 a greater number of Cluj residents will be able to benefit from the program "Promoting oral health by increasing the accessibility of the disadvantaged population to dental services" of UMF Cluj, in partnership with Cluj-Napoca City Hall and the County Clinical Hospital. The program is aimed at pensioners, severely and severely disabled people, as well as low-income or unemployed people in the city, for example :) pensioners whose cumulative income from pensions and other social security rights does not exceed 1500 lei; b) people with disabilities classified as severely and acutely disabled, c) unemployed persons receiving unemployment benefit of up to

700 lei and uninsured unemployed persons registered with the Cluj County Employment Agency; d) persons with no income or with low income, registered with the D.A.S.M., beneficiaries of guaranteed minimum income, family support allowance or social assistance canteen meals, under the law (Local City Council of Cluj-Napoca's decision no 126/2016).

Another interesting project in Cluj is called "Participatory budgeting Cluj-Napoca - Urban micro forests."

Urban micro-groves are an intervention on small areas where native, non-invasive species of trees, shrubs and other perennials are planted densely. Such micro-forests have started to appear in cities, resulting in ecosystems adapted to local conditions. They improve biodiversity, grow fast, absorb more CO2, improve people's mental health, reduce the harmful effects of air pollution, help lower temperatures in cities and reduce noise. Miyawaki forests grow 10 times faster, are 30 times denser, contain 100 times more biodiversity and absorb 16 times more CO2 than normal forests. Maintenance costs are low, as the forest is self-sustaining, requiring only minor interventions after the first 2 years.(Participatory budgeting, 2022, Cluj-Napoca).

Craiova is a strong administrative center in the Oltenia area, Romania. Some of the decisions adopted by the local authorities here have attracted attention in terms of the novel issues to which they refer, and in particular we refer to Local Youth Strategy of Craiova municipality for the period 2020-2025.

Thanks to Annex to Report no. 97888/ 09.07.2020 on the approval of the Local Youth Strategy of Craiova municipality for the period 2020-2025.young people are supported to get actively involved and make a major social contribution, realizing that they have a voice. On 1 January 2020, the "Needs of young people in Craiova in public debate", a new European project aimed at consulting young people on the implementation of amendments to the regulation implementing Law no350/2006, as well as on consultations prior to the present strategy, was launched.

The project organized a conference on the implementation of the Local Youth Strategy, with the participation of more than 200 people, young people, youth associations, public institutions with an impact on the youth sector and representatives of the Craiova business environment. As regards entrepreneurship, about a quarter of young people in Romania (27%) want to start a business in principle, so that 1 in 100 young people have their own business compared to other EU countries where 1 in 4 young people are entrepreneurs. In Craiova there are many entrepreneurship programs run both by state institutions and large companies in the city, such as Ford and others. At present these are not sufficiently known, with less than 60%

uptake and a continuation rate of less than 30%. There is a need for programs that attract young people, both in terms of what they offer and in terms of transparency and credibility.

This project was supported by various public institutions and organizations involved in the recovery and (re)integration of disadvantaged young people: The Centre for Counselling and Specialized Assistance for People with Autistic Spectrum Disorders of Directorate of Social Assistance and Child Protection , the Public Community Social Assistance Department of the Municipality of Craiova, the Craiova Penitentiary for Juveniles and Minors, the St. Mina Special Secondary School, the Beethoven Special Technological High School, etc. (Annex to Report no. 97888/ 09.07.2020 on the approval of the Local Youth Strategy of Craiova municipality for the period 2020-2025, 2020, p.2,8,9,17).

Another interesting and useful public decision is called " Iaşi Green City Action Plan " and it is reflected in draft decision on the approval of the "Green City Action Plan" for the Municipality of Iaşi, Date 30.08.2023 and concerns the creation of some green islands for separate collection of solid waste in the city.

This project consists of provision of new digitized above-ground and underground public "green" islands for separate collection of 5 fractions of solid waste throughout the city, funded by the National Resilience and Recovery Plan (NRRP/ 2022/C3/S/I.1.B). User education campaigns to optimise and monitor energy consumption in buildings develop campaigns to influence user behaviour that can reduce energy consumption in buildings by up to 30%. It also involves the creation of a network of green corridors linking the city center - Bahlui River - Galata Forest (35- 50ha) and a network of green corridors linking the city centre, the banks of the Bahlui River and the Galata Forest, totalling approximately 5-6 km of streets, promenades and green spaces with ecological landscaping (Green City Action Plan for The Municipality of Iasi, (2023):13-14).

Conclusions

Although we often get the impression that most of the normative acts coming from local authorities are based on a political interest, the above mentioned and analyzed facts show us that political interest is not always dominant in the adoption of public decisions and this is due to the openness of the administration in the last 50 years or so in Europe, first in the Western area and then in the former communist countries. Involving citizens in decision making and setting social priorities has done nothing but

turn them into active players and not into a passive audience that helplessly watches political life unfold and, implicitly, the adoption of social programs that concern the community.

As can be seen from our study, public authorities no longer focus so much on what the parties or interest groups, who usually own the resources, want, but they also strive to "capture" the attention of the communities, precisely because adopting unrealistic and useless measures from a social perspective will only alienate the electorate in the future.

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