



Research Article

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Unveiling the Enigma: Empowering Citizen Engagement in Decision-Making Deciphering Albania's Case

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Abstract

This article aims to fill the gap and analyze citizen involvement in developing and transitional democracy, focusing specifically on Albania, a country in the Western Balkans. The objective of this article is to examine the models, trends, obstacles and opportunities offered by citizen participation, as well as to evaluate the determinant factors and their impact on the transformative processes of democratization and the fragile development of Albania. The article explores the participation of citizens in the decision-making process, and their role in policy-making and democratic decision-making and tries to understand how citizens can be more actively involved in the decision-making process and how this involvement can increase the legitimacy and effectiveness of policies. In this study, we use qualitative and quantitative methods to analyze existing practices of citizen involvement in the decision-making process at different levels of local and central government. We focus on the tools and mechanisms that can be used to encourage the involvement of citizens in the decision-making process. The results of this study aim to provide recommendations for policymakers and practitioners at different levels of government to improve the involvement of citizens in the process of decision-making. In conclusion, through these recommendations, we aim to help increase transparency, responsibility and legitimacy of decision-making processes and create an environment where citizens feel involved and heard in decision-making that affects life.

Keywords: citizen, decision-making process, civic engagement, democracy, transparency

1. Introduction

An issue that must be handled very carefully, in the interest of "preserving and consolidating" democracy, is that citizens who think that "only voting" during elections is necessary and sufficient to have and maintain a functioning democracy, must be sensitized that democracy also requires effective and continuous participation of citizens.

Free, fair and continuous elections are necessary for a democracy. The right to vote is the hallmark of a modern representative democracy. Defenders of democracy highly value civic education. Citizens can receive civic education when they are involved in public discussions, controversies and debates. It is not healthy for democracy when people avoid engaging with their fellow citizens on public policy issues that affect their everyday lives and do not seek access to reliable and diverse sources of information when they need to discuss public policy alternatives.

In democratic societies, citizens expect their voices to be heard in decision-making. For many decades, decision-making has been the privilege of a small handful of political elites, while the majority of citizens were condemned to suffer from the decisions made by them. However, in Albania, a country dedicated to the new democracy, we have noticed many changes that emphasize the increase in the involvement of citizens in the decision-making process.

In this context, this study aims to expand the limits of our knowledge and understanding of the role and impact of citizen involvement in the decision-making process in Albania. If citizens are more involved and actively participate in decision-making processes, how does the nature of the decisions that are made change? What is the impact of citizen involvement on the legitimacy and democratic governance of the country? These are some essential questions that require answers and will serve as the basis for deep research and clear analysis.

Democracy is always in a process of evolution and not a rigid and cemented construct for all time. It must be talked about, discussed and debated constantly and must be fought democratically, to preserve and improve it. Undoubtedly, the importance of democracy is twofold: no other governing system guarantees the right to choose and freely express political preference; no other system promotes development through peaceful competition between different interests and ideas. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic has worsened the situation and there is a trend, across the globe, of increasing authoritarianism and decreasing the level of democracy (IDEA,2021).

2. The Purpose, the Objective of the Topic and its Novelty

This article on the topic "The importance and the challenge of the citizens' involvement in the decision-making process, the case of Albania" is motivated by several essential reasons such as:

1. *The importance of citizen involvement*: The involvement of citizens in the decision-making process is a key element for a functional democracy and to guarantee responsible decision-making in line with citizens' interests. The choice of this topic is related to the need to understand the reasons and to improve the level of citizen involvement, in our case in Albania, but which is undoubtedly similar to all the countries of the Western Balkans.
2. *Lack of detailed research*: Although citizen involvement is an important topic, there is a lack of detailed and in-depth studies in the context of Albania. Thus, the choice of this topic offers an important contribution to fill the gap in the literature of decision-making research in Albania and to give the legislators the reasons and causes that should be improved through the relevant legislation.
3. *Need for improvement*: Albania has gone through major political and social changes in recent decades. However, there is a clear need to improve citizen participation in the decision-making process and to guarantee transparency and accountability. Finding ways to address these challenges and increase citizen involvement is an important motivation for conducting this article.
4. *The case of Albania as a concrete study*: The selection of the case of Albania for this paper

offers a unique opportunity to analyse and understand the specific challenges and aspects of success in the involvement of citizens in public decision-making. Albania, as one of the countries of the Western Balkans, as a country with a unique political, social and cultural context, offers an attractive and important case study to explore the topic of citizen involvement in decision-making. Undoubtedly, it is worth mentioning the fact that Albania also has great similarities with the countries of the Western Balkans.

The study affects the institutional environment, general policies, trends and progress, concerning development, civil society building and democratization in Albania.

3. Research Methodology

To collect the necessary information, the methodology followed in this study is based on a hybrid of qualitative and quantitative methods. To achieve the objectives of the study and to understand the involvement of citizens in decision-making in the Albanian context, the following steps were implemented:

1. *Literature analysis*: A detailed preparation of the literature was done to understand the existing concepts, theories and research related to the involvement of citizens in decision-making. This literature research was used as a basis to determine the next steps of the study methodology.
2. *The questionnaire with citizens*: A questionnaire was developed with randomly selected citizens in several different areas of Albania. The survey focused on the assessment of citizens' involvement, their preferences and opinions regarding the decision-making process. The responses were analysed through statistical methods to ensure an accurate representation of citizens' views.
3. *Analysis of documents*: An analysis was made of relevant documents, such as laws, policies and official reports, to understand the legal and institutional context for the involvement of citizens in decision-making in Albania. Document analysis provided a framework for evaluating current performance and identifying important issues for improvement.
4. *Data analysis*: Data from the interviews, survey, and document analysis were analysed through appropriate analytical methods, including thematic analysis, content analysis, and statistical data analysis. This data analysis provided a deeper understanding of citizen involvement in decision-making and the identification of trends, challenges and potentials for the future.

The methodology adopted in this study aims to combine the information obtained from primary and secondary sources, integrating the perspectives of experts and citizens to give a complete overview of the involvement of citizens in the decision-making process, the case of Albania.

Realization of the " *Questionnaire of self-assessment of participation and civic engagement in Albania* with 767 participants and only 4 disqualified from the control questions" through which data was collected on the interest, ability and experiences of citizens in political-making and decision-making processes.

4. Democracy, Good Governance and Responsibilities of Citizens

Democratization is an ongoing process and requires consistency in effort, continuous improvement, interaction and willingness, both on the part of states and citizens. Citizen engagement is recognized as an important attribute and one of the main pillars supporting the institution of democracy. In a democracy, citizens gain not only rights and freedoms as commonly known but also assume responsibilities and duties, such as participation in political and civic life, through voting during elections, creation and membership in associations, participation in decision-making and policymaking, as well as demanding transparency and accountability from the government.

Does the current level of citizen participation affect the democratization and development

processes in Albania? If so, how? What is the impact of citizen participation on the objectives of the democratization process; citizens' contribution to decision-making and policy-making processes, protection of civil rights and freedoms, cooperation with local government, transparency and accountability of public institutions, etc? What is the impact of citizen participation on economic development in Albania? What hinders and what can promote the growth of the impact and productivity of citizen participation in the democratization and development of Albania (Nezha, 2024)?

Citizen participation is essential for the success of democracy. If the decision-making process excludes ordinary citizens, it is not considered a democracy. For a meaningful participation of citizens in the politics of their country and, consequently, in the success of democracy, it is necessary for citizens to know their roles and duties. In addition, citizens must educate institutions and practices, following local conditions and favourable for democratic aspirations. In nations ruled by authoritarian regimes, the challenge is to expand the areas of freedom that can exist within that oppressive regime. As mentioned in the Declaration of Human Rights and repeated in the Albanian Constitution (Albanian Constitution, 1998), citizens have their rights and obligations.

Important factors of the success and/or failure of citizen participation that must be considered are social and economic inequalities, activity related to citizen participation, public consultation, the balance between quality and quantity, the contribution of civil society, use of the Internet and technology of communication (ITC), etc.

4.1 *Economic and Social Inequalities*

Equal participation of citizens in decision-making is the fundamental point of a functioning democracy and requires policymakers to consider the needs, experiences, and opinions of citizens. Access to citizen participation is essential for empowering disadvantaged and marginalized communities to have a legitimate voice in key decisions made by policymakers (Gutiérrez, 1990). The variety of actions and activities in the continuum of participation extends from voting to legislative support. Full citizen participation reflects the democratic value of all citizen representation in making policy decisions (Verba et.al. 1995) and is a path towards empowerment for service consumers (Boehm & Staples, 2004); however, recent trends suggest that disadvantaged and marginalized citizens are excluded (intentionally or unintentionally) from these vital policy-making processes (Lombe & Sherraden, 2008). Thus, understanding the policy-making process and the role of citizen participation in that process, especially for economically disadvantaged citizens who may have less access to the process, is of great importance to achieving social justice.

More specifically, understanding how access to policy and strategy-making processes changes for economically disadvantaged citizens is particularly important given that income inequality is at its highest levels in decades (Mishel et.al., 2007). Inequalities in access, wealth (most often measured by assets) and income (most often measured by dollar income per household) reduce "political interest, policy discussion, and electoral participation among all but the wealthiest " (Solt, 2008). Social science researchers see the need to identify and critically assess the obstacles to equal citizen participation by disadvantaged individuals to achieve equal access for all citizens.

4.2 *Action and activity related to citizen participation*

Given the various existing definitions and conceptualizations of citizen participation, it is essential to clarify its use. Citizens can participate in policy development processes through several activities and actions, including participation in a public meeting to express an opinion on a problem at the local, county or national level (Wang, 2001); meeting with a legislator to express support or disagreement with a particular policy position (Cohen & Dawson, 1993); contributing to a political campaign through financial or voluntary means; organizing through a neighbourhood association structure to address problems in that struggling neighbourhood; and vote for a preferred candidate on election

day (Casciano, 2007). Although activities and actions that characterize citizen participation are an important element according to the literature, what is less clear is whether these activities and actions represent the legitimate voice of disadvantaged and marginalized communities in policy development processes.

4.3 *The concept of public consultation as an expression of participatory democracy*

The process of public participation is inspired by the common interest of the public sector on the one hand and citizens on the other. Thus, a good process of public participation directs policies, and programs, according to the reflection and needs of the electorate. A good public consultation is based on the principles of transparency and cooperation. The expected result is that both actors, such as the government and the public, have mutual trust and that policies and regulatory acts reflect the public interest.

In the context above, we can say that public consultation can be qualitative without the need for a formal/legal obligation to involve the public in decision-making, on the part of the Government. Thus, some states foresee as a legal obligation the involvement of the public in consultations during the drafting of acts or during the decision receipts of other natures. Meanwhile, in many other countries, governments themselves recognize the value of confronting their decision-making with the views of the electorate. The public would be more satisfied if they were allowed to invite the most affected citizens or those most specialized/engaged in the matter being consulted to participate in a public consultation. To satisfy the public, governments are the first to be interested in developing effective public consultations, to demonstrate that important decisions have been made by valuing the views of the public. Meanwhile, it is expected that these interest groups will be satisfied and dissatisfied with the results of public consultation, but consulted decision-making is always better accepted by the public if the latter perceives that the act/decision was publicly consulted effectively.

Also, public consultation helps in finding solutions to sometimes complex problems as a result of bringing experiences and identifying consequences, from the affected categories. If during the drafting of a law, in addition to academics, deputies or state specialists, the recommendations of practitioners and groups directly affected by the act were taken into consideration, the law turned out to be better and more applicable. Public consultation in the practice of democratic countries is conceived as a regulatory process by which the opinion of the public is sought on issues that the latter has an interest in. The consultation usually includes a phase of notification (publication of the issue submitted for consultation), consultation (exchange of views), as well as participation (involving interest groups in the drafting of policies or legislation) (Nezha, 2024).

Public consultation is typical in Commonwealth countries, such as the United Kingdom, Canada, New Zealand, or Australia, although most democratic countries have similar systems. Public consultation is also conducted by international organizations, such as the OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development). Ineffective consultations are considered cosmetic consultations, which, due to legal obligation, are done only to look good in the eyes of the public.

If consultation is effective, it is a good way of practising participatory democracy, which emphasizes the broad participation of voters in the running and functioning of political systems. Participatory democracy strives to create opportunities for all members of society to make meaningful contributions to decision-making and seeks to expand the range of people who have access to these opportunities.

4.4 *Technology*

Technology today has provided opportunities so that the community can communicate with the government. Meanwhile, in addition to technological development, communities must have access to technology and sufficient knowledge to master the opportunities offered. Today, institutional websites provide information on parliamentary sessions and pending draft laws, live broadcasts of

parliamentary debates and committee meetings, and much more. The EU's online presence is quite widespread in this respect (for example, websites such as Europa and the European Parliament), providing a wide range of archived and encrypted electronic information. Thus, it is considered the most transparent of all the averages of its member states (Petrik, 2009). In a complex multi-level governance system such as the EU, the Web is one of the most important tools for disseminating relevant information. In this way, ITC helps intermediaries such as the media and civil society to keep political representatives under control (Petrik, 2009). Finally, the availability of information and other resources related to the political process increases the competence of citizens, increasing voters' knowledge of candidates and parties. Therefore, ITC consolidates the transparency of the political process within the framework of representative democracy, informing and making citizens more competent, thus helping them to exercise their voting rights.

4.5 *The quantity of citizen participation*

Research and analysis on citizen participation clearly show an emphasis on the quantity of participation and examine the influences of individual characteristics such as race/ethnicity, gender, ownership, and age, as well as community characteristics such as neighbourhood poverty level, crime in the neighbourhood and the presentation of the neighbourhood with the likelihood that individuals will participate in several activities or actions that are assumed as citizen participation. The dominant theme in this issue is a focus on individual and/or community-related characteristics that influence citizen involvement in policy-making processes to understand why some people participate and others do not. This topic focuses on the quantity of citizen participation because the literature seeks to quantify the presence of participation through a variety of activities or actions. The obvious shortcomings in this myopic focus on the individual or the community are the possible structural or contextual factors that influence the process of quality citizen participation. These factors include the context of political power, as well as the structure of policy development processes and how that context affects citizen participation. An understanding of political power within the policy development process helps to explain why those at the bottom of the power hierarchy in a society plagued with extreme inequality, also have the weakest voice in policy development and change (Nezha, 2024).

4.6 *Quality of citizens' participation*

Unlike the quantity of participation, the quality of citizen participation refers to how the legitimate involvement of citizens in policy development processes shifts political power (Arnstein, 1969). Along with the wave of interest in involving consumers in the development and implementation of programs and policies aimed at improving their lives, were the challenges associated with including so many different voices in the process (Burke, 1968). Arnstein was the first to note changes in citizen participation. In some cases, the structure existed for participation, but the quality of participation did not yet exist; in other cases, the elements of legitimate participation existed (i.e., service consumers holding a majority of seats on a governing board), but a legitimate shift of decision-making power had not occurred. Analysing the increase in the political power of citizens is essential for the redistribution of power. Research has focused on how individual and community characteristics influence citizen participation. Studying the quality of citizen participation provides information on how individuals can increase their political power and shift decision-making to those who are not represented in policy development. This shift of power was what the concept of citizen participation should have done in the first place (Arnstein, 1969).

4.7 *Civil society and citizen action in a democracy*

Civil society has been defined in various ways. Civil society occupies the middle ground between the

government and the private sector. It is not the place where we vote and it is not the place where we buy and sell, it is the place where we talk with our neighbours about things related to our families and well-being; and how to improve our school and community. In this area, civil societies are "public" beings and share with the government a sense of publicity and respect for the common good and the community; but unlike the government, civil society does not claim to exercise a monopoly on legal obligations. On the contrary, civil society works voluntarily and "lives" in a "private" space dedicated to cooperation (non-binding) for the achievement of the public good.

This neighbourly and cooperative sphere of civil society shares with the private sector the gift of freedom: it is voluntary and consists of individuals and groups, freely associated. Unlike the private sector, it aims at the common good and consensual ways, i.e., integrative, and collaborative action. Civil society is public, without being compulsory and voluntary without being privatized (U.S. Department and Connecticut College, 1997). Civil society, however, is an indispensable support that helps ensure that the state is kept under control and supervised in its interactions with citizens. In general, the concept of civil society is a general concept that includes a variety of social formations, including social movements, NGOs, trade unions, professional associations, student organizations, women's organizations, youth organizations and religious ones (Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2009).

5. The Case of Albania

Albania is often treated as the "hardest case" of regime change, compared to other post-communist cases in Central and Eastern Europe. Its long and difficult, sometimes interrupted, chaotic and certainly uncertain road to democracy and the market economy defied any enthusiastic expectations of smooth democratic and economic progress. The historical "deficits" of the country, the lack of democratic experience, the ongoing socio-economic situation, the spread of authoritarian leadership and the lack of autonomous civil society are often cited as explanations for Albania's difficult transition and its current problems. Most importantly, the total retention of power by the Communists from 1945 to 1991 prevented the emergence of movements and leaders with the vision and capacity to lead the country towards democratization. Therefore, Albania had to start again without institutions with a democratic tradition, without experienced movements and without leaders who could have the vision for building democratic institutions and a market economy (Albania Country Report, BTI, 2020).

During these three decades, Albania has encountered many difficulties on its way to economic development and democratization, undertaking and implementing numerous reforms, trying to transform existing institutions and create new institutions that would be more suitable for to respond to the requirements and standards provided in the constitution, in international agreements and the laws of the country, building its economy from scratch, trying to address the demands and challenges of the time, according to the era of globalization where the borders are shrinking increasingly and where technological advances and the use of the internet are changing rapidly.

Albania has chosen its course towards the West by joining NATO (2009) and continuing its efforts to integrate into the European Union (EU), ratifying all the main international conventions for the protection of human rights and reflecting in its domestic legislation the standards and requirements of international treaties.

Albania, as a member of the Council of Europe (CoE) since July 13, 1995, has actively cooperated with the EU, in a variety of directions and fields, including political dialogue, legislation, trade, economy, investments, culture, etc. However, Albania has not been able to adhere to the standards of a democratic state based on European values, as well as to implement the regulations and standards provided by the legislation in force (Nezha, 2024).

Albania's path towards democratization and development has been filled with numerous challenges and obstacles. Problems carried over from the past, weak institutions, high levels of poverty and unemployment, deep and systematic corruption, informality and monopolies, and weak civil society (most NGOs are highly dependent on donor funds and often have to adapt their missions

in line with donor agendas), lack of an effective opposition, media controlled by the government (officially and unofficially), elections accompanied by serious violations (OSCE / ODIHR *"The report Final, 2017"*), lack of information of ordinary citizens about their rights and freedoms on the one hand, and the responsibilities of the government and public institutions of different levels on the other hand, are among the problems that hinder the progress of the country (Freedom House, Albania Country Report, 2021). Distrust of the government, widespread apathy and people's withdrawal from political and public life have further worsened the situation.

Against this background, the promotion of citizen participation, as a mechanism for achieving more effective and sustainable results in the areas of democratization and development of the country, can be seen as an important effort, which as we will deal with during this article, has the potential to fix many of the aforementioned issues.

Citizen participation is not claimed to be the solution to all democratization and development problems, but it can have a major impact and play an essential role in informing government policies and decision-making on issues that affect people's lives. It can contribute to better governance and accountability as a whole and help ensure that democratic principles are put into practice. Civic engagement and collaboration with local government on community issues and priorities can also promote local development through achieving more effective and sustainable solutions and creating new business opportunities for small and medium-sized enterprises, public-private partnerships, collaborations, and other initiatives, thus improving the overall economic prospects of the communities.

However, to date, very little independent research has been conducted to assess the impact of these factors or other factors on the ground, to examine and assess how healthy civic participation is, what the behaviours, capacities, levels of civic engagement and the possibilities for this engagement to influence the course of politics and reforms in Albania.

While addressing this issue, this article attempts to shed light on the obstacles to citizen participation in Albania and identify opportunities for a wider and more meaningful involvement of citizens in decision-making and policy-making processes. Thus, the article examines the factors of civic participation and especially the relationship of civic participation with social capital, civic education and the use of information and communication technology (ITC) in Albania.

The article aims to capture the trends in the use of the Internet and the growth simultaneously with the spread of ITC in the country, public awareness on rights, access to information, activism of citizens online (internet) and assessment of whether ITC can serve as an additional platform and a tool for civic engagement in Albania. Given the growing importance of the concept of citizen participation and its role in democratization and economic development results in a country that is undergoing a comprehensive and protracted transition, the study issue takes on an extremely important and current role, as far as it concerns information and further orientation for development policies.

6. The Legal Framework Regarding the Participation of Citizens in the Decision-Making Process

The Constitution of the Republic of Albania, as the fundamental law of the state, does not clearly define and expressly the right of citizens and civil society, regarding engagement and participation in public decision-making processes, since the purpose of the Constitution is the concrete determination of some main principles or the absolute exclusion of circumstances considered unacceptable for it. The adjustments made by the Constitution cannot always be complete and exhaustive, not regulating in detail every aspect of the organization of the social and political life of a country, but only some basic principles and criteria on which it must rely.

Although not defined in a written and exhaustive manner, the right of citizens to participate and engage in decision-making originates from several principles of the democratic state guaranteed by the Constitution, such as: "the right of referendum", "the right of freedom of speech" right to

information " " right to assemble " " right to organize " "the right to propose laws " " freedom of access to public information " "the right to a healthy environment" etc. Undoubtedly, it is not always easy to implement these mechanisms. One of these cases was the attempt of civil society to implement Law No. 54/2019, dated 18.07.2019 "On the legislative initiative of voters in the Republic of Albania. The concrete case of the draft law regarding collective lawsuits (class actions), related to the procedure of the legislative initiative by citizens, did not find the right support in the parliament, it is still pending. Another civil society initiative related to the creation of the national registry of those convicted of sexual crimes, even with the support of parliament members, managed to become law, Law No. 62/2022 "On the national registry of those convicted of sexual crimes". This clearly shows that in the first case, where large interests were involved with different and important subjects, the legislative initiative failed as a mechanism.

The Republic of Albania has ratified several conventions and international acts, which guarantee the right to information as a basic human right. This right constitutes one of the main elements for citizens' participation in the public decision-making process. In this context, the Republic of Albania is part of several international acts that support this right, and some of them are the Universal Declaration of Human Rights; the European Convention for the Protection of Fundamental Human Rights and Freedoms; the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights; Aarhus Convention; European Charter of Local Self-Government.

Regarding national acts, a lot of normative acts support the citizen's involvement in the decision-making process: Code of Administrative Procedures of the Republic of Albania; Law "On local self-government" no. 139/2015; Law "On public notification and consultation" no. 146/2014; Law "On the right to information" no. 119/2014; Law "On the Ombudsman" no. 8454/1999; Law "On volunteering" no. 45/2016; Law "On social enterprises in the Republic of Albania" no. 65/2016; Law "On open data and reuse of public sector information" no. 33/2022.

7. The Questionnaire

7.1 Purpose of the questionnaire

The purpose of the questionnaire entitled " *Involvement of citizens in the decision-making process* " is to collect information about the interests, abilities, and experiences of the citizens of the Republic of Albania in policy-making and decision-making processes. This questionnaire is a tool that collects facts and perceptions of citizens about their experiences and commitments in decision-making, the spaces allowed by the law and the applicability related to them. Through the data that we will collect, we will be able to give suggestions and recommendations at the end of this article to improve the quality of citizens' participation in decision-making (Nezha, 2024).

The questionnaire, which was distributed with Google Forms, via the Internet, was designed and used according to the logic and algorithm of UNDESA (DESA, UN think-tank), in response to the growing need for greater and active participation of citizens for development. The paper is based on primary data, which were collected through a questionnaire as a research instrument. In general, the collected data are qualitative and quantitative, as they are based on statements, which receive a Likert scale as an answer.

The analysis that is done with the collected data is descriptive and exploratory, as it gives us penetrating information on the perceptions and evaluations of the respondents on the issues of involvement in citizen decision-making, based on the prepared statements that are presented to them, but at the same time, there are some questions with open alternatives, regarding the channels or tools that citizens use for information and communication.

The questionnaire was designed in three sections. The first section includes personal (gender, workplace, education, etc.) and demographic questions. The second section includes questions about the aspiration and possibility of engaging in communication and information about politics in the country, as well as the tools used by the respondents. This section is designed in the form of multiple-

choice questions, where the questioner (respondent) has the possibility of choosing more than one alternative, in some cases. And the third section, where closed questions are asked, is based on statements that limit the interviewer to 3 or 5 response levels, regarding civic engagement in decision-making (Nezha, 2024).

In the first section, the survey measures and evaluates the knowledge that the respondent has regarding the legal and implementing framework for the engagement of citizens in decision-making and political issues. The second section is based on facts, concretely identifying some of the steps and tools used by the citizen, on the one hand, and the Municipality, on the other hand, as an organ of the Local Government, in decision-making to have the best policies for development. The third section measures the respondents' evaluations and perceptions of citizen involvement in decision-making at the national level.

7.2 Validity and Reliability

The validity indicator shows that the questionnaire measures what it was supposed to measure. This means that the instruments were judged by the parties interested in the subject to be valid. The reliability of the study was achieved through the use of different methods in the collection of information. For example, the study used a questionnaire as a tool, which included control questions in it. The questionnaire used both types of questions: closed and open-ended to ensure more valid answers and give more flexibility to the respondent.

7.3 Statistical analysis

Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS version 25) was used to analyse the questionnaire. Frequencies and percentages were also used in this section. The study instrument collects 763 data from a sample of 767 respondents in the Republic of Albania and processes them, dividing the statistics into several groups. It should be kept in mind that for a population of nearly 2 million people, this number of respondents is considerable, and the results are considered close to reality. This sample is random. The questionnaire was developed online on the Google Form platform to reduce the time and costs involved with typical instruments, as well as to increase overall participation.

7.4 Descriptive analysis

Based on our research sample, which consisted of 767 respondents, we have the following results in terms of gender structure (Fig.1), bearing in mind that 4 observations were excluded, as they did not pass the control questions. From the table, we can see that about 60% of respondents (461 people) are women and 40% (302) are men.

Gender of respondent



Figure 1: Gender structure

Regarding the age, we note that the sample captured through the avalanche effect has an average of about 28 years, minimum and maximum of 16 and 68 years, respectively. From the respective frequencies, there is an equal distribution of the respondents, except for the ages of 19 and 20, which results in a greater frequency (from 10%).

For our sample to be as representative as possible, it would be preferable for the study to have an equal representation among respondents with different educations, and to have a statistically significant comparison for civic engagement and decision-making between these groups. The descriptive data from the sample show us a high representation of people with a master's degree (or the 4-5-year system) 56.5%, less those with a bachelor's degree 29.5%, and a low representation of people with a doctorate, secondary education and 8 or 9-year-old, with the percentages (Fig.2):



Figure 2: Education

Two of the follow-up questions in the survey are related to birthplace (Fig.3) and residence, referring to the county. From the tables of the frequency of observations, we notice that the people born in Elbasan (16.8%), Tirana (20.6%) and Dibër (13.5%) are the most who undergo the survey, while the rest have no big differences between them.

It is different with the place of residence (Fig.4), where the difference is very obvious between the district of Tirana and the rest, where about 65% of the respondents live in Tirana (the capital). To the 157 people who were born in Tirana, a significant number of people displaced from other cities is added, which also reflects the demographic movement resulting from INSTAT, and which will also have an impact on the results of the survey, when relevant conclusions will be released.

Even graphically, it is quite clear with the area in yellow, the expansion that comes from the increase in the number of citizens who choose Tirana as their place of residence, regardless of the district where they were born.

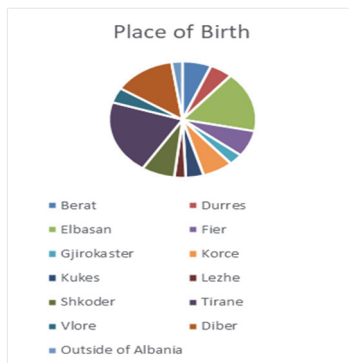


Figure 3: Place of birthplace

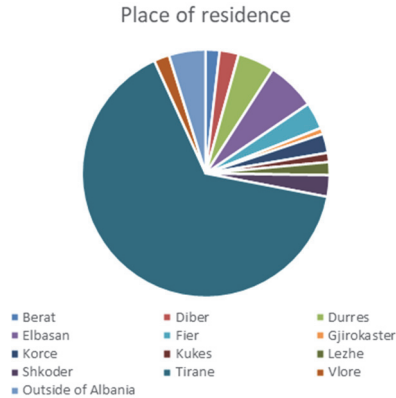


Figure 4: Place of residence

Of great interest is the examination of the residence, classifying it categorically, urban or non-urban (Fig.5). This interest is particularly related to engagement in decision-making and its forms, to test whether there is a significant difference between the initiatives to engage in the decision-making of people living in urban areas and those living in non-urban areas. The data shows that about 660 out of 763 valid surveys were completed by people living in urban areas, thus having a significantly greater representation.



Figure 5: Urban and non-urban

Another characteristic, that is tested in the questionnaire, is about the impact on civic engagement and decision-making, or the impact of ITC on it, and also the status of work. Depending on the sector, institution or position, the premises for engagement in decision-making also change. According to our respondents, the majority are employed in the private sector (42.7%), a significant part are students (28.2%), fewer are employees employed by the state (15.3%), and the rest belong to other categories. Pensioners with only one observation are the least represented.

7.5 Political engagement and Internet use

From the question of what is meant by political commitment in the Albanian context, it results (Fig.6) that the majority of respondents (57.7%) break it down into a commitment to a political party, 36.6% state that they mean a commitment to political activities, without being part of a political party, and 5.8% admit that they do not know the meaning of the term. From responses and

frequencies, we can also understand the range of knowledge that people have about politics and its concepts, and therefore their involvement in it. According to the answers given, people may not engage in politics because they think that they must necessarily be included in a political party.

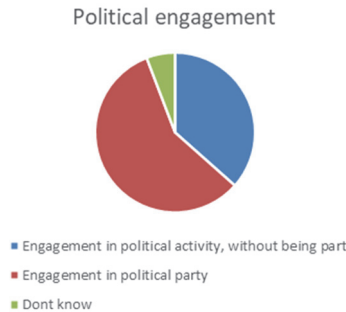


Figure 6: Political engagement

One of the types of civic engagement is voting, therefore through the question "If the elections were held this week, would you vote?" (Fig.7) it is intended to measure the willingness of citizens to express their opinions through voting. The answers show that the majority would vote for sure (44.8%), 25% expressed a high probability to vote, 11% were neutral, expressing uncertainty, and 11% were sure they would not. Of course, elections or voting are an example of civic engagement in decision-making and expression of one's will, where our sample has shown in numbers a higher willingness to participate in voting than the last elections showed.

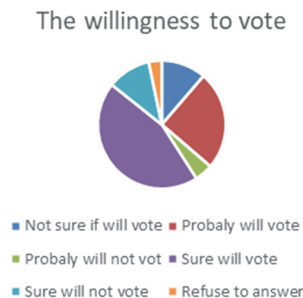


Figure 7: The willingness to vote

As we can notice from the willingness to vote with the place of residence (urban or non-urban) based on the answers given, residents in urban areas express a higher willingness to vote, while those in urban areas express themselves more passively. By asking which of the following initiatives you would be willing to carry out if a certain issue/situation would interest or concern you, it was intended to highlight the type of efforts of Albanians and their forms to have their say. From the results, we see that the most frequent form of response is "Participating as a volunteer in an activity, campaign, or demonstration (not organized by political parties)", alternative chosen 348 times; "Requesting information from state bodies (in official form, e.g., by email, letter)", selected 312 times; "Opinion on the Internet or political discussions on social networks (Facebook, etc.)", selected 233 times.

Regarding the question of how often you use the Internet (Fig.8), it is observed that the majority use the Internet several times a day, exactly 95.3% of the respondents, only 2.6% say that

they use it once a day, 1.6% say that they use the Internet several times a week, and only 2 people state that they are not internet users.

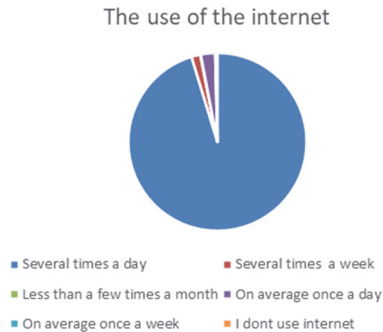


Figure 8: The use of the internet

Albanians are active users of the Internet even from other sources (INSTAT, ref) but what are the main reasons for the use?

According to the results of the survey, the main reasons are:

1. for communication, which was chosen 677 times as an alternative (that is, out of 677/763 respondents).
2. to search for information or news, selected 554 times.
3. to view email 513 times.
4. for games and entertainment 491 times.
5. While 6 people have stated that they do not use the Internet.

In addition to the closed alternatives, there was also the "Other" option as an alternative for the respondent, where the added reasons were for reading literature, online learning, or scientific research.

By comparing the groups of urban/non-urban residents with the reasons for using the Internet, it results that both groups use it mostly for communication, while if we compare based on residence, it turns out that residents of urban areas use the Internet more than residents of non-urban areas for work, information, and entertainment, while communication seems to be at the same levels.

Whereas, when we consider education, the data shows us that the use of the Internet is equally distributed among the groups, both those with a master's degree and those with a bachelor's degree (which are the largest and comparable groups), mainly for communication. Regarding email, people with a master's degree, who may also be in a working relationship, use it more. When we talk about decision-making, we cannot leave out the spectrum and influence of politics. Among the most used sources for political news, according to the survey, are "Online pages (Facebook, blogs, online portals and others)" as well as "Television and radio" and their websites. The least used as a source of information are the information channels of the political parties, chosen 66 times, while 82 people have stated that they do not follow politics at all.

Communication in online form has been proclaimed a lot in recent years, placing special importance on digital communication platforms with public institutions as well. In the framework of this movement to facilitate and speed up communication and service to citizens, let's see what the reasons are why citizens have used online communication with public institutions. We see that the most frequent and chosen answer is "I have filled out a form/request/documentation" and after that, chosen 266 times as an alternative is "I have not communicated". Afterwards, the alternative "I requested support/information" was chosen 192 times and this communication was used less for complaints or denunciations. We mostly observe a "forced use", for elements or reasons that are

officially required, while the free will to express oneself through the Internet is not observed.

Within the Digital Albania campaign, electronic platforms were created to serve citizens. Based on the answers given, it turns out that the most used is e-Albania, chosen 686/763, then u-Albania (an online platform for university) chosen 105 times, 60 respondents stated that they do not use any of them, e-Tax was chosen 50 times, e-Procurement 33 times, Teacher for Albania 42 times and e - Visa 12 times. In the "other" alternative, among the platforms used, "My Tirana" (online platform from the Tirana Municipality) results.

7.6 Legal framework

Based on the answers given by the respondent, this session is intended to analyse the degree of knowledge the citizen has regarding the legal framework of decision-making. The answer "Yes" is coded with "1", the answer "I don't know" is coded with "0" and "No" with "-1". An average close to "-1" indicates that the phenomenon does not exist, when it is close to 0, the citizen does not know about it, and close to "1" means that the citizen knows the phenomenon.

From the statistical data, it appears that citizens generally know the legal framework, regarding decision-making, although not at a very high level. This means that the respondent claims and knows that the Constitution of the Republic of Albania guarantees the citizen's right to public information and that Albania has no law or strategy for the right to information / for the protection of personal data. Mostly positively the respondent expressed the guarantee from the Constitution of the Republic of Albania for the citizen's right to direct active participation in public policies and decision-making, and for the issue of whether the Constitution of the Republic of Albania has provisions that require government institutions to consult with citizens about issues that affect their daily lives. As for the issues of whether "Albania has any law or strategy according to which government institutions must seek the citizen's opinion on problems, controversial issues or strategic documents?" or "Albania has any law or strategy, according to which the government institutions must engage the citizens in finding solutions to the issues that affect their daily lives?" it turns out that the citizens do not know.

In a detailed way, the frequencies of answers to each question regarding the knowledge of the legal framework, it is worth noting that the highest frequency among the answers is "Yes", which means that citizens know and accept the existence of a legal basis for protection of rights and their involvement in decision-making, except for the last two questions, where the most frequent answer is "I don't know". The data show that the respondents generally know, but this knowledge is at a low level. Also, we notice that about 30% of the respondents state that there is no full legal basis for supporting the citizen in decision-making or they do not know it. The biggest difference is the group of citizens with low education who have significantly less knowledge about the legal framework, compared to the rest.

7.7 Organizational framework

Based on the answers given by the respondent, this session is intended to analyse the degree of knowledge the citizen has regarding the organizational decision-making framework. In this perspective, it results that the majority of citizens "don't know" or think that people with special abilities do not have the opportunity to be informed through special means, based on their needs, and that there is no institution or agency that administers the process of civic engagement in finding solutions to issues that affect their daily lives. As for the question "Is there an institution in Albania that controls the implementation of the legislation on the right to information and the preservation of personal data?" it turns out that citizens generally affirm it. We can say that the female and male groups do not have the same knowledge about the organizational framework, in a statistically significant way they have different levels of knowledge about the organizational basis for involvement in decision-making, which means that women have an advantage.

Another difference comes from the group of citizens living in non-urban areas who easily have

more knowledge about the organizational framework compared to the rest. Now we have to test whether this difference is just random, or we can say that even in the population there is a significant difference between the knowledge about the organizational framework of the residents in urban and non-urban areas. Based on the results, we see that the groups separated by urban and non-urban residence do not have the same knowledge about the organizational framework, statistically significantly they have different levels of knowledge about the organizational basis for involvement in decision-making. Surprisingly, people living in non-urban areas have more knowledge about the state organization for decision-making. Perhaps this comes as a result of the proximity/distance that the institutions and authority have in rural areas from the citizens, undoubtedly at the local level people are more friendly to each other's.

Another differentiation occurs in the group of citizens with low education who have significantly less knowledge, about the organizational framework, compared to the rest, but also those with a doctorate have higher knowledge than the rest.

7.8 Citizen awareness and ability to engage in decision-making

This survey session aims to measure how aware citizens are of their decision-making opportunities and their abilities to be involved in decision-making. The survey shows that citizens have a positive opinion about the implementation of digital participation and its impact on civic engagement; they also state that they are ready to participate in a training program about civic engagement and affirm the existence of civil organizations that support citizen engagement in governance processes.

On the other hand, they strongly deny membership in any political party; are not members of any association or organization in the country; do not affirm the existence of training or education programs for civic involvement; they do not engage in online communication and exchange of information with any online media, nor do they participate in meetings where local or national problems are discussed. From these results, we see a will for citizen involvement in decision-making, but that remains tentative, as real commitment is very little. So, we have a passive society in undertaking actions, even though they say that the will is not lacking. What is most noticeable is the passivity manifested by groups, which means a step in the involvement in decision-making.

The only group that shows tendencies for involvement and civic engagement is the group of people with a doctorate. It also shows that residents in urban areas are easily less passive than those in rural areas. This may be a result of the more opportunities and approaches that cities offer. The other hypothesis compares civic engagement, skills, and willingness to be involved in decision-making between men and women. Our sample shows that men are more passive than women in this commitment.

7.9 Analysis of the "Municipality" session

In the questionnaire, a special section is attributed to the municipality, as a very important institution, where the engagement of citizens in decision-making, related to issues that affect them closely, is expressed. From the first two questions, we have a negative average, which means that the citizens mostly say that there is no municipal strategy for civic engagement or an official in charge of coordination. Also, many of them deny that the municipality of the city where they live conducts surveys to measure citizen satisfaction with its decision-making.

Regarding the forms of communication of the municipality to hold discussions and meetings with its citizens on the issues and decisions it undertakes, it turns out that the most used form is traditional consultation (e.g., village, neighbourhood, mini-municipality councils, etc.) then come the open days for the public, the consultation with citizens with expert groups, and less used as a form of consultation are panels with citizens. Considering the forms of how the municipality distributes information, we notice that social networks occupy the first place as the answer given by 33.4% of the total. Then we have the traditional media, such as the official website of the municipality (26.8%) and through radio and television (24.6%) and the least used form are physical meetings (15.2%). As for the

methods of involving citizens in decision-making by the municipalities, the alternatives have been chosen almost the same number of times, where the inclusion of citizens in decision-making for monitoring public expenditures is chosen less. Also, the data shows that women perceive that they feel more involved and engaged in decision-making in the municipality, than men, who do not feel very engaged. From the descriptive data, it appears that there is a relationship between education and perceived involvement in decision-making in the municipality. The higher the educational level of the respondent, the less involved the person feels in decision-making in the municipality. Likewise, the negative values of the averages when we compare the answers given by people living in urban and non-urban areas show us that everyone feels equally excluded, regardless of the area of residence.

7.10 Perceptions

In the last section, it is attempted to measure and evaluate the perception and evaluation of citizens, about their engagement in decision-making, the spaces allowed by institutions and laws, as well as the forms or effectiveness. From the descriptive data where the citizen is asked to evaluate his commitment, to decision-making on several different issues, we notice that all the average answers are less than 3, which means that in general the evaluation of the citizen commitment is low.

The average values almost all tend to be close to 2, which means: a poor assessment of citizen engagement for decisions affecting the effectiveness of digital participation, environmental protection, the effectiveness of decisions made with citizen participation, the overall participation of citizens at the local level, the general participation of citizens at the national level (over 2) and issues of citizen response to public revenues and expenditures, citizen response to economic and social development, citizen response to public services (under 2).

Meanwhile, regarding the evaluation of satisfaction by political actors and institutions, we again observe total dissatisfaction, since all the average values for the evaluation of political actors are below 3. It is worth noting that citizens are least dissatisfied with the work of civil society organizations and non-profit organizations, while the most dissatisfied are with the opposition. (Un)satisfaction with the current work of the government is close to that of the local government. While the legislative bodies and the judiciary seem to have caused the greatest dissatisfaction among the citizens. So, in general, there is dissatisfaction and distrust in the existing institutions and a minimalist hope in the elements of civil society.

Also, this section aims to evaluate the opinion of the citizen, regarding the impact of information technology on his mutual relations with public institutions. From the analysis, we see that both sides of the communication relationship between the citizen and the institution, based on ITC, have been evaluated close to 2, which means 'Weak'. Digitization and ITC are still expected to bring their effects on this ratio. From the descriptive data, we notice that the higher the education, the lower the perception of civic engagement for involvement in decision-making and also the evaluation for it. Or to put it another way, the more educated citizens are, the more they think there is room for improvement.

8. Conclusions and Recommendations

Democracy and good governance are two key factors for the inclusion of citizens in the decision-making process. A strong relationship between these two elements is identified throughout this article. The legal framework for citizen participation in decision-making in Albania is advanced, but further improvements are needed to facilitate and encourage active citizen participation.

8.1 Identification of the levels of citizen involvement in the decision-making process in Albania

In this article, it was identified that the involvement of citizens in the decision-making process in Albania is still at a limited level. Through the analysis of surveys and the research of relevant

documents, it was evident that the active participation of citizens in the decision-making process is still scarce, and citizens have a limited influence on the choice and development of government decisions. This lack of citizen involvement is related to various factors, including lack of transparency, political conflicts, and lack of appropriate mechanisms for citizen involvement.

8.2 *The importance of transparency in the inclusion of citizens in the decision-making process*

The findings of this article confirmed that the lack of transparency is a key factor in limiting the involvement of citizens in the decision-making process. Little transparency, insufficient information and lack of accountability add to citizens' lack of trust in the decision-making process. This negative factor affects the legitimacy of decisions and brings tensions in citizen-government relations. Therefore, developing mechanisms and practices to improve transparency and accountability should be an important focus to encourage citizen involvement in the decision-making process.

8.3 *The influence of political factors on the involvement of citizens in the decision-making process*

This article revealed that political factors have a significant impact on the involvement of citizens in the decision-making process in Albania. In some cases, political interests and political rivalries have limited the participation of citizens and their influence in the decision-making process. Political conflicts and polarization have led to a lack of cooperation and effective dialogue, creating challenges for citizen involvement. This highlights the need to address the interaction between politics and citizen involvement to improve the decision-making process.

8.4 *The opportunity offered through digital participation in decision-making*

This article highlighted that digital participation is an important alternative to increase citizen participation and encourage transparency and accountability. The findings show that there is a need for appropriate infrastructure and digital security to enable this type of participation. The evaluation of the best practices of citizen participation shows that there is a need for the promotion of the culture of active participation in society and the development of citizens' capacities to participate in the decision-making process.

8.5 *Recommendations*

Based on the findings and conclusions of this study, there are some recommendations for future policies and practices in the involvement of citizens in the decision-making process in Albania. Some key recommendations for policymakers and policy practitioners are:

1. Implementation of transparent mechanisms and procedures to ensure free and fair access of citizens to information and documentation of the decision-making process.
2. Development of citizen consultation mechanisms and active participation in the decision-making process, involving citizens quickly and in the early stages of decision-making.
3. Promoting constructive dialogue and cooperation between political actors and citizens to address complex issues and find common solutions.
4. Increase awareness and education of citizens regarding the role and importance of their participation in decision-making and help develop their capacities to be actively involved.
5. Investment in digital infrastructure and data security is necessary to facilitate and encourage the digital participation of citizens in the decision-making process.

Some concrete actions, based on the successful actions that happened in the past, are the well-organised behaviour of the civil society. Cases when they arrange to improve the participation of the citizens, by collecting their signatures regarding different legislative initiatives, for sensitive issues

(mentioned above), are examples that the citizens are eager to participate.

Other successful key points that can be used more actively in the engagement of the decision-making process of the citizens are the institutions that promote human rights, such as the Ombudsman, the Commissioner for the Right of Information and the Protection of Personal Data and the Commissioner for Protection from Discrimination.

These recommendations are intended to contribute to the development of a more inclusive and reliable decision-making system in Albania, improving democracy and promoting good governance.

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