# TRANSPARENCY AND STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION – A NECESSARY SYNERGY AT LOCAL LEVEL

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***Abstract:*** *This article addresses the issues of guaranteeing respect for democratic principles, identifying risk factors and control mechanisms, regulating and institutionalizing monitoring procedures, and the contribution of the operation of consultative platforms at local level to the promotion of transparency and the protection of fundamental rights. A high level of transparency facilitates access by all stakeholders to information of public interest, encourages genuine participation in decision-making and involvement in public consultation processes on public policy documents and local regulatory acts. The transparency process involves discovering, describing, documenting and communicating all the argumentative stages of reasoning. It also involves recognizing the weight of any evidence used to reach the final decision. The European integration of the Republic of Moldova involves a complex process of bringing administrative rules, structures and practices into line with those existing in the countries of the European Union. In this context of institutional reform with a view to European integration, transparency is a principle and an essential condition for re-establishing the relationship between the administration and the citizen in full compliance with European rules and practices. However, the practical implementation of transparency principles remains problematic. A significant proportion of local public authorities either lack a functional website or fail to adequately maintain their existing platforms. This situation limits the population's access to clear and relevant information, such as local budgets or adopted decisions. The lack of digital skills among public officials is another major obstacle identified, highlighting the need for dedicated training programs. Only by addressing these deficiencies can access to information and strategic communication at the local level truly become effective tools for strengthening democracy and public trust.*

***Keywords:*** *democratic principle, control mechanism, decision-making, public interest information, transparency, consultation process, local public authorities, participation.*

## Introduction

The term transparency is often used in politics in a metaphorical sense of the similar term in optics: a transparent object is an object that allows the outline and details of objects on the opposite side to be clearly seen. The transparency requirement is addressed for the purpose of receiving information, openness, communication, and evaluation.

Closely related to the requirement for a transparent policy is the requirement for transparency in administration.

When discussing decisional transparency, it's important to acknowledge that authorities' decisions are not always made public. These facts take place both centrally and locally. Here we can mention, for example, not only the secret meetings of the Government of Moldova in connection with the distribution of public money, but also the process of poor consultation and non-transparent approval of budgets at the local level. Establishment of effective dialogue platforms, especially at local level, between authorities and citizens would facilitate access to public information and increase public awareness of involvement in decision-making.

Decisional transparency implies the existence of two parts: the public administration institutions and the citizen, the beneficiary of the services of these institutions. The quality of public services must be continuously improved according to social, economic, and political contexts. To maximize the efficiency and effectiveness of these services, the citizen's degree of satisfaction is a good indicator of performance.

The objective of decisional transparency is to require central and local public administration authorities to make draft regulations public before they are adopted. Whether they are natural or legal persons, the recipients of the regulations have the opportunity to make suggestions and recommendations regarding the regulations presented to them during the project stage. The suggestions thus formulated will be analysed by the initiating authorities, who will decide on whether to include them in the final text of the regulations or not.

The benefits of decisional transparency are for both the administration and the citizen. Thus, the public administration obtains free of charge additional information regarding the sectors of activity covered by the proposed regulations and removes certain implementation problems, and citizens can adapt their activity early to the requirements to be imposed.

**Research Methodology**

The research methodology includes both quantitative research methods (e.g., surveys) and qualitative research methods (e.g., focus groups, in-depth interviews). This allowed a comprehensive assessment not only of the current situation, but also of the perception of all actors involved in decision-making processes at local level (public authorities, representatives of civil society organisations and citizens). Therefore, in order to achieve the purpose and objectives of the article, the following tools have been applied:

1. Analysis of the legal and regulatory framework governing transparency in decision-making processes; procedures and tools for organizing public consultations;

2. Analysis of data and findings from other relevant reports and studies;

3. Analysis of the web pages of local public authorities subject to research;

4. Analysis of data and information on the decision-making process published by local authorities, as well as statistical data on decisions and public provisions of LPAs in the State Register of Local Acts (RSA) www.actelocale.gov.md;

6. Analysis of public perception surveys on transparency in decision-making at central and local level;

7. Analysis of relevant international standards (CoE, OECD, etc.) and international best practices with the presentation of relevant recommendations for the context of the Republic of Moldova.

**The Concept of Transparency Within Public Authorities: The National and European Normative Perspective**

The challenges imposed by the changes in society at the current stage call for the efficiency of the activity of the local government system, orienting it to meet the needs of people, placing the centre of the priorities. The need for citizens to participate in the decision-making process is a condition of good governance at local level.

Decision-making transparency is an essential mechanism for any democratic society; it ensures the effective participation of citizens and legally recognized organizations in public life and complements the formal process of electing or designating representatives in public institutions and authorities. This mechanism is mentioned in the Republic of Moldova through the Law on transparency in the decision-making process no. 239-XVI of 13 November 2008 and involves two components: participation in the elaboration of regulations and participation in decision-making.

The principles governing decision-making transparency in public administration are: prior information of persons on matters of public interest; consultation of citizens on draft normative acts; active participation of citizens in the decision-making process and adoption of normative acts.

Decision-making transparency is even more necessary within local public authorities as, in accordance with the principle of subsidiarity, these authorities are closest to the citizen. On the other hand, the integration of the Republic of Moldova into the EU involves a complex process of making the rules, structure, and administrative practices compatible with those existing in the countries of the European Union. In this context of institutional reform from the perspective of European integration, transparency is an essential principle and condition for restoring the relationship between administration and citizen in full compliance with European rules and practices. There are three essential requirements for the reform of the relationships between the administration and the citizen and for the establishment of transparency: access to information; consultation; and civic participation. These requirements are found both in the norms of international organizations (European Union, Council of Europe, OSCE, OECD) and in the practice of democratic countries. Within the European Union, the term "transparency" supports several interpretations:

- Directive 80/723/EEC on the transparency of the relations between Member States and public undertakings, where transparency means the visibility of the relations between public authorities and public undertakings, respectively: public funds allocated directly to public undertakings concerned by public authorities; public funds allocated by public authorities through public undertakings or through institutional institutions; and the use of public funds allocated so that the Commission ensures that Member States do not grant aid incompatible with the common market to public and private undertakings.
- Law no. 436/2006 on some measures to ensure transparency in the exercise of public dignitaries, public functions and in the business environment, prevention and sanctioning of corruption, where transparency means bringing to public knowledge the list of taxpayers who register outstanding obligations to the state budget, the state social insurance budget, the unemployment insurance budget, the budget of the National Single Fund for Health Social Insurance and local budgets, and also the provision by public administration authorities of public information and services by

electronic means, along with traditional procedures, possibly also the provisions on the declaration of assets and interests. This is in addition to other provisions, such as those regarding the prevention and fight against cybercrime, the conflict of interests and the regime of incompatibilities in the exercise of public dignitaries and public functions, groups of economic interest or on the amending of some regulations for the purpose of preventing and combating corruption, to stop only here. From the doctrinal text and the one that forms the legal text, we draw the conclusion that by access to information we mean access to any information that concerns or results from the activities of a public authority or public institution, regardless of support or form or mode of expression.

By transparency we mean the procedure by which citizens and their organizations can express their opinions and interests in the drafting of normative acts and in the making of administrative decisions. The tools they have at their disposal are their consultation by public authorities in relation to draft laws and their participation in public meetings of those authorities. It is worth noting that, at European level, the two themes are only partially regulated, depending on the national regulatory sphere rather than the requirements for unitary treatment across all Member States.

The only express reference is contained in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, Article 42 – right of access to documents: "Every citizen of the Union and every individual or legal person resident or having his registered office in a Member State shall have the right of access to documents of the Parliament, the Council and the European Commission."

Where access to information at the level of European regulations is concerned, we will consider two main documents: Regulation (EC) No 1049/2011on free access to Parliament, Council and European Commission documents; Directive 2003/98/EC on the re-use of public sector information.

As far as the concept of transparency is concerned at the level of European regulations, we will rather refer to the Commission's work in the area of good regulation/regulation. Over the past fifteen years, the European Union institutions have become increasingly open to the public. The principle of openness was introduced by the Maastricht Treaty in 1991 with the aim of strengthening the democratic character of the institutions. The Council and the Co-MIA subsequently adopted a Code of Conduct on public access to documents held by them as an additional and essential aspect of the institutions' communication and information policy.

Regulation (EC) No 1049/2011 implements the right of citizens to obtain documents of the European Parliament, the Council and the Commission, and aims to give the greatest possible effect to the right of public access to documents and to lay down the general principles and limits of such access. Any citizen of the Union and any individual or legal person, resident or registered in a Member State, shall have the right of access to the documents of the institutions, in accordance with the principles, conditions, and limits laid down in the Regulation. The Regulation also refers to the term "document", to mean respectively "any content, regardless of the manner of transmission of such content (written on paper or stored in electronic form, audio, visual or audio-visual recording) regarding a matter related to the policy, activity and decisions within the sphere of responsibility of an institution".

Exceptions to free access to documents are motivated by the protection of: the public interest; the privacy and integrity of the person, in particular in accordance with community legislation relating to the protection of personal data; the commercial interests of an economic or legal person, including intellectual property; legal proceedings and legal advice.

Directive 2003/98/EC on the re-use of public sector information aims to harmonize Member States' rules and practices on the exploitation of public sector information. Re-use means the use by natural or legal persons of documents held by public sector bodies for commercial or non-commercial purposes other than the original purpose of the public task for which they were drawn up. The Directive aims at prescribing a minimum set of rules on re-use, as well as practical means to facilitate the re-use of existing documents held by Member States' public sector bodies. Nongovernmental organizations and citizens instead additional rules on professional conduct, misleading information, and biased, subjective information (Directive 2003/98).

The introduction of a period when former European citizens will not be able to lobby European institutions could discourage the practice of "revolving doors" by which an official comes out only to enter the former job as a lobbyist. All respondents asked for a clear-up on the complaints and sanctions system associated with the Code of Conduct. They considered that the procedure for monitoring and implementing the Code of Conduct should be robust, functional, and proactive, but at the same time it should preserve the pro-tonality between facts and penalties and viciously protect interest representatives against vicious or false claims. The right to appeal against sanctioning decisions was considered an essential one. Respondents also considered it important whether sanctions would be applied to registered entities representing certain interests or against clients and members of represented interest groups. Some NGO representatives have called for violations of the Code of Conduct to be made public by publishing a "blacklist". Additionally, citizen participation and consultation are nothing more than the ways in which the citizens of the European countries are to be able to participate in the public consultation.

The nations and the countries can take a conscious and active act on what a state and a local community undertake in its general interest, which is why it is necessary to find the most diverse ways to ensure the effective realization of this fundamental right in the Republic of Moldova, especially if we take into account the vector of European integration declared and supported by all governments.

In the analysis within the implementation of the fifth Action Plan on Open Government, the report analyses the application of the legal provisions, namely Law no. 239/2008 on the transparency of the decision-making process and Government Decision no. 967/2016, complemented by the recommendations of the Group of States against Corruption (GRECO). At the same time, it brings to attention the international standards established by organizations such as the Council of Europe and the OECD, with the aim of integrating good practices into the legislation and practices of the Republic of Moldova.

Currently, the regulatory and practical application framework has been supplemented (Law governing information, consultation and participation in the decision-making process LP239/2008; Government Decision no. 967 Of 09.08.2016 on the mechanism of public consultation of civil society in the decision-making process; Law on access to information of public interest no. 148 Of 09.06.2023 aimed at ensuring transparency and promoting access to information held by public authorities and

institutions; Government Decision no. 728 Of 26.09.2023 on official websites of public authorities and institutions and minimum requirements for their social profiles.

Local public administration and civil society in the Republic Moldova must use all available means to ensure a participatory approach to the decision-making process.

**Participation of Citizens in the Local Governance Process**

The challenges imposed by the changes in society at the current stage call for the efficiency of the activity of the local government system, orienting it to meet the needs of people by placing them at the centre of priorities. The need for citizens to participate in the decision-making process is a condition of good governance at local level. The participation of citizens in the local governance process is the basic component of a democracy, being a mechanism to increase the transparency of the decision-making process and the efficiency of the governance act (Box, 2007: 103).

The need to involve citizens in decision-making is also conditional on the fact that decisions taken by public administration authorities have a direct impact on people. In the same context, recent public administration reforms have completed the functions of local public administration authorities in the Republic of Moldova with new competences and responsibilities, most of which are difficult to implement without community support. Citizens' participation in the decision-making process increases citizens' confidence in local public administration. Abraham Lincoln, one of the most impactful presidents and statesmen of the United States, said that by increasing their trust in local public administration, citizens will show an increased tendency to support the decisions taken.

Citizens' involvement in the decision-making process makes local public administration authorities and citizens accountable for simultaneously implementing community development policies. Thus, in a community where citizens are involved in the decision-making process, the local public administration will: share information in an honest, complete, and clear manner; influence the decisions of the administration in a fair and open manner; encourage citizens to take advantage of these possibilities; provide all the arguments that supported the decisions and explain how they were made.

In turn, citizens can understand their rights and obligations to participate in local decision-making, in decisions that can directly or indirectly influence their lives; they may be prepared to work honestly and constructively to support local government representatives in solving problems. Local public administration authorities, based on the regulatory framework and the mission they have, are directly responsible for involving citizens in the decision-making process. To provide services to citizens, the local public administration organizes and provides them. Therefore, the local authorities must have communication with them to identify their problems and develop and implement their solutions. In the same context, we mention that the citizen pays local taxes and pays services. The citizen has the right to buy quality services, and to buy those services that he needs, and this can be done through direct or indirect participation (through their elected officials) in the decision-making process.

The normative framework of the Republic of Moldova ensures the right of citizens to participate in the decision-making process, but at the same time citizens have responsibilities: to observe what the local administration is doing and for what purpose; to be prepared to make a contribution when the administration plans to do something that may affect their interests; and to approach the representatives of the administration with a

positive attitude. In accordance with the provisions of the analysed normative framework, the public administration is obliged to provide citizens with information on its activity and on plans, and to allow free access to existing information in public institutions. Good communication from the administration to the citizens takes time and resources but is found in public trust and understanding. Information can be made available by using the communication channels offered by the media: newspapers, radio and television broadcasts, public announcements, etc. Information can also be made available to citizens by using official or informal public meetings, contacts with various associations and organizations, and direct contacts with citizens.

The flow of information from the administration to citizens is important, and the list of categories of information accessible to citizens includes:

- information about how the administration is organized and how it works – for example: departments, services, titles, job descriptions, names of managers; detailed description of the responsibilities of different departments and directions;
- contact information: whom to address to solve problems, to whom, when and where, including the work programme;
- information about the services that the administration provides to the community – for example: which compartment is responsible for providing the service; how the compartment is organized to provide the service; what services are funded and how much they cost; budget information: increased spending compared to the previous year;
- information on the meetings of the local and district councils – for example: when the meetings will take place, the detailed agenda of the meetings; how a citizen can put his problem in the agenda of the meeting; how the decisions are taken and the petitions are solved; what steps are taken and what decisions are taken at each meeting; what committees the board has, who their members are and what decisions will be taken by them; when the committee meetings will take place; how can a citizen put his personal problem on the agenda of the committee meeting;
- financial information – for example: the budget of the local public administration for each year, showing all revenues, expenses in a way accessible to citizens; information on how the budget is made in each compartment; information on how and when citizens can express their opinions on budget spending; annual comparison of income and expenses.

It should be noted that the process of computerization of society has opened new possibilities for communication and information gathering. Thus, many local and national administrations use the Internet as a useful way to communicate and provide and receive information through their own websites. These websites of the administrative authorities include the following types of information:

- description of the organization and its mission; strategic plan, including long-term objectives and goals of the local authority; organizational chart;
- contact information for all offices: contact name, e-mail address, telephone, fax, voice mail numbers; a telephone guide with name, phone number, locations and telephone numbers of employees;

- budget information, including budget flow and opportunities for public participation; current employment opportunities.

**The consultation**. Consultation of citizens is carried out to identify their needs and problems in order to evaluate the priorities of actions and to collect ideas and suggestions for the elaboration and implementation of local public policies. In this regard, the consultation involves dialogue with citizens and involves: renouncing the directive and dogmatic attitude of public authorities, eliminating professional language by using a common language, clear and simple, and the use of participatory socio-cultural techniques, because making citizens express their opinions is even more important than explaining them.

**Public meetings**. Citizen participation in the governance process is traditionally done through this method. The practice of countries that have chosen the path of democracy shows that people often oppose public meetings, claiming that local governance is the task of local elected or appointed representatives, expecting them to perform their duties. This interpretation is partly correct. But local elections are held every four years; conditions, opportunities, problems and expectations change significantly in a much shorter period. Political leaders and officials need to be in constant contact with people during and between electoral periods and give them the opportunity to express their views.

A public meeting can be made with a relatively small number of participants - a representative of the administration and a few citizens or with a large number of participants – a committee of representatives, representatives, or local council members and dozens or hundreds of citizens. For both situations, the public meeting has the following characteristics:

- local government representatives have the opportunity to educate the public about a particular issue – which could be, for example, the budget, environmental protection, approval of economic development contributions, and so on;
- the representatives of the administration have the opportunity to get acquainted with the opinions of the interested members of the public about the important issues they are facing, and to gain ideas that will facilitate the decision-making process or provide insights that will help the management of the administration;
- the public has the chance to express their opinions and has the possibility to influence the course of local public administration plans;
- both representatives of the administration and the public have the opportunity to clarify the exchange of opinions and opinions, and through this process they educate each other.

**Forums.** Before a council meeting is held, the forum can provide citizens with the opportunity to address any issues that, in their opinion, require taking some measures. Usually, the forum lasts a maximum of one hour. The issues addressed by citizens help public administration authorities to set their priorities in their work.

**Public announcements**. In order to inform the public about different plans or proposals, ads may be displayed. Such announcements can be posted in traditional places, such as newspapers or radio, or in other places. For example, if a youth program is launched, local public administration could place ads in schools or entertainment centres. The local public administration may also temporarily provide information about the large projects at the posters in parks or public markets.

**Polls of opinion**. The local public administration must find out the opinions of large categories of citizens. This can be done effectively through opinion polls. If opinion polls are sent by mail, many people who will find out that their opinions interest local authorities will receive them. It is possible, however, that few citizens make efforts to respond to a survey received by mail, unless the problem is very urgent. The best survey results are obtained when questions are asked by direct survey.

**Discussion groups and informal meetings**. Civil servants can contact the citizens, effectively going in their midst and talking to them. A group discussion is an informal meeting, with 10-15 citizens chosen at random, to express opinions, priorities and interests related to a problem or project at local level. The facilitator of the meeting asks the citizens questions and does not try to direct them to a certain conclusion.

Apart from interest groups, the local administration can contact the citizens, organizing meetings with less official character. In European countries, it is common for civil servants to communicate with citizens in an informal space; in the United States, it is common for civil servants to, civil servants hold informal meetings with citizens to discuss issues in the community.

**Collaboration with the media**. Mass media should be considered an effective tool for widening the dialogue between citizens and local public authorities. Media can be used both to listen to citizens and to talk to them. For example, in Europe and the United States, the local public administration hosts radio shows and local television programs during which citizens call and talk about local problems or general difficulties they face. Currently, such events of communication with the media are taking place in the Republic of Moldova, but for the time being at a level insufficient to have a positive impact on solving local problems.

**Civic involvement of groups/volunteers**. This is perhaps the most sophisticated approach to citizen participation. In participatory involvement, the local administration considers local leaders and interested citizens as equal partners in the development of plans and projects. The key point is to identify all those who are genuinely interested and bring them to the discussion table right from the start of the planning process. In such a process, local government leaders and council staff must facilitate a discussion leading to the identification of interests and problems before seeking solutions.

**Public hearings**. Public hearings are a democratic instrument for achieving local autonomy and consist of consulting citizens on issues of public interest, in order to identify the most pressing social issues. Public hearings are a special type of meetings with citizens and are suitable for major issues related to local public policy (Balan, 2018: 82).

Citizens' participation in the decision-making process is essential for good governance. In a democratic society the supreme power belongs to the people, therefore the government requires public participation to govern effectively. Open local public administration is one of the pillars of democratic society, and the clarity and transparency of the local governance process brings benefits for the whole community.

**Analysis of Local Transparency Based on Data and Evidence**

At level II, the situation is even more uneven. Only half of the rayon councils analyzed publicly disclose information about the initiation of the decision-making process. For example, the Straseni District Council provides details about the decision-making process on its website, while the Nisporeni District Council does not even have a section dedicated to transparency, which makes access to information almost impossible. These

discrepancies highlight significant inequalities between districts, both in the prioritization of transparency and in the allocation of resources. Moreover, insufficient time to consult draft decisions limits citizens' participation, thus weakening community involvement.

As regards local level I public authorities, the situation is even more worrying. Most Local Public Authorities (LPA) I level do not provide the necessary transparency in the initiation and public consultation of draft decisions. For example, only Balti municipality has published draft normative acts on the https://particip.gov.md portal, which highlights a significant under-utilization of this instrument. At the same time, many LPAs confuse publishing a project on the web page with public consultation itself, which is an error that reflects the lack of understanding of legal requirements. The analysis of the data indicates that only 33% of the assessed LPAs complied with the requirements for the publication of draft decisions, and for many of them, the reporting is inaccurate and incomplete. Citizens' perception of transparency in decision-making is another central aspect of the analysis. The survey showed perceptions of transparency in the decision-making process of public authorities at three levels: Government/CPA, LPA level I and LPA Level II. The key remark is that a significant proportion of respondents assess transparency as "slow… especially at LPA level I (40%) and LPA level II (33%)" (Raport CoE, 2024: 12).

This suggests that most believe that decision-making is lacking in openness at the local level. The category „very low" is also substantial, with 25% of respondents perceiving low transparency at Government/CPA level. There is also a considerable part of the responses "I do not know/does not respond", especially at LPA level II (31%), indicating uncertainty or lack of visibility over decision-making processes (Raport CoE, 2024: 7).

The survey shows widespread dissatisfaction, particularly with LPA level, which are perceived as the opaquest. Citizens also feel poorly informed about the decisions of the authorities, which indicates major gaps in communication. A trend of decommitment is also manifested in terms of citizens' involvement in the decision-making process, especially at the level of APC and LPA II, as well, where opportunities to participate are perceived as rare or non-existent.

The findings of the research outline a number of key measures to address the structural and functional shortcomings affecting the transparency of the decision-making process in the Republic of Moldova. This calls for fundamental changes aimed at ensuring clarity, accessibility and genuine citizen engagement, combining legislative, technological and institutional reforms. First, the analysis highlights the urgent need to standardise and unify the existing legal framework. The current legislation is dispersed and ambiguous, which creates confusion in the implementation and offers too much interpretative flexibility to the authorities. Provisions on transparency of decision-making, including prior information notices, the organisation of public consultations and the publication of decisions, should be grouped together in a coherent manner and structured in such a way as to be easily understood and applied. For example, it is proposed that all requirements for publication of notices and public consultation be clearly defined in one section, eliminating redundancies and gaps.

To support this clarification, it highlights the need for and importance of better defining key terms in legislation, such as 'decision project' or 'impact of decisions'. In the absence of precise definitions, there is a risk of arbitrary interpretations, which leads to inconsistent applications. Another issue is the clear demarcation between the stages of the decision-making process, such as the publication of the prior information notice and the

organisation of public consultations. At present, many authorities are confused about these stages, which hinders the real involvement of citizens.

Another important aspect of the recommendations is the focus on the accessibility of public information. It is considered essential that all information is published in an open format, allowing citizens to access and use it without technical difficulties. In addition, the publication of details on decision-making meetings, start-up announcements and minutes should become a mandatory requirement for all authorities. Advisory platforms, which at the moment are not known to what extent they are effective, must be supported to become genuine spaces for dialogue and collaboration between authorities and stakeholders.

The LPAs published draft decisions on the official websites of the local authorities, send by e-mail to the persons on the list of interested parties, post on social networks (for example, how the Soroca District Council Facebook page is very often used to inform citizens about draft decisions and request feedback). Another way sometimes used by LPA of level II is the publication of ads in the local media (for example, this is how it does: district council Straseni, Soroca district council, etc.).

It is found that although Law no. 239/2008 stipulates that draft decisions must be available at least 15 working days before completion, with a minimum of 10 working days for public recommendations, many LPAs publish projects only a few days before council meetings. This practice limits the involvement and significant contribution of the public, weakening citizens' involvement in decision-making.

To encourage citizen engagement, Tier II LPAs employ various consultation procedures. Hearings and public discussions on important local issues like budgets, infrastructure projects, and land use changes are organized by Tier II LPAs. Usually, these events are announced in advance through official websites and local media. Working groups also play a crucial role, inviting citizens and representatives of non-governmental organizations to work together on specific issues, such as environmental projects or social services. In recent years, some Level II LPAs, such as the Soroca District Council, have begun, also use digital platforms to expand participation, especially in rural areas.

However, traditional methods such as information boards remain prevalent, which may limit the accessibility of wider segments of communities to information and subsequently to participate in decision-making. Some LPAs of level II, such as district councils in Straseni and Soroca, are more proactive and citizens are more actively involved in the decision-making process. For example, in 2023, 278 citizens participated in the district council of Straseni during a year, in the district council of Briceni – 270 citizens, while at public hearings, the debates from the Basarabeasca district council participated only 57 persons and 74 persons in the public consultations from the Causeni of district council. The Nisporeni district council did not provide such data in the report on ensuring transparency in the decision-making process. This highlights the significant differences in the level of citizen engagement and in the proactivity of Tier II LPAs in the decision-making process. Differences between districts point to inequalities in the way citizens perceive and access public participation processes. These disparities may reflect differences in communication, infrastructure, accessibility or local culture.

In order to conduct an effective public consultation process, LPAs must identify and notify relevant stakeholders about draft decisions directly. However, only the Straseni district council has published detailed information about stakeholders on its website; more than that, the requests were submitted to be included in the list of stakeholders and not all

district councils followed the request. The other rayon councils analysed do not have constructive approaches to identifying and involving stakeholders, which limits the impact of consultation efforts.

Of the six district councils analysed in the public reports (Briceni, Soroca, Straseni, Nisporeni, Causeni, Basarabeasca), only two (Straseni and Causeni) reported in 2023 that they received and considered recommendations from citizens, from associations established in accordance with the law, other stakeholders in the consultation process of draft decisions. The Straseni district council considered 1 recommendation from the mass media and 8 recommendations from the advisory committees, while Causeni included 14 recommendations from CSOs, 1 Recommendation from a development partner, 3 recommendations from advisory committees. It is found that some district councils: (Briceni, Soroca and Basarabeasca) mentioned in the reports on ensuring transparency in the decision-making process that they did not receive any recommendation, he said, and the authorities attributed this to the lack of interest from stakeholders.

It's important to note that consultations may not always be organized, and even when they are, not enough efforts are put into ensuring that citizens and stakeholders participate in the process. Also, the, it is necessary to mention that many citizens remain uninformed and are unaware of their rights to participate in the decision-making process or how to make their needs and opinions heard and do not know how their wishes and recommendations can be transmitted, which leads to the under-utilization of existing channels.

Ensuring stakeholder participation is achieved by raising public awareness of their right to participate in the decision-making process. This involves using local media such as radio, television, and newspapers to announce future meetings and discuss topics on the agenda. However, many LPAs under use these media channels, limiting community awareness and reducing participation rates. Most ads are made through official websites, social media platforms and information boards, which may not reach all citizens.

Effective communication, convenient programming, an inclusive agenda, exchange of information before the meeting, and feedback mechanisms after the meeting are all tools LPAs can use to increase stakeholder participation in public meetings. While some district councils, such as Causeni, have implemented strategies to improve participation, many Level II LPAs still face challenges in achieving and fully engaging their communities.

By using more local media, meeting times that are more accessible, and more community involvement in the agenda establishment, we can strengthen public engagement and promote more transparent and participatory decision-making. The analysis of district councils reveals significant variations in the number of decisions. For example, Causeni district council reported in 2023, the highest number of decisions adopted (299), the, while the Basarabeasca district council had the fewest (51) (according to the reports on ensuring the transparency of the decision-making process for 2023). Moreover, there is inconsistency in publishing decisions on official websites: the Briceni district council published 254 decisions, while the Nisporeni district council had only 28 decisions accessible online. Moreover, in the register of local acts in 2023 in the Nisporeni district council there are 622 decisions while in the report on transparency are indicated only 153 decisions and on the institutional page could only 28 decisions will be found for 2023. Due to the lack of decision-making publications sections in the Soroca and Basarabeasca district council, it is difficult for the public to access these documents.

District council websites vary in their transparency and accessibility, with some councils not having any dedicated sections for publishing decisions. For example, the Straseni and Basarabeasca district council have relatively accessible platforms, but in other district councils such as Soroca, citizens may encounter difficulties in finding relevant information (decision projects, decisions, announcements of public consultations), thus limiting public access and involvement.

Despite the fact that the new Law no. 148/2023 brings more clarity on public data, focus group participants (mainly the secretaries of local councils responsible for transparency in the decision-making process) highlight the confusion between public data and personal data, respectively, it has negative effects on decisions transparency, especially at local level (publication of decisions/devices In the RSAL with blurring of public data, actually invoking personal data).

At local level, public authorities at level I and II are encouraged to adapt their consultation methods to the needs of communities. Citizens need to have real opportunities to participate in the decision-making process, regardless of whether it's a general meeting, sectoral meeting, or the use of social media. To have transparency, it is essential to publish decisions fully and accessible, including on official websites. The study highlights the importance of participatory education, particularly for young individuals, in fostering a strong civic culture. Citizen engagement can be effectively encouraged by organizing community events, information sessions, and open discussion forums. The long-term outcome of these initiatives would be the strengthening of a continuous dialogue between the authorities and the community.

**Conclusions**

It is suggested to establish mechanisms to guarantee that all local public authorities report figures that show the total number of decisions/provisions adopted throughout the year, including ministerial/institutional orders and provisions, at the end of the analysis. In order to ensure the provision of exhaustive data, such data should be collected automatically. One solution would be to publish these documents on a platform in the same way as government documents. At the same time, it is necessary to identify mechanisms to ensure that all local public authorities publish all their decisions (including orders and provisions) to the transparency compartments on the website. Currently, Article 15 of Law 239/2008, although specifying the obligation to publish these decisions, is imprecise as regards the manner of publication. If the recommendation to establish by law the obligation to publish decisions (including normative acts) in the transparency compartments is accepted, then p. 33 of Government Decision no. 967/2016 should be excluded.

If the file is kept as a legal provision, it is recommended to specify that such files should be published in the transparency compartments of the websites of the institutions, and, whereas the legal-normative framework currently provides only that the file „linked to the drafting of the decision is accessible to all citizens, associations established in accordance with the law, other interested stakeholder's. At this time, only two of the LPAs have been examined, and it can be concluded that the provisions regarding the dossier content have been partially observed.

A necessary aspect is the analysis of the profile of the citizens of the respective localities (LPA I or LPA II) and to decide the optimal way of involving citizens in the decision-making process (either general meetings, or public consultations, sector gatherings,

school meetings, etc.) (recommendation received during public consultations with which experts agree). Examination of the possibility of introducing at LPA level local transparency and participation formats modelled on the basis of existing positive examples stimulating transparency and participation (for example, for LPA 2: Local Councils of Transparency, Rayon Participation Councils, Senior Groups, Local Youth Councils, etc.). The formats can be different for APL 1 and APL 2, depending on the models that currently work.

Also, the continued use and updating of the stakeholder list and specific information techniques should only be used to invite stakeholders to physical or online consultation meetings. In this context, it is important to identify mechanisms to ensure the execution of the legal obligation provided for in Article 17 (6) of LP436/2006 Publication of the minutes of the council meeting on the official website of The LPA (recommendation received during the public consultations with which the experts agree).

In the same vein, it is recommended to analyse and remedy situations in which LPA limits the participation of persons with filming devices by invoking Art. 17 (7) of LP436/2006, which mentions that the meetings of local councils can be broadcast live to national and local public radio and television stations, other media channels, and, on social networks or on the official website of the local public authority by distributors or media service providers or by individuals in accordance with the provisions of the Code of audiovisual media services, law no. 133/2011 on the protection of personal data and Law no. 239/2008 on transparency in the decision-making process (recommendation received during public consultations). We welcome the development and implementation of a mechanism for recording and controlling requests for information at the level of public authorities, as well as, to ensure the response of applicants for information (recommendation received during public consultations).

Informing participants in public consultations via email about the results of the public consultation process, including final approval of the consulted document and accepted proposals, etc.

Local transparency represents a cornerstone of democratic governance and public accountability. In the Republic of Moldova, the recently updated legislative framework – including the 2024 law regulating access to public information – has brought substantial improvements regarding citizens' rights to request and obtain relevant information. Unlike previous legislation, the new law clarifies procedures, eliminates ambiguities, and aligns national standards with international ones, such as those established by the Tromso Convention.

However, the practical implementation of transparency principles remains problematic. For instance, a significant proportion of local public authorities (60%) either lack a functional website or fail to adequately maintain their existing platforms. This situation limits the population's access to clear and relevant information, such as local budgets or adopted decisions. The lack of digital skills among public officials is another major obstacle identified, highlighting the need for dedicated training programs.

Citizen participation in decision-making is also affected. Although public consultations are mandatory under the law, they are often formally organized, aiming more at reporting activities than at genuine community involvement. As a result, these initiatives fail to significantly contribute to building trust between authorities and citizens.

On a positive note, the new legislation introduces clear requirements for proactive transparency. Authorities are obligated to publish budgets, public procurement activities, and adopted decisions on their own initiative. Moreover, financial penalties applicable in cases of

non-compliance (ranging from 250 to 10,000 MDL) create an additional accountability mechanism. However, the effects of these measures remain to be evaluated in the long term.

In conclusion, while the Republic of Moldova is taking significant steps toward more transparent and accountable governance, multiple challenges remain to be addressed. These include developing institutional and digital capacities and promoting a genuine culture of transparency and public engagement. Only by addressing these deficiencies can access to information and strategic communication at the local level truly become effective tools for strengthening democracy and public trust.

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