

Citizen participation as a tool for strengthening democracy

One of the fundamental demands of democracy is to ensure that active citizens can participate in the exercise of power. In ancient times, this participation was understood in a direct way, whereas with the development of nation-states it took the form of representative (electoral) democracy. Modern democracy, however, has to adapt to the conditions of a global - networked and interdependent - world. At the same time, representative democracy is no longer the only and sufficient form of government and is increasingly being supplemented by various forms of direct citizen participation in the decision-making on public affairs.

Citizen participation implies the need to create and ensure the functioning of a space that allows citizens to be actively involved in public affairs. This space is intended to be independent of governments and accessible to citizens with different views and positions. These citizens should be able to undertake, within the space made available to them, various forms of social activity, independently or together with others, thus creating and developing the idea of civil society. In this way, citizen participation will constitute a form of active involvement of citizens in public affairs, including in the process of creating and applying the law, that is complementary to traditional forms of political activity.

Due to the positive aspects of the citizen engagement in the public sphere, citizen participation is nowadays applied in most democratic countries. At the same time, the practice of applying this institution raises many questions and doubts in science, which this project will address. First, is citizen participation a tool that strengthens or weakens representative democracy, and to what extent does the development of different forms of decision-making by citizens on public issues modify the traditional model of the democratic system? Secondly, does the use of participatory mechanisms help to prevent conflicts between different social groups and between the society and the government or, on the contrary, does it generate such conflicts or increase the risk of their development? Thirdly, does citizen participation strengthen trust in public institutions or is it an expression of citizen distrust of those in power? Fourth, is the right to citizen participation a fundamental right rooted in human dignity, and is it sufficiently protected and guaranteed by constitutional and international regulations? The search for answers to these questions will require taking into account the social and political changes we are currently witnessing, such as the strong polarisation of society, the emotionalization of political issues, populism as a method of doing politics, the decline of the authority of experts and public institutions, the growth of legal and civic awareness in society, the rise of social media.

The Ph.D. student selected for this project will conduct theoretical, normative and empirical research based on the analysis of legal acts, case law, the literature and the practice of participatory institutions in different countries. The project includes international cooperation with six European research centers and a 3-month research internship at the John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University. The findings will be presented in a monograph and three English-language papers.