Methodological framework for identifying civic participatory techniques and tools to foster sustainable tourism development in multicultural Danube communities

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Abstract. Objective*: Sustainable tourism development in multicultural and transnational regions requires governance models capable of integrating diverse stakeholder perspectives into decision-making processes. This study develops a methodological framework for identifying, classifying, and assessing civic participatory techniques and tools applicable to sustainable tourism governance in the Danube region. The research is grounded in participatory governance theory and the Responsible Research and Innovation (RRI) framework, emphasizing inclusive and collaborative approaches to policy development.* ***Method****: A qualitative and exploratory framework was employed to systematically identify, organize, and examine participatory methods documented across academic research and policy literature. Participatory instruments were examined according to a set of analytical criteria, including level of application, degree of stakeholder involvement, implementation requirements, and adaptability to multicultural and cross-border contexts. A standardized synthesis sheet was developed to support the comparative assessment and classification of each method.* ***Results****: The paper produced a comprehensive research of participatory techniques applicable to the sustainable tourism context in Danube multicultural communities. Seven thematic groupings were detailed: The analysis identified seven major categories of participatory instruments: (1) consultative and deliberative collective methods, (2) participatory and creative solution-generation tools, (3) participatory research and citizen science methods, (4) digital and hybrid participation instruments, (5) educational and collaborative university–based methodologies, (6) multicriteria decision-making and evaluation tools, and (7) deliberative and democratic legitimation mechanisms. The study demonstrates the potential of combining these methodologies to strengthen citizen engagement throughout tourism policy cycles, enhance intercultural dialogue, promote inclusive governance, and ensure legitimacy and transparency of public tourism policies. The study also highlights their potential application in addressing tourism governance challenges specific to the Danube region.* ***Originality****: The study proposes an integrated methodological framework specifically tailored to the governance needs of multicultural Danube communities. By linking participatory governance instruments with sustainable tourism policy processes and the RRI approach, the framework provides*

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both a theoretical contribution to participatory governance research and practical guidance for policymakers, destination managers, and regional development stakeholders.

***Keywords**: civic participation, sustainable tourism, Danube region, participatory methods, community engagement*
***JEL classification**: Z32, Z18, M14*

1. Introduction

Sustainable tourism has become an increasingly important component of regional development strategies, particularly in territories characterized by cultural diversity, ecological sensitivity, and complex governance structures. Tourism generates economic opportunities through employment creation, local entrepreneurship, and regional branding, but it may also produce environmental pressures and social tensions if development processes are not managed in an inclusive and sustainable manner.

In recent decades, public policy research has highlighted the limitations of traditional top-down governance models in addressing complex, multi-actor challenges such as sustainable tourism development. Tourism systems involve multiple stakeholders (including local communities, policymakers, tourism enterprises, researchers, and civil society organizations) whose interests, values, and knowledge must be integrated into decision-making processes. As a result, participatory governance approaches have gained growing attention in tourism policy and regional development research.

Civic participation contributes to improved governance outcomes by reducing information asymmetries, increasing social acceptance of policy measures, and strengthening institutional trust. In the tourism sector, these benefits are particularly important because tourism development often affects shared resources such as natural landscapes, cultural heritage, and community identity. Participatory processes allow local stakeholders to influence development strategies, ensuring that tourism initiatives reflect community priorities and local knowledge.

The relevance of participatory governance is particularly evident in multicultural and transnational regions such as the Danube Region. The Danube Region represents one of the most diverse macro-regions in Europe, encompassing 14 countries and more than 80 million inhabitants. The region encompasses diverse cultural identities alongside valuable natural and cultural assets, and strong tourism potential based on river landscapes, cultural routes, biodiversity, and historical heritage. Within the framework of the European Union`s regional cooperation agenda for the Danube basin (EUSDR), tourism development plays an important role in fostering economic cohesion and cross-border cooperation. However, the region also faces structural challenges, including uneven economic development, environmental pressures on river ecosystems, and governance fragmentation across national borders. These characteristics make the Danube Region a particularly relevant case for exploring participatory governance approaches capable of integrating diverse social actors into sustainable tourism planning.

Within this context, participatory governance mechanisms can play a crucial role in supporting sustainable tourism development. By facilitating dialogue among stakeholders, participatory tools may strengthen cross-border cooperation, improve policy legitimacy, and encourage collaborative innovation in tourism planning. These principles are also closely aligned with the Responsible Research and Innovation (RRI) approach in European research policy, particularly stakeholder engagement, inclusiveness, and responsiveness to social needs and expectations throughout the research and innovation process.

Despite the growing importance of participatory governance in tourism planning, the existing literature provides limited methodological guidance for systematically identifying and selecting participatory instruments appropriate for specific governance contexts. In particular, the multicultural and cross-border characteristics of the Danube region require adaptable participatory tools capable of integrating diverse institutional environments and stakeholder perspectives.

Thus, this research proposes a systematic approach for identifying and classifying civic participatory techniques and tools relevant to sustainable tourism governance in multicultural Danube communities.

The research is guided by the following questions:

- RQ1: What types of civic participatory methods and tools are most relevant for sustainable tourism governance in multicultural regions such as the Danube Region?
- RQ2: How can participatory instruments be systematically classified and evaluated according to their applicability within tourism policy cycles?
- RQ3: What potential governance benefits can participatory methods generate for sustainable tourism development in the Danube Region?

To answer these questions, the study combines systematic literature analysis with a methodological mapping of participatory instruments used in civic governance processes. The proposed framework aims to support policymakers, researchers, and regional development practitioners in selecting appropriate participatory tools capable of strengthening inclusive tourism governance.

By integrating participatory governance theory, tourism policy analysis, and Responsible Research and Innovation principles, this research contributes to a better understanding of how civic participation mechanisms can enhance sustainable tourism development in multicultural macro-regional contexts.

2. Literature review

2.1. Participatory governance and economic decision-making

Civic participation has long been considered a fundamental element of democratic governance. In economic terms, participation influences the allocation of public resources, the prioritization of development strategies, and the legitimacy of policy outcomes. Arnstein's seminal ladder of citizen participation (Arnstein, 1969) conceptualized participation as a continuum ranging from manipulation to citizen control, highlighting the qualitative differences between symbolic and substantive engagement.

Participatory governance refers to institutional arrangements that facilitate stakeholder involvement in public decision-making processes. Contemporary governance theories move beyond hierarchical models toward deliberative and collaborative approaches, emphasizing dialogue, learning, and co-creation. From an economic perspective, participatory governance reduces transaction costs associated with policy resistance, litigation, and social conflict, while enhancing policy coherence and implementation capacity. These benefits are particularly relevant in sectors such as tourism, where development outcomes depend heavily on local acceptance and long-term stewardship of resources.

2.2. Participatory approaches in tourism development

The growing complexity of tourism systems has led to increased recognition of participatory approaches as essential components of sustainable tourism governance. Tourism destinations are characterized by the interaction of multiple stakeholders, including public authorities, tourism businesses, local communities, non-governmental organizations, researchers, and visitors. Because tourism development directly affects economic opportunities, environmental resources, and socio-cultural dynamics, decision-making processes that exclude relevant stakeholders often generate conflicts, resistance, and implementation challenges.

Participatory approaches in tourism development are grounded in the principles of collaborative governance and stakeholder theory, which recognize tourism destinations as complex systems requiring the involvement of multiple actors in planning and decision-making processes (Jamal & Getz, 1995; Bichler & Lösch, 2019; Bichler, 2021; Ariyani & Fauzi 2022). These approaches emphasize the active involvement of stakeholders throughout the tourism policy cycle, including agenda-setting, planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. Rather than viewing

citizens and local communities as passive beneficiaries of tourism policies, participatory governance recognizes them as active contributors to destination development and management.

The literature suggests that participation contributes to more effective and sustainable tourism outcomes in several ways. First, participatory processes facilitate the integration of local knowledge into planning and decision-making. Local residents often possess valuable knowledge regarding environmental conditions, cultural assets, and community needs that may not be captured through conventional planning approaches (Murphy, 1985; Timothy, 1999; Dias et al., 2023; Rastegar & Ruhanen, 2023). Incorporating such knowledge can improve the relevance and effectiveness of tourism strategies.

Second, stakeholder participation enhances the legitimacy and transparency of public policies. Participatory mechanisms provide opportunities for stakeholders to express their preferences, negotiate competing interests, and contribute to consensus-building processes (Jamal & Getz, 1995; Byrd, 2007; Mtapuri et al., 2022). As a result, tourism policies developed through participatory approaches tend to enjoy greater public acceptance and reduced implementation resistance (Reed, 1997; Aas et al., 2005; Waligo et al., 2013; Lei et al., 2026).

Third, participatory governance contributes to the development of social capital and community resilience. Collaborative decision-making fosters trust among stakeholders, strengthens local networks, and promotes a shared sense of responsibility for tourism development (Pretty & Ward, 2001; Okazaki, 2008; Esteves et al., 2025). These factors are particularly important in destinations facing environmental uncertainty, economic vulnerability, or rapid social change (Ruiz-Ballesteros, 2011).

Recent studies in sustainable tourism emphasize the importance of co-creation processes, in which local communities, tourists, businesses, and public authorities collaboratively develop tourism products, experiences, and development strategies (Binkhorst & Den Dekker, 2009; Campos et al., 2018). Such approaches support innovation, enhance visitor experiences, and contribute to the alignment of tourism development with local values and sustainability objectives. Furthermore, collaborative governance and stakeholder participation have been associated with improved destination resilience, competitiveness, and long-term sustainability (Bramwell & Lane, 2011). Consequently, participatory governance is increasingly regarded not only as a democratic principle but also as a strategic instrument for strengthening destination management and sustainable tourism development.

2.3. Digital civic participation and smart tourism

The rapid development of information and communication technologies has significantly transformed traditional models of public participation and governance. According to Macintosh (2004) and Medaglia (2012), digital technologies have expanded opportunities for civic engagement by reducing geographical barriers, increasing access to information, and facilitating interaction among diverse stakeholder groups. In the context of tourism governance, digital participation mechanisms have become increasingly important in supporting collaborative planning and decision-making processes.

Digital civic participation encompasses a broad range of instruments, including online consultation platforms, crowdsourcing applications, participatory mapping systems, electronic forums, social media networks, and collaborative knowledge-sharing platforms. As highlighted by Brabham (2009), crowdsourcing tools enable citizens and stakeholders to contribute ideas and knowledge to public planning processes, while participatory mapping approaches support the collection and integration of local information relevant to territorial development. These tools allow stakeholders to provide feedback, report local issues, and participate in policy discussions regardless of their physical location, thereby increasing the inclusiveness of governance processes.

The emergence of smart tourism ecosystems has further strengthened the role of digital technologies in destination governance. Gretzel et al. (2015) define smart tourism as the integration of digital technologies, data analytics, and networked communication systems into tourism planning, management, and service delivery. Similarly, Buhalis and Amaranggana (2015) emphasize that smart

tourism destinations rely on interconnected digital platforms that facilitate information exchange among public authorities, tourism businesses, residents, researchers, and visitors. Such environments facilitate informed decision-making and strengthen destinations' ability to anticipate and manage emerging challenges (Morales-Urrutia et al., 2020; Bala, 2026).

Digital participation tools offer several advantages for sustainable tourism governance. They increase accessibility by enabling the involvement of geographically dispersed stakeholders, improve transparency through open access to information, and facilitate the efficient collection and analysis of public opinions (Medaglia, 2012; Gretzel et al., 2015). These characteristics are particularly relevant in multicultural and cross-border regions where traditional face-to-face participation may be difficult to organize.

Tourism governance experienced a notable expansion of online participation practices during the COVID-19 crisis, as digital channels became increasingly important for maintaining stakeholders' engagement. As noted by Sigala (2020), online consultations, virtual workshops, and digital collaboration platforms became essential instruments for maintaining stakeholder engagement during periods of travel restrictions and social distancing. These experiences demonstrated the potential of hybrid participation models that combine digital engagement with conventional face-to-face interaction.

Despite their advantages, digital participation tools also present important challenges. Research on digital inclusion highlights persistent issues related to digital literacy, unequal access to technology, and the digital divide, which may limit the effectiveness and representativeness of online participation processes (Mossberger et al., 2008; Van Dijk, 2020). Consequently, scholars increasingly advocate for hybrid governance models that combine the accessibility of digital technologies with the deliberative benefits of direct interpersonal communication.

For transnational and multicultural territories such as the Danube region, digital participation tools offer particularly valuable opportunities. By facilitating communication across administrative borders and cultural contexts, these instruments can strengthen cross-border cooperation, support collaborative tourism planning, and foster coordinated approaches to the long-term stewardship of shared cultural and natural resources that transcend territorial boundaries.

2.4. Participatory governance in multicultural regions

Multicultural regions are characterized by cultural diversity, linguistic plurality, different institutional traditions, and varying socio-economic conditions, all of which influence governance processes and public decision-making. While these factors may generate divergent interests and competing development priorities, they can also represent valuable resources for innovation, creativity, and sustainable development when supported by inclusive governance arrangements (Putnam, 2007).

Participatory governance has increasingly been recognized as an effective approach for managing the complexity of multicultural environments. According to Ansell and Gash (2008), collaborative governance frameworks create opportunities for dialogue, trust-building, and joint problem-solving among stakeholders from different social and institutional backgrounds. Similarly, Fung (2006) argues that participatory processes improve the quality and legitimacy of public decisions by incorporating diverse perspectives and local knowledge into governance systems.

In multicultural settings, participatory governance plays an important role in ensuring the representation of different social groups, including ethnic minorities, marginalized communities, and less-developed territories. Inclusive participation mechanisms provide opportunities for these groups to express their interests, contribute to policy discussions, and influence development priorities. Such processes can help reduce inequalities in representation and strengthen democratic accountability.

Participatory governance also contributes to intercultural dialogue and social cohesion. Deliberative processes encourage stakeholders to engage constructively with different perspectives, negotiate potential conflicts, and identify shared objectives. These functions are particularly relevant in tourism development, where local identities, cultural heritage, and community values constitute essential components of destination attractiveness and competitiveness (Bramwell & Sharman, 1999).

Furthermore, participatory approaches enhance the legitimacy and effectiveness of public policies. Decisions developed through inclusive consultation processes are generally more responsive to local needs and are therefore more likely to gain public acceptance and facilitate successful implementation (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Erdmenger, 2023).

The Danube region provides a particularly relevant context for examining participatory governance in multicultural environments. As one of Europe's most diverse macro-regions, encompassing fourteen countries and numerous ethnic, linguistic, and cultural communities, the Danube basin faces significant challenges related to cross-border coordination and sustainable territorial development. At the same time, its rich cultural heritage, environmental resources, and tourism assets create important opportunities for collaborative governance initiatives, particularly within EU-level cooperation for the Danube region (European Commission, 2023).

In this context, participatory governance mechanisms can facilitate cooperation among actors from different territorial and institutional levels. Through dialogue and joint decision-making, these approaches can support the development of integrated tourism strategies, strengthen intercultural cooperation, and encourage the responsible stewardship of environmental and heritage assets of common relevance. Consequently, the Danube region represents an appropriate setting for investigating how participatory governance may contribute to sustainable tourism practices across culturally diverse and interconnected territories.

2.5. Defining and characterizing participatory methods

Participatory methods encompass a wide range of approaches through which stakeholders contribute to decision-making, policy development, and problem-solving processes. These methods may involve direct face-to-face interaction among participants or technology-mediated engagement through digital platforms and online communication tools. As noted by Rowe and Frewer (2005), participatory mechanisms differ considerably in terms of objectives, stakeholder involvement, communication flows, and decision-making influence. Such approaches are particularly relevant in regional and national governance contexts, where policy decisions often generate significant social, economic, and environmental consequences.

The primary outcomes of participatory processes are frequently normative rather than predictive. Participatory methods are designed to identify collective preferences, values, expectations, and priorities, thereby supporting socially legitimate decision-making processes (Fung, 2006). However, previous experiences have demonstrated that participatory deliberation alone may not be sufficient to address complex policy challenges. Consequently, several authors emphasize the importance of combining participatory approaches with analytical and evidence-based methods in order to strengthen both the legitimacy and effectiveness of policy outcomes (Rowe & Frewer, 2005; Reed, 2008).

A central principle of participatory governance is that the degree of stakeholder involvement influences both public acceptance and implementation success. Higher levels of participation generally enhance trust, ownership, and commitment to policy outcomes, particularly when stakeholders perceive the process as transparent and inclusive (Ansell & Gash, 2008). At the same time, participatory processes are inherently dynamic and may involve divergent interests, conflict, and emotional engagement, especially when addressing contested public issues. Effective facilitation therefore plays a critical role in managing group dynamics, fostering constructive dialogue, and supporting consensus-building among participants (Forester, 1999).

Understanding these characteristics is essential for selecting appropriate participatory instruments and adapting them to specific governance contexts, including sustainable tourism planning in multicultural and transnational regions such as the Danube basin.

3. Methodology and data

3.1. Research design

The study adopts a qualitative and exploratory research design focused on developing a methodological framework rather than testing empirical hypotheses. The research integrates systematic literature analysis, conceptual synthesis, and methodological structuring of participatory practices relevant to sustainable tourism governance.

3.2. Selection criteria for participatory methods

The participatory methods included in the analysis were selected based on three main criteria:

- *relevance for governance processes*, particularly methods that support dialogue, consultation, or collaborative decision-making in public policy contexts;
- *applicability to tourism planning*, especially those previously used in spatial planning, environmental management, or regional development;
- *adaptability to multicultural and cross-border contexts*, which is essential for regions such as the Danube basin where multiple institutional, cultural, and linguistic environments coexist.

A total of 58 participatory instruments (see Annex 1) were identified through literature review and institutional documentation and subsequently classified according to the analytical framework described above.

3.3. Mapping and analytical criteria for civic participatory methods

In order to develop integrated civic participation models applicable to sustainable tourism development in multicultural communities along the Danube region, a systematic process of identifying and mapping participatory methods, techniques, and tools used within civic participatory systems was undertaken. This process aimed to highlight existing practices while providing a coherent analytical framework for assessing their applicability and effectiveness in specific local contexts.

The mapping of participatory methods was conducted based on a set of essential criteria designed to ensure a contextualized and in-depth understanding of the diversity of participatory approaches identified. These criteria, based on the Public Engagement Methods and Tools report (2014) reflect both governance-related and socio-economic dimensions relevant to sustainable tourism development:

- *level of application:* participatory methods were analyzed according to the stages of the decision-making process in which they can be applied, ranging from policy formulation and program development to project definition and concrete research and implementation activities;
- *relevant actors and participant groups:* the analysis encompassed diverse categories of participants, such as civil society organizations (CSOs), public authorities and policymakers, researchers, citizens, affected commnuities, consumers, employees, users, and representatives of business and industry. Their involvement may provide valuable inputs throughout the formulation and implementation of tourism policies that reflect the particular circumstance and priorities of culturally diverse communities;
- *degree of involvement:* the identified instruments were classified along a participation spectrum, dialogue, consultation, involvement, collaboration, empowerment, and direct decision-making, thus reflecting the transformative potential of each method in relation to local governance structures;
- *temporal resources:* time availability was treated as a key factor, as in-depth deliberative methods require longer implementation processes, while rapid instruments (such as online surveys) may be applied in a targeted manner but often generate more limited impacts;
- *societal challenges addressed:* the methods were examined in relation to the broad societal needs and policy issues they are intended to tackle. The assessment covered areas such as public health and demographic wellbeing, sustainable food and agriculture systems, forestry and bioeconomy, climate and environmental pressures, the responsible use of natural resources, inclusive and innovative societies, energy security and transition, public safety, and sustainable mobility and transport.

The four identified *levels of application* (policy formulation, program development, project definition, and research and innovation activities) span the main stages of science, research, and innovation processes. Mapping participatory practices across these levels provides a structured basis for strengthening stakeholder involvement throughout decision-making processes and for supporting more collaborative and inclusive approaches to governance in research and innovation.

Each level of application involves specific objectives, actors, and decision-making contexts, wich may call for different participatory approach and tools. The four levels can be described as follows (Public Engagement Methods and Tools report, 2014):

- *Policy formulation* refers to the development of the framework conditions governing research and innovation. It includes establishing policy priorities, defining mechanisms for the allocation of funding across programmes, and developing policy instruments that support Responsible Research and Innovation (RRI).
- *Program development* concerns the definition of priorities, thematic areas, and calls within research and innovation programs. Participation at this level may involve Member State representatives, programme committees, research organisations, thematic platforms, stakeholder groups, and wider public consultation processes.
- *Project design with societal involvement* refers to the participation of relevant stakeholder group in identifying priorities, defining research questions, and shaping the focus of specific research or innovation projects. Such involvement can help align projects with societal needs and expectations and enhance the relevance and applicability of their oucomes.
- *Direct societal involvement in research and innovation activities* concerns the participation of societal actors in the implementation of research and innovation processes. Depending on the context, this may contribute to expanding the empirical evidence base, incorporating diverse perspectives into research processes, and improving the relevance, usability, and societal applicability of research outcomes.

3.4. Levels of public participation and analytical definitions

This methodological framework incorporates participatory practices across six levels of public engagement (Public Engagement Methods and Tools report, 2014), reflecting increasing degrees of interaction and influence in decision-making:

- *Dialogue* refers to an ongoing exchange among researchers, public authorities, and members of society, intended to facilitate mutual understanding and create opportunities for the reciprocal discussion of perspectives.
- *Consultation* involves collecting public input to inform those responsible for decisions, particularly regarding evidence, possible course of action, and proposed policy choices.
- *Involvement* denotes the active participation of members of the public during the different phases of a participatory process. It seeks to ensure that their views, interests, and expectations are considered as the process develops.
- *Collaboration* represents a partnership-based form of participation in which public actors work together with other stakeholders across the successive stages of decision-making, including the exploration of alternatives and the joint consideration of possible solutions.
- *Empowerment* refers to participatory processes through which participants develop knowledge, skills, and capacities that enable more meaningful engagement in decision-making.
- *Direct decision-making* describes situations in which final authority is delegated to members of the public.

These criteria were applied to structure a logical analytical framework for selecting participatory instruments suitable for sustainable tourism development in the Danube region. By integrating these instruments into local governance models, the framework aims to facilitate a more transparent, inclusive, and context-sensitive decision-making process adapted to the needs of multicultural communities.

3.5. Structure of the standardized synthesis sheets

In order to systematically document and analyze participatory methods, techniques, and tools applicable to sustainable tourism development in multicultural Danube communities, a standardized synthesis sheet model was developed. This structure enables methodological comparison across instruments, supports context-based selection, and facilitates the evaluation of potential impacts on social cohesion, intercultural dialogue, and sustainable regional development.

Each synthesis sheet includes the following core elements (Engage 2020 Consortium, 2014):

- *name of the method or tool*, enabling clear identification, classification, and indexing within the participatory instruments database;
- *short description*, providing a concise overview of the functioning and principles of application of the method;
- *detailed description*, outlining operational principles, procedural steps, facilitation requirements, implementation conditions, activity format (face-to-face, digital, or hybrid), and typical duration;
- *objective of application*, highlighting the primary purpose of the method, such as opinion collection, decision-making support, innovative idea generation, or strengthening social cohesion and intercultural dialogue;
- *results and outputs*, documenting tangible outcomes such as reports, recommendations, action plans, participatory maps, tourism product prototypes, or community impact assessments;
- *level of stakeholder involvement*, indicating the intended participation objective (dialogue, consultation, active involvement, collaboration, etc.) and the degree of influence and responsibility assigned to participants;
- *participants involved in the application process*, specifying categories such as organizer, direct participants, and beneficiaries, along with their roles and responsibilities;
- *geographical scope of application*, identifying the scale at which the method has been applied (local, regional, national, EU-level, or international);
- *societal challenges addressed*, including social, economic, cultural, or environmental issues targeted by the method;
- *advantages and limitations*, outlining strengths as well as constraints or contextual conditions influencing successful implementation;
- *implementation timeframe*, indicating the recommended duration for applying the method;
- *required competencies*, classified by level (none, basic, intermediate, advanced) and by relevant domains (subject-matter expertise, IT skills, project management, facilitation);
- *aspects of interest for organizers*, such as logistical requirements, cultural context, resource availability, and preparatory considerations;
- *examples of method application*, including concrete case studies (project, organization, timeframe) demonstrating real-world applicability;
- *additional information*, such as historical background or previous implementation experiences;
- *relevance for multicultural communities in the Danube region*;
- *references*, including links to relevant websites and scientific publications, ensuring credibility and traceability.

This standardized structure ensures consistency and comparability across participatory methods, supports the identification of the most appropriate technique for specific contexts, and enhances understanding of the potential impact of each approach on social cohesion, intercultural dialogue, and sustainable tourism development.

3.6. Integrity and ethical considerations

Process integrity was treated as a central methodological concern. Participatory processes must avoid manipulation or predetermined outcomes, as such practices undermine trust and legitimacy. Neutral facilitation, transparent objectives, and balanced representation are essential, particularly in multicultural tourism contexts characterized by asymmetric power relations.

4. Research results and comments

4.1 Tourism potential of the Danube Region

The analysis of the scientific literature, European policy documents, and previous empirical studies conducted within this research indicates that the Danube Region has a unique combination of tourism resources and governance characteristics that justify the development of participatory approaches for sustainable tourism. The Danube countries form an interconnected macro-regional tourism system whose long-term competitiveness increasingly depends on cross-border cooperation, collaborative governance, and stakeholder engagement.

The synthesis of the analysed sources highlights several characteristic strengths that support the tourism potential of the Danube Region. The region encompasses a wide range of exceptional ecological assets, including the Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve, extensive wetlands, numerous protected areas, and rich biodiversity, creating favourable conditions for nature-oriented tourism and ecotourism initiatives. At the same time, the Danube River functions as a strategic transnational corridor connecting historical cities, UNESCO World Heritage Sites, cultural routes, and recreational infrastructure such as the Danube Cycle Path (EuroVelo 6), thereby supporting the integration of destinations, attractions and activities into coherent cross-border tourism experiences. Furthermore, the growing international demand for authentic, sustainable, and experiential tourism creates favourable conditions for the promotion of community-based tourism, local gastronomy, and heritage tourism throughout the region (European Commission, 2023).

Another defining characteristic of the Danube Region is its multicultural diversity. The coexistence of diverse ethnic, linguistic, and religious communities has shaped a distinctive cultural landscape reflected in traditional crafts, folklore, gastronomy, festivals, and intangible cultural heritage. This diversity enhances the region's attractiveness for cultural and ethnic tourism while strengthening regional identity and intercultural dialogue. The reviewed literature also indicates that multicultural communities possess valuable local knowledge and social capital that can contribute substantially to tourism planning when appropriate participatory mechanisms are implemented (Musteață-Pavel & Lixăndroiu, 2024).

The analysis also reveals that the principal barriers to sustainable tourism development are not primarily related to the availability of tourism resources but to the governance mechanisms through which these resources are planned, managed, and valorised. Tourism development remains uneven across the Danube Region due to disparities in infrastructure quality, accessibility, investment capacity, digitalisation, destination management performance, and institutional effectiveness. In several tourism corridors, insufficient transport connectivity, limited accommodation capacity, inadequate waste management systems, and increasing environmental pressures reduce destination competitiveness while threatening sensitive ecosystems. In protected areas such as the Danube Delta, uncontrolled tourism development may lead to ecological degradation and weaken local support for tourism when communities perceive that its social and economic benefits are limited.

The findings further indicate that fragmented governance is a major challenge to sustainable tourism development in the Danube Region, limiting cross-border cooperation and the implementation of integrated tourism strategies. Previous research has shown that tourism planning in several Danube countries has traditionally relied on predominantly top-down approaches, resulting in relatively low levels of civic participation and limited involvement of local communities, NGOs, minority groups, and other stakeholders in destination management and decision-making processes (Musteață-Pavel & Lixăndroiu, 2024). Consequently, valuable local knowledge and multicultural perspectives are often insufficiently incorporated into tourism policies and development initiatives.

Overall, the synthesis of the analysed literature suggests that the future competitiveness of tourism in the Danube Region depends on identifying and improving the governance processes through which existing resources are managed collaboratively. Therefore, the principal challenge is not the lack of tourism potential, but the need for effective mechanisms that facilitate dialogue, co-creation, and evidence-based decision-making among diverse stakeholders operating in multicultural and transnational environments.

These findings provide the empirical and conceptual foundation for the methodological framework proposed in this study. The framework classifies civic participatory techniques according to their governance functions and their contribution to sustainable tourism development. The following section presents this classification as the first component of a framework designed to support collaborative tourism governance in multicultural Danube communities.

4.2. Classification of participatory methods

Based on the synthesis of the participatory methods and tools presented in Annex 1, the analysis led to the identification of seven thematic categories of participatory techniques relevant to sustainable tourism development in multicultural Danube communities:

Table 1. Classification of participatory methods applicable to sustainable tourism governance

Category of participatory methods	Examples of instruments	Level of participation	Potential applications for the Danube Region	Strengths	Limitations
Consultative and collective deliberation methods	Delphi Method, Delphi Groups, Focus Groups, Future Panels, Scenario Workshops, Surveys, and Deliberative Forums	Consultation / Dialogue	deliberative workshops for the creation of cross-border tourism routes along the Danube; involvement of ethnic communities in the protection of multicultural heritage; and joint regional branding initiatives.	Structured feedback from stakeholders	Limited influence on final decisions
Participatory and creative tools for solution generation	Future Workshops, Future Search, Charrettes, Democs, Hackathons, Foresight Workshops, Open Space Technology, and Knowledge Workshops	Collaboration	co-creative workshops for developing local tourism products, intercultural festivals, or innovative solutions for ecological and river-based tourism, involving local communities and stakeholders.	Stimulates innovation and stakeholder engagement	Requires facilitation and organizational resources
Participatory research and citizen science methods	Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR), Participatory Action Research, Participatory Sensing, Citizen Science, Citizen Observatories, Resource Mapping, Science Shops, and Mass Experiments	Involvement / Collaboration	participatory mapping of cultural and natural heritage; water quality monitoring to support sustainable tourism; involvement of schools and NGOs in citizen science projects.	Integrates local knowledge with scientific research	Time-intensive processes
Digital and hybrid instruments	Modern technologies such as e-conferences, computerized integrated	Dialogue / Consultation	online platforms for citizen consultation across multiple Danube riparian countries; hackathons	Broad accessibility and scalability	Digital divide may limit participation

Category of participatory methods	Examples of instruments	Level of participation	Potential applications for the Danube Region	Strengths	Limitations
	participatory assessment models, and hybrid digital planning methods		for tourism application development; digital simulations of river tourism impacts on ecosystems.		
Educational and collaborative methods in the university context	the integration of participatory research into university curricula, co-design of research questions with civil society organizations, Science Shop workshops, and collaboration between early-career researchers and NGOs	Collaboration	university programs involving students in community-based sustainable tourism projects; partnerships between universities and NGOs to develop intercultural and ecological solutions	Strengthens academic–community partnerships	Requires institutional coordination
Decision-making and multicriteria evaluation mechanisms	Multicriteria Decision Analysis (MCDA), the Citizen Compass, crowd-wise approaches, consensus conferences	Collaboration / Decision support	evaluation of regional tourism strategies using multiple criteria, including environmental protection, social impact, and economic benefits for local communities.	Structured and transparent decision support	Requires technical expertise
Deliberative and democratic legitimation mechanisms	citizens' juries, citizens' assemblies and summits, and public hearings	Empowerment / Decision-making	cross-border citizens' assemblies for intercultural dialogue; citizens' juries for decisions on major tourism projects; public hearings for the protection of Danube heritage.	Enhances legitimacy and transparency	Long implementation processes

Source: adapted by authors based on the "Public Engagement Methods and Tools" report (Engage 2020 Consortium, 2014).

4.3. Applications of participatory methods in tourism governance

The participatory methods identified through the analytical framework can support multiple stages of the tourism governance cycle, including strategic planning, destination management, policy implementation, and evaluation.

In the Danube region, participatory approaches can facilitate the development of cross-border tourism strategies by encouraging dialogue among stakeholders from different countries and cultural backgrounds. Methods such as Delphi panels, focus groups, and citizens' assemblies can help identify common priorities and support coordinated tourism planning.

Participatory instruments are also valuable for cultural heritage preservation and environmental management. Community-based research, citizen science initiatives, and participatory mapping can engage local communities in documenting cultural assets, monitoring environmental conditions, and promoting sustainable use of tourism resources. In the Danube region, where river

ecosystems constitute a major tourism resource, citizen participation can complement institutional monitoring systems and contribute to more informed environmental management.

Creative and collaborative methods, including workshops, charrettes, and hackathons, can support tourism product development, destination branding, and the co-creation of innovative tourism experiences. Through co-creation processes, stakeholders can jointly design tourism experiences, thematic routes, cultural festivals, and innovative tourism services that reflect the distinctive characteristics of the destination.

In addition, digital participation tools, like online consultation platforms, e-conferences, etc. facilitate stakeholder engagement across geographical boundaries and strengthen cross-border cooperation. These tools are particularly useful in the Danube region, where tourism governance often requires coordination among multiple administrative jurisdictions and stakeholder groups.

Finally, multicriteria decision-making methods can assist policymakers in evaluating tourism alternatives according to economic, social, environmental, and cultural criteria. Overall, the combination of participatory instruments can contribute to more inclusive, transparent, and sustainable tourism governance in multicultural Danube communities.

The analysis indicates that the effectiveness of participatory methods depends on their adaptation to local socio-cultural contexts, the level of stakeholder engagement achieved, and the institutional capacity to integrate participation outcomes into policy decisions. Consequently, selecting appropriate participatory instruments should be considered a strategic component of sustainable tourism governance rather than a supplementary consultation activity.

4.4. Strengths and limitations of participatory instruments

The analysis highlights several strengths of participatory instruments in tourism governance. First, they enhance the legitimacy and transparency of decision-making by involving citizens, local communities, tourism stakeholders, and civil society organizations in policy processes. Second, participatory methods facilitate the integration of local knowledge and stakeholder perspectives, leading to more context-sensitive and socially accepted tourism strategies. Third, they contribute to the development of social capital, trust, and intercultural dialogue, which are particularly important in multicultural regions such as the Danube basin. Finally, collaborative and co-creative approaches can stimulate innovation and support the design of sustainable tourism products and services.

Despite these benefits, participatory methods also face important limitations. Many participatory processes require considerable time, financial resources, and organizational capacity. Challenges related to unequal representation may also arise, as some stakeholder groups possess greater resources and influence than others. In addition, the effectiveness of participatory initiatives is influenced by the extent to which public authorities incorporate stakeholder contributions into decision-making processes. Digital participation tools, while expanding access and flexibility, may further be constrained by issues such as digital exclusion, technological barriers, and data privacy concerns.

Table 2. Main strengths and limitations of participatory techniques and tools in tourism governance

Strengths	Limitations
Increased legitimacy of decisions	High time and resource requirements
Enhanced transparency and accountability	Risk of unequal stakeholder participation
Integration of local knowledge and expertise	Need for skilled facilitation and coordination
Improved stakeholder engagement	Limited institutional capacity
Strengthened social capital	Difficulties in achieving consensus
Support for innovation and co-creation	Digital divide and technological barriers
Greater policy acceptance	Risk of participation fatigue

Source: processed by authors

Overall, the effectiveness of participatory instruments depends on their adaptation to local contexts, the quality of facilitation, stakeholder representation, and institutional support. Therefore,

participatory methods should be considered strategic governance tools whose successful implementation requires careful planning and long-term commitment.

Table 2 illustrates that participatory techniques and tools offer substantial benefits for tourism governance, particularly in terms of legitimacy, transparency, and stakeholder engagement. However, their successful implementation requires adequate resources, institutional support, and effective facilitation mechanisms.

4.5. Discussion

The results highlight the growing importance of participatory governance for sustainable tourism development in multicultural and transnational regions such as the Danube basin. The analysis demonstrates that participatory methods are most effective when applied as complementary components of broader governance frameworks rather than as isolated instruments.

Different participatory tools can support various stages of the tourism policy cycle. Consultative methods are particularly useful for identifying stakeholder needs and priorities, while collaborative and co-creative approaches contribute to the development of innovative tourism solutions and strengthen community ownership of development initiatives.

The analysis also indicates the increasing use of digital participation tools alongside hybride forms of governance in tourism. By facilitating communication across geographical and administrative boundaries, digital platforms can support stakeholder engagement and cross-border cooperation, which are essential for tourism governance in the Danube region.

Finally, participatory governance contributes to social cohesion, institutional trust, and intercultural dialogue by creating opportunities for diverse stakeholder groups to engage in collective decision-making. These aspects are especially important in multicultural regions where tourism development depends on the effective management of shared natural and cultural resources.

5. Conclusion

This research resulted in a methodological framework for identifying, classifying, and assessing civic participation techniques and tools applicable to sustainable tourism governance in multicultural Danube communities. The proposed framework responds to the growing need for inclusive governance approaches capable of addressing the complex economic, social, cultural, and environmental challenges associated with tourism development.

From a theoretical perspective, the study advances the understanding of participatory governance and sustainable tourism by providing a structured classification of participatory instruments and by linking these instruments to the principles of Responsible Research and Innovation (RRI). The proposed framework integrates diverse participatory approaches within a coherent analytical model that can support the design of more inclusive and context-sensitive governance processes.

The results identified seven major categories of participatory instruments, including consultative and deliberative methods, creative co-design tools, participatory research approaches, digital participation mechanisms, university–community collaboration models, multicriteria decision-support techniques, and democratic legitimation processes. The analysis demonstrated that these instruments can support different stages of the tourism policy cycle, from agenda setting and strategic planning to implementation, monitoring, and evaluation.

From a practical perspective, the findings highlight the potential of participatory governance to improve policy legitimacy, transparency, stakeholder engagement, and social acceptance of tourism initiatives. The framework can assist policymakers, regional development agencies, destination management organizations, and local communities in selecting participatory methods that correspond to specific governance objectives and contextual conditions.

The study further emphasizes the relevance of participatory governance for the Danube region. Given its multicultural character, transnational governance structures, and shared natural and cultural resources, the region provides a particularly suitable environment for the application of participatory

approaches. Civic participation can contribute to strengthening cross-border cooperation, promoting intercultural dialogue, and supporting the sustainable management of tourism resources.

The findings also underline the growing importance of digital participation tools and hybrid governance models. Advances in digital technologies have expanded opportunities for stakeholder engagement, facilitating collaboration across geographical and institutional boundaries while increasing the accessibility and inclusiveness of decision-making processes.

In conclusion, the proposed framework offers a systematic and adaptable tool for supporting sustainable tourism governance in multicultural regions. By integrating civic participation into tourism policy processes, decision-makers can strengthen democratic legitimacy, improve policy effectiveness, and foster more sustainable and inclusive forms of regional development. The framework may therefore serve as a useful reference for future research and policy initiatives aimed at enhancing participatory governance in the Danube region and beyond.

A key contribution of the study is the development of a structured methodological framework linking civic participation tools with sustainable tourism governance in a multicultural macro-regional context. By integrating participatory governance theory, RRI principles, and tourism policy analysis, the research connects academic conceptualization with practical policy design for sustainable tourism in the Danube region.

Limitations and future research. The findings should be considered in light of several limitations. One limitation concerns the primarly conceptual and methodological nature of the research, which focuses on the identification and classification of participatory instruments rather than on their empirical testing within specific tourism projects. A second limitation relates to the mapping of participatory methods, which relies mainly on secondary literature and documented practices.

Future research could expand the present study by conducting empirical case studies in Danube communities, examining how participatory governance tools influence tourism planning outcomes, stakeholder engagement, and regional development indicators. Comparative studies across different Danube countries could also contribute to a better understanding of how participatory governance models operate in diverse institutional contexts.

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Annex 1. Participatory methods and tools for citizen engagement in tourism and cultural contexts

Method / tool	Brief description	Relevance for multicultural communities in the Danube Region
Action research	Applied research involving direct community participation.	Engages ethnic groups in locally grounded and sustainable solutions.
Challenge prizes	Competitions rewarding innovative ideas and solutions.	Stimulate collaboration and visibility of diverse cultural heritage.
Charrette	Intensive participatory planning workshop.	Involves communities in designing tourism and cultural spaces.
Citizen compass	Civic tool for evaluating local governance performance.	Encourages participation and intercultural dialogue.
Citizen science	Citizens actively contribute to scientific research processes.	Supports heritage monitoring and strengthens social cohesion.
Citizen juries	Structured public deliberation on policy issues.	Builds trust and balances diverse cultural perspectives.
Citizens' summit	Large-scale civic consultation event.	Facilitates shared visions for tourism and cultural development.
Citizens' assembly	Representative group formulating policy recommendations.	Ensures democratic participation and mutual respect.
Citizens' hearing	Public discussions conducted without external influence.	Promotes transparency and institutional accountability.
CIVISTI	Citizens identify priorities for innovation.	Involves communities in shaping cultural and tourism strategies.
Civic dialogue	Structured dialogue addressing complex societal issues.	Builds trust and a shared regional identity.
Community-based participatory research	Collaborative research equitably involving all partners.	Enhances inclusion and local relevance of research outcomes.
Consensus conference	Deliberative process addressing controversial topics.	Supports inclusive cultural and tourism policymaking.
Crowd Wise	Consensus-oriented collective decision-making approach.	Harnesses the diversity of cultural viewpoints.
Science week	Educational events promoting science and innovation.	Encourages intercultural learning and knowledge exchange.
Deep democracy	Method for managing conflict and diversity.	Fosters inclusion and cooperation among diverse groups.
Deliberative mapping	Participatory evaluation of alternative options.	Supports informed and inclusive decision-making.
Deliberative workshops	Facilitated discussions for policy formulation.	Promote intercultural cooperation and dialogue.
Online deliberative forum	Digital platform for structured public deliberation.	Enables broad, accessible, and cross-border participation.
Deliberative polling	Opinion polling combined with informed discussion.	Contributes to more balanced and legitimate policies.
Delphi method	Iterative expert consultation process.	Supports consensus-building and regional cooperation.
Democs game	Participatory game for public policy learning.	Encourages experiential and inclusive learning.
Distributed dialogue	Series of interconnected deliberative discussions.	Facilitates cross-border and intercultural cooperation.
E-conference	Temporary online thematic discussion forum.	Enables intercultural exchange and coordination.
Focus groups	Qualitative discussions in small groups.	Capture local perspectives and innovative ideas.

Method / tool	Brief description	Relevance for multicultural communities in the Danube Region
Future panel	Dialogue between experts and civil society actors.	Supports shared visions and sustainable strategies.
Future search	Conference aimed at collective action and planning.	Promotes innovation and social cohesion.
Future workshop	Participatory planning method at local level.	Strengthens cultural identity and sustainable tourism.
Delphi group	Face-to-face expert deliberation format.	Supports consensus and social innovation.
Hackathon	Event generating rapid and innovative solutions.	Encourages creativity and regional collaboration.
Interdisciplinary groups	Collaboration across disciplinary boundaries.	Enhances innovation and regional cohesion.
PIA / integrated focus groups	Participatory impact assessment using models.	Supports sustainable cultural heritage management.
Interviews	Qualitative method exploring individual perspectives.	Captures authentic multicultural viewpoints.
Knowledge workshop	Network connecting authorities, NGOs, and academia.	Facilitates co-creation of inclusive cultural products.
Mass experiment	Public participation in experimental initiatives.	Engages diverse groups in testing new approaches.
Multicriteria decision analysis (MCDA)	Systematic evaluation of multiple alternatives.	Integrates diverse perspectives into planning processes.
Neo-Socratic dialogue	Ethical discussion aimed at collective understanding.	Creates an equal space for reflection and dialogue.
Open Space Technology	Self-organized participatory event format.	Encourages intercultural exchange and innovation.
Participatory budgeting	Collective decision-making on public expenditures.	Promotes equity and ethnic inclusion.
Participatory design	Co-design of solutions with end users.	Reflects local cultural diversity.
Participatory sensing / citizen observatory	Volunteer-based data collection initiatives.	Engages citizens in heritage and tourism monitoring.
Participatory strategic planning	Joint definition of long-term development directions.	Reflects cultural diversity and supports cohesion.
Perspective workshop	Exploration of visions and future perspectives.	Encourages shared reflection and intercultural dialogue.
Q methodology	Systematic identification of stakeholder viewpoints.	Ensures balanced representation of diverse actors.
Interactive reflexive design	Sustainable co-design with stakeholders.	Values cultural heritage and diversity.
Resource flow mapping	Mapping the circulation of resources within systems.	Highlights inequalities and supports cooperation.
Scenario workshop	Development of shared future-oriented scenarios.	Facilitates dialogue and collective planning.
Science Shop	University-based research responding to NGO needs.	Connects academia with local communities.
From CSO question to research question	Translation of civic needs into research topics.	Transforms local concerns into applied solutions.
Integrating civic research into universities	Collaboration between students and communities.	Promotes applied learning and cultural diversity.
CSO needs survey	Identification of local priorities and challenges.	Supports intercultural collaboration and sustainability.

Method / tool	**Brief description**	**Relevance for multicultural communities in the Danube Region**
Science café	Informal dialogue between citizens and experts.	Creates intercultural learning and cooperation spaces.
Science theatre	Artistic presentation of scientific topics.	Highlights cultural identities through creative expression.
Serious games	Educational simulations for learning and decision-making.	Promote collaboration and intercultural learning.
User committee	Advisory group representing beneficiaries.	Ensures relevance and practical impact.
World Café	Structured collaborative dialogue method.	Builds intercultural trust and shared understanding.
World Wide Views (WWV)	Global citizen consultation methodology.	Encourages cross-border cooperation and equity.
Ideathon	Platform for developing and proposing innovative projects.	Brings together citizens, entrepreneurs, and authorities from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Source: adapted by authors based on the "Public Engagement Methods and Tools" report (Engage 2020 Consortium, 2014).