



# Romania

Cooperation between advocacy groups and local governments



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## Country chapter

# Romania

### Introduction

Romanian civil society started its journey after the fall of Communism and its importance began to increase mainly in the process of EU accession (1993-2004). During the communist regime, the concept of civil society had *different connotations* and signified autonomous and pluralist strongholds designed to counter the effects of the regime. These took many forms, including individual and private resistance, intellectuals building informal networks (*Școala de la Păltiniș*, for example), strikes, protests and similar actions (*Valea Jiului in 1977*, *Motru in 1981*, *Brașov in 1987*) and openly denouncing the reality of life in Romania abroad (inspired by Charter '77, *Paul Goma* wrote about respect for human rights and was labeled a traitor and arrested). Under the monopoly of the state and the all-seeing Securitate, which allowed only for certain modes of participation in society, a civil society by today's standards was not an option. The fear of resistance was so strong that it took decades for the communist regime to permit the establishment of *tenant associations* – which were harmless and only dealt with administrative issues. Indicative of the attitude of the Communist Party towards people joining a cause was the immediate cancellation of the *Workers' Free Syndicate* in 1979. Thus, unlike in Czechoslovakia or Poland, public criticism and alternative formal groups were not the norm and opposition manifested itself through informal networks of intellectuals.

In its current understanding, the term civil society is linked to the profound changes that society underwent during its transition towards democratic rule, for which it is considered a prerequisite. Nonetheless, given that the concept of civil society was a new one and that Romanian society as a whole struggled to understand the different actors' roles in this new democratic architecture, some *argue* that the foundation for the Romanian civil society did not take place under the most auspicious circumstances. One of the *issues* linked to this situation was the poor correlation between CSO and government initiatives, which actively limited the potential of civil society. In the early years, external influence, be it through established Western CSOs or the European Commission directly, fostered the growth of the civil society scene, a move that was seen throughout the former Eastern Bloc states.

When it comes to the legal framework, the first CSOs established after 1989 operated under the provisions of Law 21/1924, which was replaced, in 2000, by Ordinance 26/2000. This, in turn, was approved through Law 246/2005, which is still in force. Currently, most civil society organizations are registered as associations or foundations. According to the NGO Registry maintained by the Ministry of Justice, there are *97,926 associations* (including mutual aid associations) and *20,017 foundations* in Romania.

As CSOs were becoming more and more common, their activity required a better legislative framework. The early 2000s were marked by the adoption of two important pieces of legislation that allowed civil society to become even more relevant. These are Law 52/2003 on decisional transparency in public administration and Law 544/2001 on the freedom of access to information. Both came about as a result of external pressure from large international assistance programs such as USAID, which requested the enactment of *sunshine laws* (regulations requiring openness in government or business), and the European Commission, which strongly recommended the development of social and civil dialog. Alongside this external pressure, NGOs themselves contributed to the public policy changes through their actions.

These two pieces of legislation marked a big step for organizations dedicated to good governance, fighting corruption, greater transparency and the promotion of responsibility and integrity of public officials. These newly adopted laws provided CSOs with a useful framework in their quest to serve as thriving promoters of good governance.

At the beginning of the 2000s, the promotion of European integration exerted a continuous influence on the public agenda of CSOs. Consequently, the collaboration between civil society and the government started to improve, not least thanks to the creation of new institutionalized channels for collaboration – within the Prime Minister's Chancellery, the College for Consultation with Associations and Foundations was established, with the purpose of ensuring the participation of civil society in the elaboration of public policies and in debates on important topics for Romanian society.

## Critical moments

In the past years, civil society appears to have been activated by unfortunate events that led to vocal civic reactions. Public support and CSO interventions in important events are not only linked to increased visibility for CSOs, together with a better understanding of their role, but also helped to expose more citizens to the idea of civil society and increased their civic engagement. Apart from continuous advocacy efforts, CSOs have been more visible during critical events, notably those that resulted in public demonstrations, which is why a timeline of these protests facilitates a better understanding of the broader societal climate in which Romanian civil society operates.

After the 1989 Revolution and the subsequent years of turmoil and constant protests, society did not take to the streets to express its opposition to the manner in which the country was run for many years, with certain exceptions in the case of state workers and labor unions protesting against low wages.

The first major wave of protests in recent years took place in 2012, when the then-ruling PDL party announced *reforms of the healthcare sector* that would allow more private entities to operate in the insurance sector and even in the provision of emergency care. The protestors declared their support for Raed Arafat, a medic credited with reforming the emergency response units, which opposed said changes. With the PSD party, then in opposition, supporting the protests, the PDL government fell.

One year later, environmental NGOs, activist groups and the wider public responded to the controversial *Roșia Montană mining project*. Spanning over five months and taking place in dozens of cities in Romania and abroad, the protests opposed the open-pit mining of gold and other metals using cyanide by highlighting the consequences: an ecological disaster, resettlement of the local population, the destruction of ancient historical artefacts and, last but not least, a very small profit margin for the Romanian state. As a result of this public outcry, the government, initially a supporter of the mining project, changed its stance and refused to grant further permits to Gabriel Resources, the Canadian company pushing for the project. In response, the company filed a lawsuit against Romania seeking \$4.4 billion in alleged losses through the World Bank's court of arbitration.

Two years later, in 2015, a deadly fire in the *Colectiv* club fueled *massive demonstrations against corruption* (the club did not have a fire safety permit), which led to the fall of the government. People were not only angry about the incident itself, but also about the manner in which the authorities handled the aftermath of the fire, for instance by claiming that optimal care for all the wounded could be provided in Romania, only to later admit that this was not the case; unfortunately, this was too late for many of the victims.

Perhaps the best-known protests internationally are those that *took place in 2017*. At the time, massive civic protests against corruption broke out in many cities throughout the country, after the government passed an *emergency ordinance* pardoning certain acts of corruption. In this particular case, not only did the procedure lack transparency and real public consultations, but it was widely perceived as designed to absolve the leader of the ruling PSD party, Liviu Dragnea, of his legal issues.

While civil society was very visible during this period and more and more people became civically engaged as a result of the overall societal climate, viral anti-CSO propaganda started to be spread at a nationwide level. The main talking point was similar to the anti-NGO rhetoric in other European countries: civil society activists were portrayed as anti-national agents serving foreign interests, especially those of *George Soros*. In addition, this was accompanied by anti-EU propaganda, since the EU and representatives of various EU countries had condemned the actions of the Romanian government, and by attempts to demonize Romanian citizens working abroad. After countless initiatives aimed at weakening the rule of law, a massive protest of Romanians working and living abroad was scheduled for August 10, 2018. In response to a small group of violent protestors, the authorities used disproportionate force to clear the protest venue, injuring both protesters and journalists. The politicians targeted by the angry crowds claimed that the protest was nothing short of an attempted *coup d'état*.

After years of civic involvement and voting not being perceived as *cool* on a societal level, protests – and the results they achieved – acted as a catalyst, which many people described as a *“civil awakening.”* This translated into the establishment of new political parties, greater citizen involvement in how the state is run, the creation of both formal and informal groups dedicated to addressing local or national issues, and a different perspective on the role and scope of CSOs overall.

## The situation today

*Official records* by the Ministry of Justice provide data on the total number of CSOs, their founders and boards, status, location, address and identification number, but nothing about their area of activity. Moreover, this list only includes registered NGOs, while data on active organizations can be obtained from the Statistical Registry of the Ministry of Public Finance.

The main regulatory framework for CSOs are Governmental Ordinance (GO) 26/2000 and the corresponding Law no. 246/2005. Generally speaking, the regulations linked to the functioning of the NGO sector have been subject to numerous *controversial changes* over the years. One of these changes was made by Law no. 129/2019, aimed at preventing and combating money laundering and terrorist financing, which included amendments and supplementary legislation, including Government Ordinance no. 26/2000. Even though the main purpose of the law was to transpose the *EU Directive* on the prevention of the use of the financial system for the purpose of money laundering or terrorist financing, the Romanian law added some additional provisions regarding NGOs. One of the major issues, which caused a lot of confusion and indignation among CSOs, was the newly established obligation to declare the actual beneficiaries of their activities, which was seen as a bureaucratic burden and another way to hinder CSO activities. On account of the late transposition of the directive, the Court of Justice of the European Union also ordered Romania to *pay a fine* of EUR 3,000,000.

NGO activities contributed to many positive changes in Romanian society, by promoting democracy and, more specifically, by monitoring government activities, lobbying for greater transparency and accountability and expanding the scope for civic participation. Since Romania's accession to the European Union, the CSO landscape has become more dynamic and diverse. Sadly, the internal political context, together with recent international developments, are now putting brakes on the development of the civil society sector. The political actors do not fully recognize the contributions made by CSOs and even try, through legal changes and a hostile public discourse, to paint civil society entities, especially the more vocal and critical ones, as enemies. Nonetheless, the public's level of trust in associations and foundations has risen steadily throughout the last two decades – from 19% in 1998 and 26% in 2004 (Soros Barometer 1997-2010) to 32% in 2010 (Omnibus research, CSDF 2010) and 31% in 2018 (*APAPR study*, 2018).

Apart from the anti-NGO sentiment that is also present at the European and international level – discrediting CSOs as elements of disruption on the payroll of controversial figures (mainly George Soros) that seek to destabilize and take over countries (which was especially prevalent in the political discourse in Romania between 2016 and 2018) – other antagonizing narratives have also been circulated. Among these, the most common was linked to sources of funding – NGOs, it was argued, were receiving large amounts of money from the state, be it the national or local authorities, and to do little in return, even “biting the hand that feeds them” through their constant criticism. This is not only problematic, but also false, since the majority of CSO financial resources come either from external grants from private sources, including private donations, or from citizens redirecting a small percentage (2% and more recently 3.5%) of their income taxes. Furthermore, talking points that are often overlooked are *job creation* – in 2015, the NGO sector employed almost 100,000 people – and the social impact of CSOs. For example, one of their most representative, professionalized and appraised fields of activity are social services, where approximately 40% of the providers are NGOs that run nearly half of all licensed services.

Predictably, the constant repetition of this negative narrative has impacted the perception of CSOs. While the situation is better than in other CEE countries, such as Hungary and Poland, *polls from 2018* show that one third of Romanians agree that George Soros has a negative impact on Romania, even if no evidence supports this claim. On the other hand, more than 60% of respondents agree that NGOs play a vital role in defending and protecting democracy. While these actions have affected the sustainability of the CSO sector over the last few years, its *infrastructure* remains its main asset. This has not been harmed by the public discourse or by any legislation and has benefited from the influx of people newly interested in the activities of CSOs.

While CSOs are seen as synonymous with NGOs in most situations, there are different actors operating within civil society. Apart from foundations and federations, informal groups began gaining ground in recent years; their growth is linked not only to the growing engagement of citizens with issues affecting their everyday lives, but also to constant support from NGOs. While these groups often lack legal personality, they compensate with a high degree of legitimacy, as they are centered around tangible issues, target a small group of people and are established by ordinary citizens eager to solve their community's problems. A lack of tradition in this regard causes some skepticism towards their activities and sometimes prompts the authorities to dismiss them. Simply put, public servants and elected officials have little experience in open collaboration with their citizens and often consider it peculiar at the beginning, as representatives of local NGOs point out in their interviews. Fortunately, the same representatives emphasize that constant dialog and focused talks can bridge the gap and lead to successful collaborations, as is the case in Iași and Făgăraș. For an informal group to be successful, it needs to have dedicated members willing to invest time and resources and to provide solutions to the issues it has identified, thereby demonstrating its capabilities.

While larger cities have a more diverse and better represented civil society, there is a noticeable trend of CSOs being established in smaller communities. Sometimes, these are individual initiatives, stemming from the particular needs and the specific social landscape of one community, while in other cases they are founded as chapters of a larger entity operating at the national level. The latter describes the situation of the *community foundations*, now present in 19 cities across Romania, which support the development of smaller local initiatives. While the local authorities are usually skeptical, it seems that constant communication and result-oriented projects are able to win them over. In some cases, talks about budgetary transparency are a good starting point, since there is a legal framework covering this topic.

## Collaborations between civil society and local authorities

In the absence of a strong tradition in this field, collaboration between civil society organizations and local authorities faces a number of challenges.

First of all, there is a lack of strategy both on the part of local authorities and of NGOs regarding collaboration, which tends to happen as a result of subjective circumstances. One of the most frequently mentioned situation that leads to collaboration, according to our interviewees, is the attitude of the local authorities, in many cases strongly influenced by the personality / interests / openness of the mayor.

For example, the Țara Făgărașului Community Foundation managed to collaborate with the local authorities on many projects due to the openness of both the mayor and the bureaucratic apparatus. At the opposite end of the spectrum, the Bucharest municipality has become less and less open to dialog with citizens and CSOs during the mandate of the current mayor.

Similarly, without formalized channels to facilitate dialog, it comes down to the individual attributes of both CSOs and state workers to address this issue. In certain cases, it is the CSOs, including the community foundations, that identify and tackle the need for dialog, for example in Sibiu, Odorheiu Secuiesc and other municipalities. Subjective circumstances can also mean that changes in political rule and fluctuations in the attitude of the local authorities can have an impact on a particular subject or NGO. In order not to be affected by political battles and fluctuations and to assure the sustainability of the collaboration, it is important to maintain a good working relationship, based on successful projects. Such is the case in Cluj-Napoca and Sibiu, where maintaining regular dialog and collaboration with CSOs has started to become the *modus operandi*, thus making it difficult for an incoming administration to fully disband these processes.

Our interviews highlight another formal obstacle that hinders collaboration among CSOs and also between CSOs and the local authorities, namely the lack of a regularly updated and complete database of CSOs. At the moment, when looking for potential partners, CSOs rely on the lists of NGOs put together by the county councils plus hearsay; they lack an official list to help them in this regard. The registry maintained by the Ministry of Justice does not provide any information as to whether a CSO is still active or not, and there are no filters and search criteria based on area of interest. Such a database would be the first step towards helping both local CSOs and the local authorities to get to know each other.

Bureaucracy inside the public administration also stands in the way of fruitful collaboration between the two parties. One of our interviewees notes that this has sometimes been one of the most challenging aspects of collaborating with the local authority, due to the tortuous reporting and documentation requirements and other bureaucratic hurdles.

Apart from a lack of strategy that makes the collaboration very subjective, the capabilities of local CSOs are also often underdeveloped, as the complaints of the local authorities illustrate – NGOs may lack expertise, especially in highly specialized topics, including local budgets, as well as the resources to keep up with the bureaucratic challenges involved in collaborating with the authorities; or the local civil society may simply not cover certain fields and topics, making it impossible for the local authorities to gather any input from them (as mentioned by representatives of the local authorities in Alba Iulia and Sinaia).

In other communities, even if the situation is somewhat better, there are still elements that are missing: some fields may not be covered by civil society, such as the environment and the cultural sector. In Alba Iulia, the city manager noticed this in particular when he tried to create partnerships in these fields but could not find any NGOs from which to gather input.

This underdevelopment is seen by the local authorities as an obstacle in creating partnerships, as mentioned by the city managers of Sinaia and Alba Iulia. As a result, activities that could have been outsourced to NGOs (needs assessments, finding solutions) are instead assigned to independent experts.

Some local authorities have found other ways to build and maintain a culture of collaboration with CSOs, for example the municipal authorities in Sinaia: they started to expand their network and connections, and their solution is to groom small local organizations for a leadership role or help them to become local subsidiaries of bigger NGOs.

Other issues that CSOs face include the resistance of local bureaucracies, as civil servants are often reluctant to change their established ways and the bureaucratic procedures involved. Our interviewees also pointed out that all of them are to some extent familiar with a certain conservatism on the part of the public administration. Regarding city managers, who can act as promoters and initiators of collaborations with civil society, they noted that overcoming barriers of perception between the city managers and other, more reluctant public servants requires proper communication, presenting the pros and cons of a decision, the drive to implement collaborations and, last but not the least, a good working relationship with the mayor.

Finally, perhaps the most pressing obstacle to collaboration between CSOs and local authorities is the lack of real dialog. Both parties have misconceptions about the other: CSOs see local authorities as bureaucratic, opaque, resistant to change, skeptical about any proposal and prone to hiding behind legislation, while the authorities tend not to trust CSOs, suspect ulterior motives and become

irritated by their insufficient knowledge of legal procedures. This translates into reluctance to collaborate and into a failure to understand the other side's stance, needs and values. Fortunately, in most cases, once an initial dialog has been established, direct and personal contact helps to clear up such misconceptions and paves the way for future collaboration.

Our interviewees, both from civil society and the local authorities, offer solutions for improving the dialog between them. City managers believe that the dialog and thus the collaboration with CSOs could be improved by regular meetings that would create a relationship based on trust; by accepting CSOs as informed critics of local authorities' activities and failures to act, and finally, through honesty on both sides.

On the other hand, CSOs' suggestions for improving dialog and the collaboration include the professionalization of NGOs in order to present an attractive portfolio of past projects; greater NGO awareness and understanding of the various procedure that govern public administration; efficient communication (and communication channels), as well as transparency on the part of both parties.

## List of respondents:

### Case study 1: The role of city managers

**Nicolae Moldovan** | Former City Manager of Alba Iulia

**Ioana Leca** | City Manager of Sibiu

**Marian Panaite** | City Manager of Sinaia

**Bogdan Moșescu** | Former City Manager of Medgidia

### Case study 2: Community Foundations

**Mihai Tudorică** | Association for Community Relations

**Doris Cojocariu** | Iași Community Foundation

**Marian Dobre** | Cluj Community Foundation

**Rozália Csáki** | Odorheiu Secuiesc Community Foundation

**Ciprian Ciocan** | Sibiu Community Foundation

**Cristiana Metea** | Țara Făgărașului Community Foundation

**Gabriela Solomon** | Vâlcea Community Foundation

### Case study 3: Participatory budgeting

**Alexandrina Dringa** | CIVICA Iași

**Dan Postolea** | Iași municipal government

**Cristiana Metea** | Fundația Comunitară Țara Făgărașului

**Liviu Ardelean** | Făgăraș municipal government

**Ana Ciceală** | General Council of Bucharest

**Ilina Macarie** | Bucharest 1<sup>st</sup> District Council

**Liviu Mălureanu** | Bucharest 3<sup>rd</sup> District Council

**Daniela Popa** | Deputy Mayor of Bucharest's 1<sup>st</sup> District

**Diana Culescu** | Asociația Peisagiștilor din România

**Ovidiu Cîmpean** | Cluj-Napoca municipal government

**Marian Dobre** | Cluj Community Foundation

### Case study 4: Bucharest

**Ana Ciceală** | Bucharest Municipal Council

**Daniela Popa** | Deputy Mayor of Bucharest's 1<sup>st</sup> District

**Irina Zamfirescu** | Active Watch

**Diana Culescu** | Asociația Peisagiștilor din România

**Carmen Nemeș** | Asociația ANAIS

**Raluca Fișer** | Green Revolution

## Case study 1

# City Managers in Romania – Promoters of Change

### Interviewees:

**Nicolae Moldovan** | Former City Manager of Alba Iulia

**Ioana Leca** | City Manager of Sibiu

**Marian Panaite** | City Manager of Sinaia

**Bogdan Moşescu** | Former City Manager of Medgidia

## National context

The role of city managers in Romania is a recent innovation that only appeared in the public administration legislation in 2006. The initiative came from the Ministry of Administration and Internal Affairs, as a step towards a more modern and professional public administration. The purpose of introducing this function was to professionalize local government, by attracting public administration specialists who combine technical, scientific, administrative and managerial skills.

Apart from that, the introduction of city managers (or public administrators) was seen as a necessity for building a modern public administration in the context of the separation of political and executive influence.

The model of city managers in Romania was inspired by other European countries where the coordination of the local public service is handled by someone other than the mayor, such as Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Ireland, Latvia, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands and Sweden. Since the inspiration came from the Anglo-Saxon system, it was adapted to the Romanian reality and context.

Since 2011, city managers from around Romania have *their own NGO*, through which they campaign for professional management in the public sector. Its members are administrators from all levels of the local public administration: communes, towns, municipalities and county councils. According to their data, there are currently *348 city managers*, out of 3,221 communes, towns and municipalities where such a public office could have been established.

Despite examples of best practices from around Romania, the office of city manager is still unknown to average citizens and there is a lack of interest in implementing this position. This stems from the fact that, according to *Law 215/2001 on public administration*, the position is not mandatory within the public administration: “*at the level of municipalities and cities, the mayor may propose to the local council that the office of public administrator be set up, within the maximum number of posts approved.*”

According to the law, what differentiates city managers from other officials inside the public administration is that they are appointed under a management contract with the mayor, with the task of coordinating the local public administration or public services of local interest.

Appointed mainly because of the need to delegate some of the mayor’s numerous duties, city managers usually deal with all the issues of which the mayor is in charge, starting from access to European and government funds for the development of the city to the coordination of public services of local interest.

In addition, the job description and the management contract may also specify other delegated tasks, such as improving the efficiency of public service departments, assigning the distribution of responsibilities among departments, involvement in collaboration projects for development at county level, and organizing the activities of the mayor. Apart from that, city managers may also be in charge of the relationship with the media and with non-governmental organizations.

Another important fact is that these tasks are not allocated in a uniform way among the various county councils and municipalities. The job description of city managers is flexible and depends on the strategy/vision of the mayor or the president of the county council, on the complexity of the tasks at the relevant administrative level and also on the skills and the experience of the city managers themselves.

Regarding the collaboration between local authorities and local CSOs, city managers are expected to be promoters of change within the public administration, to foster collaborations and to come up with new ideas for improving them.

## Local context

The impact of city managers on local communities may vary according to different factors (resistance from public officials, city managers' own drive to take action, etc.) but our research revealed one element that was constant: a positive relationship between mayors and city managers leads to positive change in the community.

All the city managers we interviewed recognize the role of civil society in changing communities, with different nuances depending on their local context. CSOs are described as (or expected to be) content generators for new public policies, strategic partners in their fields of activity, watchdogs, fundraisers, or initiators of small projects that contribute to the improvement of life in the community.

The collaboration with civil society starts by supporting CSOs through public authorization of their activities and extends to support with their social projects, such as writing proposals on behalf of NGOs, contributing funds or teaming up with CSOs on different projects, such as hackathons, in order to collect inputs from civil society on different subjects.

While political polarization erodes democracy at the local level, our interviews revealed that the local political involvement of CSOs seems neutral and fair, with some exceptions.

## Local best practices

**Creating ownership in Alba Iulia through formal and informal channels:** The local authorities have tried to involve citizens in their activities to give them greater ownership of the city's activities: they made it into the Guinness World Records twice (for the biggest hug ever and for the biggest country map formed by people). Alba Iulia was also the first city to create a brand manual. In the first stage, when designing the logo, the municipality involved over 1,400 citizens, photographing their faces and using these images to create the logo.

The local community barometer is another tool used by the municipality to ask citizens about different community problems and to identify citizen and private sector needs. The community barometer is defined as a scientific research project carried out through a sociological study conducted annually by the Center for Sociological Research of "1 December 1918" University.

As a city where the average age tends towards the elderly, Alba Iulia organized meetings with associations of managers of publicly-owned apartments and the Council of Seniors in order to get input from senior citizens about their problems and needs. This project is called BlocManagerNet and its main objectives are to create a channel for online interaction between apartment managers, citizens of Alba Iulia and the municipality, in order to make the work of apartment administrators more efficient and more transparent, as well as to simplify the process of verification and communication within the municipal administration.

Apart from informal face-to-face meetings, the city has also launched two applications: e-alba iulia, through which residents can receive notifications from the municipality about events, public works or planned projects, and another one (Smart alert Alba Iulia) that promotes citizen participation by enabling them to submit reports about potholes, uncollected waste, vandalized public property, etc. Mobile city apps are starting to be more and more common among local authorities and the same is true for Sibiu: the Sibiu City App enables citizens to notify the administration about incidents in the city while also offering information about key landmarks for both tourists and residents.

**Expanding networks and connections in a mountain city.** Sinaia is a small city with 15,000 inhabitants, with a large elderly population. Because the city is so small, there are only a few NGOs; one active NGO organizes activities for elderly people, another one is the local scouts group and a third is focused on environment issues. Given the unavailability of local partners due to the lack of an active civil society, Sinaia looks towards national and international NGOs and other partners for collaboration, such as Erasmus+, various leadership programs, Greenpeace, MagiCamp and SMURD. The municipality's solution is to groom small local organizations for leadership roles or to help them to become local subsidiaries of bigger NGOs, but its main concern is that the activities of these groups will reflect the local needs.

## Local challenges

*“There is no such thing as problems, just the wrong questions.”*

**Ioana Leca, City Manager in Sibiu**

### Lack of local NGOs

In small communities, one of the most significant challenges for local authorities is that the civil society is underdeveloped, alongside an occasional lack of know-how and professionalization on the part of civil society groups. As a result, activities that could be outsourced to NGOs (needs assessments, finding solutions) are instead assigned to independent experts.

In other communities, even if the situation is a little better, there are other gaps, notably in certain fields, such as the environment or the cultural sector, are not covered by civil society. In Alba Iulia, the city manager experienced this in particular when he sought to create partnerships in these fields but found no NGOs from which to gather input.

Moreover, in many cases, the underdevelopment of local civil society also means that no NGOs are available that could act as watchdogs over the activities of the local authorities.

### Reluctance inside the public administration

City managers also face opposition within the public administration, and to some extent, all of them are familiar with a certain degree of conservatism on the part of the public administration. Proper communication and presenting the pros and cons of a decision can help to overcome these barriers, and the same is true if the city manager has a good working relationship with the mayor and exhibits personal drive.

The city managers of both Sinaia and Medgidia had to contend with such opposition, but things didn't turn out the same in each case. In his activity as city manager of Sinaia, Marian Panaite had the support of the mayor, which made it easier for him to implement his ideas despite the reluctance he encountered within the public administration. In addition, he stressed that the fact that both he and the mayor had previously worked in the CSO sector, and thus entered the public administration with experience from the other side, facilitated the development of collaborations and led to greater openness on their part.

On the other hand, Bogdan Moşescu's stated that he was unable to fulfil his function as city manager in Medgidia due to his bad working relationship with the mayor, which he cited as a hindrance to the effective discharge of his activities.

## How to make the collaboration work

### Advice for better collaboration

Our interviewees mentioned the following preconditions for effective collaboration, some of which may seem obvious:

- Organizing regular meetings where the parties can find solutions to a community's problems and create a relationship based on trust between them;
- Accepting the informed criticism of CSOs regarding the local authority's activities or failures to act;
- Maintaining dialog with them despite such criticism, and last but not least
- Maintaining an honest dialog.

### Participatory budgeting

Some cities transformed participatory budgeting into a strategic tool for connecting with local CSOs, with positive feedback from the local community, while in other, small and medium-sized communities, citizens were more reluctant to respond, if at all. For example, last year's winning projects of the *participatory budgeting* in Sibiu focused on education (investing in the necessary equipment to ensure the proper functioning of the *Children's Palace*), sports (*a multifunctional sports pitch*), the environment (*a biological air filter, waste bins for selective collection*) and urban mobility (*a multi-level parking garage* and *a panoramic terrace*).

### Areas for improvement

All our interviewees offered practical and feasible measures for collaboration with civil society that the public administration could implement:

- **Establishing a department dedicated to civil society** is urgently needed in some local communities, in order to institutionalize and maintain a regular dialog with CSOs.
- **Introducing mandatory social projects** that must be implemented together with civil society in order to create a culture of collaboration in the relevant field and beyond.
- **Less bureaucracy within the public administration** to expand the opportunities for local authorities to collaborate with CSOs, as well as to promote a better understanding among NGOs of the often convoluted and rigid bureaucratic procedures and how the administration works on a daily basis.

### Conclusions

The role of the city managers and the impact they have on their communities vary from one administration to the next, both due to the tasks included in their management contracts and, as shown in the above-mentioned cases, to subjective circumstances, such as their personal drive or the support they enjoy within the public administration.

Despite the differences in city managers' duties, they can play an important role in promoting good governance initiatives, including collaborations with CSOs, while fulfilling their mission of impartiality in public administration management.

## Case study 2

# Community Foundations in Romania

### Interviewees:

**Mihai Tudorică** | Association for Community Relations

**Doris Cojocariu** | Iași Community Foundation

**Marian Dobre** | Cluj Community Foundation

**Rozália Csáki** | Odorheiu Secuiesc Community Foundation

**Ciprian Ciocan** | Sibiu Community Foundation

**Cristiana Metea** | Țara Făgărașului Community Foundation

**Gabriela Solomon** | Vâlcea Community Foundation

## The context in which the community foundations developed

The history of community foundations in Romania started in 2009 when, under *ARC* leadership, a national program for supporting community foundations was launched, in cooperation with the Environmental Partnership Foundation and the PACT Foundation, and with the financial support of the C.S. Mott Foundation, Trust for Civil Society in Central and Eastern Europe, and the Romanian American Foundation.

Even though community foundations are part of a *national network* with the same mission, they try to and must adapt to the community in which they operate.

As regards the collaboration between them and local authorities, their national network also has common standards concerning their interaction with the political environment. However, the community foundations do not have a common strategy for such collaborations, mainly because the local context, with all its needs and problems, is different for each of them. Consequently, they adapt their strategies to the local context.

Usually, they conduct their activities at the municipal level, but they may also extend them to the county level. Currently, there are *19 active community foundations* in the country, which focus on financing local initiatives, motivating the community, mobilizing local resources and managing funds. They run their activities under the umbrella of the Romanian Federation of Community Foundations and *organize similar programs*, such as swimathons, running events, bike-a-thons, YouthBanks, STEM education funds, etc.

They conduct their activities according to a series of *common standards and principles*, including a guiding principle that stipulates that the board and members should actively seek to understand the needs, the resources and the opportunities present in their geographical area.

Community foundations have a real impact in their community, since they act as philanthropy hubs by supporting the involvement of private donors and acting as local interfaces between different parties: local NGOs, businesses and authorities. For example, the Sibiu International Marathon 2020 is organized by the Sibiu Community Foundation, along with the Sibiu Community Sport Club and Gray Projects, with the main sponsor being Visma Software, alongside a large number of other local partners. The event is also co-financed by the municipality of Sibiu, through the Sports Agenda.

In their statute, community foundations define their mission to support the development of the geographical area in which they operate. *According to data from the community foundations*, between 2008 and 2018, they spent \$6,822,473 on in-kind donations, health cases, project implementation, scholarships and grants.

## Local context

At the local level, the situation is more fluid, with patterns that differ from one community to another. The community foundations' local strategies depend on the community they serve: some operate within a poorly developed CSO system, but with an active civic spirit (Sibiu), some in a community reluctant towards civic participation (Odorheiu Secuiesc) and others within an engaged and active landscape that nevertheless presents certain problems (Cluj-Napoca).

The reasons for CSOs' lack of involvement in dialog with the authorities differ from one community to another: a reluctance to participate in such processes to avoid becoming politicized, a lack of trust in the political parties or simply demographic issues. The collaboration

between the two sides is also influenced by the attitude of some of the local authorities, since many of them do not seem to fully understand the importance of an organized civil society, do not trust CSOs or are simply not transparent enough to gain the trust of citizens and CSOs.

Despite these challenges, there are local communities where the dialog between CSOs and local authorities is productive, thereby laying the foundations for fruitful cooperation (Cluj-Napoca, Iași, Sibiu).

## Local best practices

Based on our research, it does not appear as if any local government collaboration strategy has been defined, neither on the part of the local authorities, nor on that of the community foundations; instead, we found subjective contexts that are typically influenced by subjective criteria, such as a mayor's openness, a local authority's informal culture of dialog or the relevance of the project to the local authority.

As for the community foundations, their strategies for how they interact with the political sphere seem to vary: some of them choose to remain apart in order not to be perceived as politicized (with minimum interaction such as asking for permits to use public spaces) while others go further by being involved in different kinds of discussions / collaborations initiated either by the local authorities or by CSOs. Either way, they take caution into consideration in formulating their strategy.

Apart from this lack of strategy, there are some examples of best practices that are worth mentioning, such as:

- Țara Făgărașului, where the local authorities have been very open about partnerships for some time, both at the mayor's level and that of the administration, which has produced both formal and informal collaborations (the municipality provides NGOs with facilities and covers some of their utility costs). For example, when the community foundation decides what projects to implement next, it communicates with the municipality's Projects Office in order to determine if there are any overlapping initiatives and to decide which party is better placed to implement them. Besides this good communication with the City Hall, the local authority is also financing one of the most well-known projects within the community, a *bikeathon* and the *Crosul Cetății Făgăraș* race, which are organized by the community foundation. In its activities, the community foundation also tries to collaborate with different partners; at the moment, it is trying to implement a project together with the National Agency for the Roma and the local municipality.
- Sibiu, where the dialog between CSOs and the local authorities has not been affected by political battles and the political parties appear to understand the value of productive collaboration, especially due to the positive influence exercised by some local councilors (who were previously themselves active in NGOs) and also because the collaboration takes place in a small community, which makes it easier to be maintained.
- Cluj-Napoca, where the clear interest of the local authorities in maintaining a dialog with civil society took the form of a *formalized channel* and periodical meetings. The Cluj Community Foundation can also point to a number of examples of productive collaboration with the local authorities, such as the Com'ON Project (a form of participatory budgeting for young people), in which it worked together with the municipality, together with another NGO. The community foundation's role in this project was to manage a large fund through which different projects were financed. Another project is its five-year partnership with the municipality regarding community development in Bontida, a village where the Electric Castle festival takes place and where the foundation acts as the owner of a private fund for investing in local development projects. In these two projects, the community foundation played the role of grant-maker, administering both private and public funds. Despite these examples, in the past two years, the community foundation managed to maintain only informal partnerships with some parts of Cluj City Hall, such as the Social and Medical Care Directorate and the Local Development Directorate. At the meetings organized by the local authorities, the community foundation is currently a normal participant (at least in the past two years), but, in the past, it also served as an advisor and partner.
- Iași, where the collaboration between the community foundation and the local authorities is limited to specific projects. Most of the time, the community foundation chooses to play a more consultative role, instead of a proactive approach geared towards collaboration with the local authorities. Despite this internal strategy, it has collaborated with the local authorities, mainly on urban development projects, such as establishment of the city's *skate park*. It received sound support from the municipality in the form of technical expertise on urban revitalization and rehabilitation as well as help with project implementation and with navigating the local bureaucracy. On another project, again relating to urban development and revitalization, which it carried out together with the local Technical University, the community foundation awarded a grant of EUR 10.000 to the most innovative and bold idea for transforming a student campus. Even though the municipality did not provide funding for the initiative, it supported it with technical help and manpower. The interviewee notes that the community foundation's way of working with the local authorities may be limited to specific projects and that it prefers a more consultative approach, but that she is aware that there are other community foundations that pursue a more proactive and sustainable approach to engaging with the local authority, such as the Oradea Community Foundation. The Iași Community Foundation, however, prefers to play a consultative role on projects related to education, active citizenship and youth.

## Local challenges and strategies

The road to collaborations has not been an easy one for the community foundations, given that they had to – and still have to – face many challenges along the way. One of these is the lack of formalized channels to facilitate dialog and collaboration between local authorities and civil society (Sibiu, Odorheiul Secuiesc). In some cases, such dialog takes place as a result of European programs that force the decision makers to organize public consultations,<sup>1</sup> and in others due to personal relationships based on trust that the foundation / association has managed to build up over the years.

The needs of the local authorities shape their attitudes towards collaboration – if the local authority feels that it can gain something, as in the case of the COVID-19 outbreak, it will accept collaboration; in other cases, the local authority often believes that it knows best and that outsiders should not question its activities.

Apart from the above-mentioned challenges, CSOs also have to face fluctuations and changes in political parties. However, in some communities (Cluj, Sibiu), maintaining regular dialog and collaboration with CSOs has started to become the *modus operandi*, thus making it difficult for an incoming administration to fully disband these processes, mainly because the community foundations already have a solid reputation in their respective communities.

Problems may also appear due to a lack of transparency on the part of the local authorities, for example in Cluj, where the municipality refused to fund one of the community foundation's flagship projects because of "frivolous" reasons, as the foundation maintains. In its opinion, the municipality does not have a transparent system for awarding non-refundable grants, one that would focus on addressing problems rather than just on correcting mistakes and that would make it possible to evaluate the utility of a project for the local community.

Despite some successes in the community regarding such collaboration, the local authorities are still reluctant and anxious about openness to civil society, in contrast with the business sector where things are moving at a faster pace.

In order to overcome these challenges, each community foundation has defined its own strategy:

**One example is the Sibiu Community Foundation's focus on building trust.** As stated by our interviewee, building a relationship based on trust was difficult, hence the foundation's strategy was first to build a good reputation among the local community so that it would come to be seen as a partner for the local authorities. The capacity of such collaborations to shape new local public policies depends, in his point of view, on the experience of positive relations between these actors. As a starting point for future collaborations, the community foundation is deploying one of its best-known projects, the *Sibiu International Marathon*, which, according to our interviewee, acts like a *business card in facilitating collaboration with the local authorities*.

Other community foundations also apply this strategy, and they agree that having a strong portfolio of successful community projects and investing in professionalization help them to reach out to partners within the local authorities with whom they want to collaborate.

Mutual trust seems to play a significant role in building long-lasting collaborations. As regards the community foundations that we interviewed, they tend to have to take the first step towards building trust, which has thus become an essential starting point in their strategy to facilitate collaboration and dismantle prejudices on either side. At least initially, an NGO should be seen as giving something, because requesting something would start the conversation on the wrong foot.

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<sup>1</sup> The early 2000s were marked by the adoption of two important pieces of legislation that allowed civil society to become even more relevant. These are Law 52/2003 on decisional transparency in public administration and Law 544/2001 on the freedom of access to information. Both were the result of external pressure from large international assistance programs such as USAID, which requested the enactment of *sunshine laws* (regulations requiring openness in government or business), and the European Commission, which strongly recommended the development of a social and civil dialog. Alongside this external pressure, NGOs also contributed to the public policy changes through their actions.

## How to make it work?

### Advice for better collaborations

*“Trust is built on successive episodes of successful collaboration.”*

– **Ciprian Ciocan**, Executive Director of the Sibiu Community Foundation

As regards to suggestions for improving the collaboration between CSOs and local authorities, each of the community foundations gave different answers based on their individual experiences: professionalization of NGOs to enable them to present an attractive portfolio of past projects; greater NGO awareness and understanding of the various procedures that govern public administration; building a strong community and finding allies in the community; treating the collaboration as a mutual resource; efficient communication (and communication channels) as well as transparency on the part of both parties; or simply asking for the things one needs.

### Participatory budgeting

When it comes to participatory budgeting, one of our most important fields of interest, the community foundations we interviewed had different experiences, depending on the local context.

In some communities, such civil engagement still manifests as an image-building exercise for the mayor, with little effort to promote the underlying process or to implement it fully. On the other hand, examples of successful implementation and best practices can also be found, but this does not mean that things could not be improved: local authorities could also make the procedures more flexible and exercise greater transparency in the implementation of projects.

When it comes to participatory budgeting, community foundations can act as catalysts for action within the community, helping citizens to find solutions to local problems or collaborating with the local authority in decision-making processes.

For example, in 2018, the Sibiu Community Foundation *organized a meeting* for citizens to identify the local needs together and come up with project ideas for the participatory budget contest organized by the municipality; 9 of the 36 eligible projects that were proposed came out of the meeting organized by the foundation.

The Cluj-Napoca Community Foundation was also involved in supporting *Com'ON Cluj-Napoca*, a project that aims to involve young people in the participatory budgeting process. During the 2015 and 2016 editions, the project was professionally managed by THE PONT group, while the technical implementation of the most voted initiatives was coordinated by the Cluj Community Foundation. At present, however, the foundation is no longer part of the project.

In Țara Făgărașului, the local community foundation was a member of the jury in the *participatory budgeting process*. Apart from its involvement in evaluating the projects proposed by the citizens, the community foundation also tries to give projects that were not approved a second chance. For example, it is currently implementing a street art project that was previously proposed for the participatory budgeting process but did not make it to the finals. The public spaces used for this project are being provided by the municipality.

### Formal requests

Apart from the issue of the informal working culture stated above, there are some (apparently) simple things that can be done in order to facilitate the work of associations and foundations in Romania and increase the quality of their work:

- **An updated CSO registry:** When looking for possible partners, CSOs rely on a list of NGOs put together by the County Council plus hearsay; they do not have any other official list to help them in this regard. The list on the website of the Ministry of Justice is insufficient, simply because it does not provide any information as to whether an CSO is still active or not. The list contains little to no updated data regarding an organization's activity and offers no filters or search option based on areas of interest. An updated registry would help both local CSOs and the local authorities to get to know each other.
- **Better local authority websites:** Sometimes, the websites of the local authorities also represent a challenge – with little to no available information, convoluted site maps and outdated data.
- **Less bureaucracy:** Sometimes, excessive bureaucracy has been one of the most challenging aspects of collaborating with the local authorities; tortuous reporting and documentation requirements, included the need for scanned and printed invoices, and so on.
- **Training on budgets:** Community foundations would benefit from receiving training on budgets, especially on how to understand them, how to follow the money in a certain field (e.g. education), how to understand long-term budgetary strategies, and determining what information should be publicly available on the local authorities' websites.

## Conclusions

Even though, at the national level, community foundations have common standards regarding their relationship with the political environment, there is no common strategy concerning their collaboration with the local authorities. Each community foundation has enough leeway to adjust to the local context and to follow its own strategy. As we have seen in the above-mentioned cases, the local context may be influenced by subjective factors, such as a culture of greater transparency and openness on the part of the local authorities.

In their communities, the foundations can play an important role, as catalysts that bring different parties together, including other CSOs, the local authorities and private and business entities.

## Case study 3

# Participatory budgeting – from proposals to community building

Cluj-Napoca | Bucharest | Bucharest, 1<sup>st</sup> District and 3<sup>rd</sup> District | Iași | Făgăraș

## Interviewees:

**Alexandrina Dringa** | CIVICA Iași  
**Dan Postolea** | Iași municipal government  
**Cristiana Metea** | Fundația Comunitară Țara Făgărașului  
**Liviu Ardelean** | Făgăraș municipal government  
**Ana Ciceală** | General Council of Bucharest  
**Ilinca Macarie** | Bucharest 1<sup>st</sup> District Council  
**Liviu Mălureanu** | Bucharest 3<sup>rd</sup> District Council  
**Daniela Popa** | Deputy Mayor of Bucharest's 1<sup>st</sup> District  
**Diana Culescu** | Asociația Peisagiștilor din România  
**Ovidiu Cîmpean** | Cluj-Napoca municipal government  
**Marian Dobre** | Cluj Community Foundation



Participatory budgeting (PB) is a new addition to the toolkit of interaction techniques between local authorities and citizens. It became better known and implemented throughout the country in the last five years, with mixed results. In some cases (see some districts of Bucharest, for example), the lack of tangible results after only one round of voting seems to indicate that the local authorities were not fully invested in the concept of participatory budgets, but rather interested in the effects it would bring in terms of political PR. In other cases (Cluj-Napoca being the best-known example), the process became an integral part of the local administration's progressive "brand," even when faced with criticism. In smaller communities, such as Făgăraș, the implications of participatory budgets go beyond the results themselves and mark a different manner of interacting with citizens.

Participatory budgets, and the more general subject of discussions related to local budgets, can provide great insight into the relationship between local authorities and citizens. They can also serve as an indicator of openness and transparency on the one hand, and of strong communities and engaged citizenship on the other.

Within the rather relaxed and permissive legal framework on this topic, local authorities are free to create and implement proprietary versions of participatory budgets. This can prove useful, as it allows for greater flexibility in catering to the specific needs of the citizens, but in turn produces variations that complicate analyzing the subject.

Law no. 215/2001 specifies that one of the core principles of local public administration is to consult citizens in resolving issues of local importance (Art. 2). Law no. 52/2003 on decisional transparency in public administration defines the principles and procedures that local authorities must follow to ensure that citizens are being notified and consulted on legal proposals, which also includes local budgets. Law no. 273/2006 regarding local public finance makes indirect reference to participatory budgeting, by describing the process of approving the yearly budget and the corresponding calendar. As described in the *procedural manual* put together by *Asociația Pro Democrația*, these laws offer a framework for PB, but the budgetary process is so complex and rigid that it effectively limits the implementation of participatory efforts.

In terms of civic engagement, participatory budgeting provides citizens with a different way to affect public spending within their municipality, enabling them to have a direct impact and to exercise agency. In comparison to participatory budgets, consultations regarding local budgets – which require public consultations in accordance with the national laws – only allow citizens to voice their opinions on previously-chosen topics and leave them little room for providing and promoting their own solutions to community issues.

Such a participatory exercise can prove very useful for community-building, even if it is limited, both in terms of scope (participatory budgets only cover a limited array of topics, such as parks, public spaces, street art, etc.) and resources (the amount of money available differs from municipality to municipality – Făgăraș has a EUR 15,000 limit, that of Bucharest's 1<sup>st</sup> District is a little over EUR 40,000, Cluj-Napoca and Sibiu both stipulated a EUR 150,000 limit for their latest proposals, while that of Bucharest is EUR 200,000). To be successful, PB requires an informed effort, both on the part of citizens and of the local authorities, and it can be an efficient anti-corruption tool, as it is based on transparency and constant dialog and involves many people. In the case of Iași, the contribution of citizens in the budgetary mechanism has contributed to greater visibility – and in turn greater accountability – of the local councilors, who are generally perceived to be an anonymous group.

When implemented properly, participatory budgets empower citizens in a continuous and direct manner, complementing the electoral cycle of voting once every four years.

## Cluj-Napoca, the first city to implement PB

Participatory budgeting was first implemented in Cluj-Napoca in 2013 in the form of a pilot project limited to the municipality's largest neighborhood, Mănăştur, following a civil society *proposal* (which included Adrian Dohotaru, now a Member of Parliament). As Ovidiu Cîmpean, Director of Investments and Head of the Local Development Directorate within the Cluj-Napoca City Hall explains, one of the goals was to improve the involvement of citizens with their own community. Since Cluj-Napoca is a dynamic and attractive city thanks to its academic life, this process involved constant dialog with university representatives and professors as well as with CSOs. This endeavor went beyond the PB mechanism, through the efforts of the Innovation and Civic Imagination Centre, where university experts and citizens meet and debate projects. Moreover, the municipality took notice of the limited involvement of youth in the PB process and thus created a dedicated framework for this age group. Cîmpean believes that civic involvement is a way of creating ownership among citizens and to help people understand democratic mechanisms and procedures. After the initial *COM'ON Cluj* project in 2013 and the shift of the focus to youth and informal groups, two additional editions took place in 2015 and 2016, when Cluj-Napoca was the European Youth Capital. This PB initiative targeted young people aged 14-35 years, and the source of funding for the selected projects was the local budget of the municipality.

The official launch of participatory budgeting in Cluj-Napoca took place in 2017, building on the lessons learned through past experiments. Since this example provided a starting point for other municipalities trying to implement PB, it is important to understand the framework behind Cluj-Napoca's take on participatory budgeting.

The 2017 edition covered six topics: alleys, sidewalks and pedestrian areas; traffic safety, mobility and accessibility; parks and playgrounds; public areas, public lighting and furniture; educational and cultural infrastructure; and digitalization. These categories have been retained during the following years. The price estimate for proposals is limited to EUR 150,000 EUR. Voting is open to anybody over the age of 18 living, studying and/or working in Cluj-Napoca, which is verified by accessing the location of the device used to vote. Proposals can be submitted by anyone eligible to vote, in line with certain general guidelines, such as that they should be of general interest, fall under the jurisdiction of the municipality and not pursue any electoral or commercial intent. Proposals can be altered to make them more compliant with internal regulations (such as the need to get multiple approvals from different municipal departments) and similar proposals can be combined into a hybrid project. The procedure also provides for participatory workshops, intended to stimulate public dialog on the topic of PB in general and on each proposal in particular.

Voting takes place online, in a two-step process. First, each registered user has to choose one proposal for each category. The top three proposals in each category and the runner-up projects with most votes, regardless of topic make it to the second round. During this round, each user can only vote for one proposal. Six out of the final 15 projects are the most popular ones from each category, followed by the remaining nine with the most votes overall.

Information on the status of projects is available on the [project's website](#). The previous three editions, each with a total of 15 projects per year, have produced the following results so far:

- 2017 – 7 completed projects, 2 underway, the rest are at early stages / 10,530 votes
- 2018 – 5 completed projects, 1 underway, 1 on hold and the rest are at early stages / 3,659 votes
- 2019 – 2 completed projects, the rest are at early stages / 2,539 votes

Given the specific circumstances of 2020, which relate not only to the direct effects of the pandemic, but also to the uncertainties surrounding the local elections (the elections were postponed, but the definitive date was announced only in July), the mayor of Cluj-Napoca declared that PB would also take place this year, with or without changes, but no recent updates are available on the relevant website.

Even if it is being hailed as an innovative approach practiced by an equally appraised municipality, Cluj-Napoca's PB initiative has its critics. MP *Adrian Dohotaru*, who has promoted PB in Cluj-Napoca since 2012 and is currently working on a nation-wide legal framework on the subject, highlights the main issues with Cluj-Napoca's PB model – and, by extension, with the PB process at the national level. PB, he argues, covers only a minimal share of the local budget and is not centered around deliberation; nonetheless, even with all these flaws, it still makes an important contribution in terms of civic engagement and administrative innovation. The focus of the local authorities seems to be PR, rather than the effective implementation of proposals, and ever fewer citizens vote for the projects. On top of that, there is no social policy dimension to PB, which would be a great boon for a city that prides itself on having the most modern and European administration in the country. Participation is also an issue – greater citizen involvement could be fostered by organizing debates and public meetings. The current model sees the city as a unitary entity, without considering differences in neighborhoods when it comes to population, income and resources. If the stated goal is to improve the overall quality of life and the indirect gain is increased citizen participation, then organizing public debates could kindle cohesion around certain initiatives, whereas the current framework encourages individuality and competition, mostly among digital natives.

In addition to Adrian Dohotaru's comments, it is worth noting that the digital-only format can be limiting. This is a concern raised by Bucharest activist Irina Zamfirescu who, among other issues, states that online-only interaction further disenfranchises citizens with fewer resources and wealth – a group that would greatly benefit from being more involved in the decision-making process.

## PB in other municipalities – Bucharest, Iași, Făgăraș and others

The general process presented above has been implemented, to varying degrees of success, in other cities since 2017. In the case of Bucharest, it was not only the municipality that promoted a version of PB, but also some of the district administrations. In Iași, an original take on the idea helped to promote citizens' involvement, and in Făgăraș, a small community was brought together by the efforts of the local authorities and CSOs.

### Bucharest

After the 2016 local elections, the new mayor of Bucharest, Gabriela Firea, supported by most of the city council, began a multitude of projects designed mainly to score PR points. Among public fairs, free concerts and prizes for the best-looking balcony in town, the Bucharest municipality (PMB) initiated a PB program, *Propune pentru București* (Propose for Bucharest). In August 2017, following the Cluj-Napoca model, the Bucharest city council approved a proposal to allocate EUR 4,000,000 from the 2018 budget to PB.

The campaign, which started a month later, in September 2017, follows a simple process – citizens can submit their proposals online, said proposals are evaluated for eligibility and selected by PMB experts, and citizens can then cast their votes, which in turn will yield 20 projects to be implemented the following year. Proposals fall under one of eight categories – healthcare, cultural infrastructure, public spaces, parks and playgrounds, smart city, infrastructure (pedestrian zones, squares, sidewalks), traffic safety and accessibility, and social infrastructure. While Cluj-Napoca's PB model featured public workshops, they are not included in the Bucharest version.

Moreover, simply by checking the rules, some problematic features stand out: PMB not only left out dialog from the implementation phase of this public policy, but did not include it in the design phase either – CSOs and informal groups were not consulted on the matter and the proposal does not include the idea of community engagement; there is a lack of dialog, both within communities and between communities and their respective local authorities – for instance, a proposal cannot be submitted on behalf of a group; there is no community outreach – whereas the municipal representatives in Cluj-Napoca acknowledged the importance of informing and maintaining a constant conversation with citizens, PMB failed to include mechanisms or individuals that could help to facilitate this project. A more *in-depth analysis* of Bucharest's PB scheme even describes this as “a contest that harms the idea of PB, a simple contest of ideas within a small group, with options filtered by PMB experts and voted by a small audience.”

The list of projects can still be found *online*, even if the official website no longer works. The most voted proposal, dedicated to increasing traffic safety, received 1,446 votes. No other iteration was organized in the following years.

As regards the results and the implementation of the winning projects, in the absence of an official response by PMB representatives, the answers were provided by city councilors (Ana Ciceală, USR) and members of CSOs (Irina Zamfirescu, Active Watch).

Ana Ciceală recalls that, after the voting ended, the first two proposals were discussed and partially implemented. The winning proposal was only put partially into practice, with little clout and follow-up. The runner-up, a proposal designed to aid couples facing infertility issues, was “adopted” by the mayor (since it aligned with her platform of helping the elderly, married couples and mothers), presented and voted in the council and implemented through Bucharest's healthcare agency. Councilor Ciceală complains that, since there is no dedicated department on the topic of PB, these projects got lost on the way. Moreover, since the initiator does not take part in the implementation, the original intention gets diluted and there is a distinct lack of empowerment and agency.

Active Watch's Irina Zamfirescu, involved in monitoring PMB's activity, has similar complaints. She highlights the fact that citizens and their needs have not been taken into account when shaping public policies in the past and that PB is no exception. Zamfirescu also complains that PMB makes significant changes to the projects, but still presents them as citizens' proposals. While PMB, the richest local administration in Romania, has the resources necessary to implement PB properly and in an impactful manner, it is unlikely to assign an important share of its manpower to PB. It is also worth noting that, given that the PB process is based on a popular vote, a well-known person with a larger social media following has a significant advantage.

Since 2017-2018, no other PB attempt has been announced by PMB. The official PB website has not been updated and is only accessible via internet archives. Apart from the project dedicated to infertile couples, no news of other proposals that been implemented is available.

### Bucharest's districts

3<sup>rd</sup> District councilor Liviu Mălureanu and his colleagues took inspiration from Timișoara and Oradea (both inspired by the model used in Cluj-Napoca) and forwarded a proposal to the local council in 2018, which was approved. Since time was tight, a lighter version was proposed by the mayor's office in order to implement the proposal more quickly, which was then approved by the council and subsequently implemented. Sadly, the process only had one iteration. Even if implementation was difficult, citizens were engaged, and the public servants put in the necessary effort. Over 60 projects were registered, despite little promotion and a faulty online platform, and hundreds of votes were cast. There were 10 categories and, even if the rules stated that this project was only addressed to people living or working in this district, voting was not limited in any way. The total sum dedicated for PB was RON 2,000,000 (around EUR 410,000). Since the district administration was not fully dedicated to the project, even if some of the proposals were *implemented*, councilor Mălureanu expresses his regrets on the subject – he considered this to be an opportunity for citizens to become more involved in the inner workings of the local authorities, not as a project contest.

The 1<sup>st</sup> District of Bucharest carried out its *first round of PB* this year. The structure was similar to that of the 3<sup>rd</sup> District, the original proposal coming from councilors of the same party. While their proposal was not subjected to voting, a similar proposal coming from within the local authority was passed by the local council. Councilor Ilinca Macarie recalls that the proposal, submitted in 2018, included limited funds dedicated to promotional activities and that the money for the projects was supposed to come from a different emergency fund, in order to simplify procedures (in this case, the money would be granted directly, without back and forth talks with each of the departments involved). A distinctive feature of the voting process in the 1<sup>st</sup> District was that voting was strictly limited to people with a valid ID proving their residency in the area – proof of which had to be submitted when creating an account, which raised GDPR and security concerns from voters. Deputy Mayor *Daniela Popa* recalls that security was a central concern and that the registration process was compliant – the issue was that initially, the GDPR policy was not explicitly stated on the website; nonetheless, the issue was fixed, allowing for more than 1,150 users to register and vote for a total of 104 projects. After voting was completed, the winning projects were announced and talks with initiators were scheduled and their conclusions presented on a dedicated *Facebook page*. Diana Culescu, a landscape architect and president of a group dedicated to this field – *Ordinul Peisagiștilor din România* – received the most votes with her pilot project on a green registry for trees. She recalls that all *interactions* went smoothly and that the deputy mayor even built upon her proposal with other possible common initiatives. Both Diana Culescu and the deputy mayor talked about the possible future of the proposal after the local elections that are set to take place in September 2020, expressing their hope that they will not negatively impact the project.

### Iași

*Iași.Tu decizi (Iași. You decide)* was launched in 2018, using the same model as that of Cluj-Napoca, but as an initiative of local councilors from one political party rather than of the municipality. *Dan Postolea*, head of the Communication Bureau of Iași City Hall, recalls the events: councilors from an opposition party came up with a PB proposal, popularized it and encouraged people to vote, but since the local council was not part of the process, the majority of councilors did not vote in favor of this initiative. Based on this situation and on the good working relationship the municipality has with CSOs, a new proposal was drafted, incorporating dialog with civil society, which was ready for implementation in spring 2020 but was postponed because of the pandemic.

Outside of classic PB, Iași already implemented its own take on involving citizens in the inner workings of the municipality a few years ago, starting with an idea of the CSO CIVICA Iași. Alexandrina Dringa recalls that the starting point for the idea was how most people perceive the roles of elected officials at the local level. The majority of citizens think that the mayor has all the power and that the city councilors have little say in running the city, she argues. That is why in the last four years her NGO created a special website that presents all councilors and displays the results of their activity, in order to create awareness that the city council, the local equivalent of a parliament, has more power than the mayor while mostly remaining in the shadows. The 27 councilors were asked to name the priorities for their mandate, in order to make their activity more transparent and to make it easier for citizens to know whom to address with a certain issue. The website can be consulted *here*, including the documents relating to the activity of each council member. Following the success of this initiatives, CIVICA launched *Cetățenii Conduc* (The Citizens are in Charge), together with the Iași municipality. The mechanism is as follows: calls for projects on a certain topic are launched, citizens send in their ideas and three of them will be selected; later on, the selected ideas

will be publicly presented at an event where local politicians take part, the idea being that the councilors will adopt one of these ideas, making sure that all bureaucratic hurdles will be cleared to make it happen. CIVICA is aware that such an initiative can be interesting to politicians because it enables them to improve their public image – but in its assessment, this is a reality of political life, and CSOs should not avoid this topic, since it has great potential to promote competition among local political actors.

### Făgăraș

This small local community held its second round of PB in 2020. Liviu Ardelean, advisor to the mayor, was happy to discuss the topic, since the *first round of PB* was considered a success. The municipality has a history of good collaboration with local CSOs, and therefore it was considered normal to involve representatives of civic society in all stages of PB. Liviu Ardelean argues that the community was open and involved because previous initiatives that brought together local authorities, CSOs and citizens had proved successful, such as the Țara Făgărașului bikeathon. Initially skeptical and expecting negative reactions from the public, municipal representatives were happy to see that even public servants from different departments were eager to help citizens with writing their proposals in the proper format, because there was a sense of community and accomplishment. He mentions that having young employees certainly helped in this regard. The downside was the administrative burden associated with PB, an issue that citizens did not take into account. The municipality also tried to build on the citizens' involvement to organize public debates on other subjects, but these were hit-or-miss, depending on the topic. While a smaller community usually means more involvement, it also translates into more polarization, Liviu Ardelean argues, since most people are politically involved in some way.

Cristana Metea, from the Țara Făgărașului Community Foundation (FCTF), was involved in the PB process. The CSO contributed mostly with ideas on projects for the five categories after it was approached by citizens asking for support. Both the foundation and the municipality helped applicants with writing their proposals, and FCTF even helped with joint applications. FCTF also participated in judging the projects. She considers the PB initiative to be a useful exercise in involvement and community building, acknowledges the involvement of the municipality and is happy with the results of the project.

## Conclusions

The PB model preferred by Romanian municipalities originated in Cluj-Napoca; while every municipality put its own spin on it, the basis – and the shortcomings – have remained the same. PB is recognized as a tool for civic engagement, but this does not always translate into how it is implemented. In order to fulfil this criterion, citizens and CSOs should be extensively engaged in the process from the very beginning and remain involved in a hands-on manner until the end.

Since community building should be a desired side-effect of PB, municipalities should encourage informal groups to come together around a topic and come up with a solution of their own. Municipalities – in collaboration with civil society organizations – should also aid citizens during the proposal writing phase, since most citizens are unfamiliar with the formal requirements of the state bureaucracy. Public workshops, information sessions and constant dialog should be the standard, alongside continuous reporting on the current state of affairs of each proposal. While the term “participatory budgeting” implies that the main focus is the budget – how it is decided and spent – its main benefit goes beyond the immediate results. PB enables citizens to experience that their direct contribution can bring about a tangible change, which is why local authorities that seek to innovate and revolutionize the relationship between them and their citizens should extensively target community outreach and building.

Working more closely within the existing framework and ensuring follow-up would be a great addition to the process – the case of Iași, which involved city councilors in projects proposed by citizens, could serve as an example. In this case, the councilors reduced the bureaucratic burden placed on citizens, ensured more consistent follow-up from within the local administration and in turn helped to promote grassroots proposal at a city-wide level. In this example, CSOs were involved in the creation of the collaborative framework and facilitated constructive deliberation, which yielded better results.

## Case study 4

# Bucharest – Opportunities and Closed Doors

### Interviewees:

**Ana Ciceală** | Bucharest Municipal Council  
**Daniela Popa** | Deputy Mayor of Bucharest's 1<sup>st</sup> District  
**Irina Zamfirescu** | Active Watch  
**Diana Culescu** | Asociația Peisagiștilor din România  
**Carmen Nemeș** | Asociația ANAIS  
**Raluca Fișer** | Green Revolution

With an official population of 1.9 million, Bucharest, the capital city of Romania, is also the country's largest municipality with the largest budget. The city is governed by a municipal government (Primăria Municipiului București, PMB) and six district councils (primării de sector), each with its own bureaucratic apparatus, which also share certain services and competences. For example, the same street may be the responsibility of the district when it comes to waste management, but that of the municipality for matters related to fixing potholes in the road. Under this system, PMB should act as a factor of stability and cohesion, both within and outside the municipal system, since the districts have limited jurisdiction and are thus less appealing as collaboration partners. Moreover, the districts, whose boundaries follow a pie-chart model, are not only varied in terms of resources, but also combine neighborhoods with very different needs under the same administration. *The 5<sup>th</sup> District*, for example, brings together Cotroceni, a posh neighborhood, with villas and parks, and Ferentari, a disadvantaged area, known for poor living conditions that is sometimes referred to as *a ghetto*. There are even *proposals* to reorganize Bucharest under one central administration, to dissolve the current districts and to redraw them based on neighborhoods with similar needs, with the aim of putting an end to overlapping competences and promoting greater involvement and cohesion on the part of citizens.

While Bucharest has a significant scene of civil society organizations (CSOs) that are both resourceful and experienced, it lacks an effective dialog between citizens and their representatives. The previous mayor coined the phrase “good NGOs and bad NGOs”, while the current mayor simply denies access, censors opposing opinions and threatens lawsuits, citing defamation. Elected by 43% of voters on a low attendance of only 33%, Gabriela Firea (PSD) has not fostered collaboration with civil society<sup>2</sup>. While her *campaign platform* specifically featured a chapter dedicated to better collaboration with civil society, representatives of NGOs complain that it is harder than before to work with the local authorities. Nonetheless, Firea's campaign platform identified and defined a problem that was not subsequently addressed: “One can observe a condescending attitude of the local authorities when talking with social partners – they are simply tolerated; [...] an honest desire for openness and constructive dialog is missing. [...] Generally speaking, in Romania, local officials don't know, don't want to know and do not wish to support problem-solving through social dialog, considering that it is not important.”

Given this context, it is no surprise that – even after repeatedly requesting an interview with representatives from PMB and with the city manager – no answer was received. That being said, the following text features the opinions of people working with or within the municipal government, who were kind enough to share their experience for the purpose of this research.

### Active Watch

Active Watch is an NGO that deals with human rights, with a focus on transparency and good governance, the promotion of freedom of speech, access to information of public interest, accountable and transparent governance practices and equal opportunities in Romanian society. Based on its history of exposing questionable PMB actions, such as limiting citizens' access to public meetings and their right to protest, Active Watch has monitored the record of the current mayor, Gabriela Firea. The mayor's personality is a central aspect of how the municipality is run, and her main concern is her public image. The mayor's attitude towards CSOs depends on whether they are friendly (and accepted) or critical (and censored). Under the current administration, PMB went so far as to create its own NGO, “Asociația Municipală pentru Dialog,” the Municipal Association for Dialog, with the legal status of an NGO. The relationship PMB and CSOs has been characterized as downright hostile in some cases.

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<sup>2</sup> In the local election of September 2020, after our study was completed, incumbent mayor Gabriela Firea was replaced by mathematician and civic activist **Nicusor Dan** (USR-PLUS alliance).

While generally being non-transparent and non-friendly towards civil society – in terms of denying access to meetings, lacking overall transparency and threatening lawsuits – a functioning collaboration was maintained between PMB and NGOs that provide social services. This exception derives from the fact that the local authority is not only more involved in social services than in other areas, but also because the partnerships in place have been successful. Nonetheless, this collaboration ended without prior notification when PMB decided to substitute the service provided by an NGO with an internal one, with no regard for the citizens that would suffer during the long transition period (for further details, see the paragraph about ANAIS).

Respondent Irina Zamfirescu notes that one cannot talk about cooperation with the Bucharest municipality, because the reality is closer to NGOs asking it to respect the legal framework while the authorities make minimal efforts to do so. The current mayor is also known to take legal action against NGOs, mainly for defamation, while the way she interacts with public servants within PMB was described as a “reign of terror.” The mayor’s image is equivalent to that of PMB, that it must preserve at all costs. Irina Zamfirescu describes the work of NGOs as that of a sewage worker tasked with cleaning a septic tank – cleaning up the mess and trying to keep things operational, without the time or the context to build anything. If the basic needs of transparency and public debate are not respected, how can we even start talking about real citizen’s involvement in drafting the budget?

In the particular case of Bucharest, the confusing distinction and divided competences between the city and district administrations can prove challenging. Even if Bucharest is rich in civic initiatives that could help with mapping the issues and mediating between citizens and the authorities, the latter lack an understanding of the idea of consultations. Respondents point to owners’ associations (each apartment building has one), which are not deployed to better understand the needs of citizens, but are sometimes mobilized for political reasons, by means of distributing flyers and other campaign materials.

Engaging in public consultations between citizens and councilors could help in changing PMB’s perception on collaboration – since it is often invoked that the councilors are elected and thus represent the people, the people should make their voices heard. This is even more important since the councilors are less well known and can hide within their group, thus avoiding responsibility.

Another especially important issue is that of councilors from new parties, namely USB (now USR), which started at the local level in Bucharest and then became national. Irina Zamfirescu mentions that while the situation is better now, thanks to USB/USR councilors using their status to make documents publicly available and thereby contributing to greater transparency, there is much resistance within the PMB establishment that counterbalances any transparency gains. The most visible example is the current deputy mayor who often bullies other councilors during public meetings in order to silence the opposition. The respondent argues that if the current mayor and her team will be reelected for a second term, nothing will change; not only that, but the situation could become even worse, since a second term would prove that their approach is the right one and that all those opposing them are irrelevant.

## Green Revolution

An NGO dedicated to a more sustainable and healthy way of living, Green Revolution is especially known for its pro-bike stance and campaigns in Bucharest and in other municipalities. It has been active for 11 years and describes itself as *an urban ecology NGO*. When it entered into partnerships with PMB, the authorities did not get involved in any of the NGOs existing projects, but only wanted their name to be associated with them. Raluca Fişer of Green Revolution recalls that in order to organize BikeFest, she had to include the PMB logo and name in all communication materials despite not receiving any help from the authorities beyond the approval to organize the event. Raluca Fişer emphasizes that there is a visible divide between the administrative apparatus of PMB, where collaboration seems to follow a normal path, and the political level. She notes that one of the shortcomings of the local authorities, especially in Bucharest, is that weak points should be acknowledged rather than hidden or denied. Nonetheless, this does not mean that the administrative side is without its problems, as the different departments do not communicate with each other. This situation is telling for the larger picture in PMB – there is a major communication issue, both within and outside PMB. Some projects are not necessarily bad, but are not explained to the public, or are not contextualized and come across as dubious, since citizens distrust the authorities altogether. Furthermore, the respondent considers communication to be a significant issue of the CSO sector as well, given that NGOs fail to present themselves as a cohesive group with a professional take on issues – while some cannot wait to pick a fight with the authorities, others appear too humble; the respondent recommends that NGOs should be true to their goals and know how to get their point across. She claims that transparent, coherent communication, involving all stakeholders, is the way forward, citing the example of *Green Politics*, a group including Members of Parliament from all political parties as well as CSOs that was the driving force behind a number of environmental laws. Yet even in this successful format, the issue of inadequate follow-up remains.

While civil servants are usually helpful, their hands are tied by bureaucratic procedures. Mayors in general are not open to learning, and when given the chance to learn from other mayors, they rather stick to their narrative and act as they know best.

The person of the mayor is still the driving force behind any action within PMB; if the mayor favors a proposal, more effort will be put into it. Nonetheless, it would be wrong to place the entirety of the blame on Mayor Firea, since Bucharest has a municipal council that is responsible for the decisions taken. Most of the city councilors enjoy their status of anonymity vis-à-vis the wider public and would prefer it if they – alongside their activities – were not known individually.

Raluca Fișer cites her experience when she argues that the authorities avoid implementing beneficial measures if they fear that they could damage their popularity with voters, for example restricting traffic in the city center; she advises taking such steps at the beginning of the term, in order to deal with the backlash first and then to reap the benefits.

## Asociația ANAIS

Asociația ANAIS, which is dedicated to helping domestic abuse victims, started its first collaboration protocol (an agreement that often includes financial support) with PMB in 2012, with the opening of its first dedicated shelter. Only in 2016 did ANAIS receive public funds for its work, and continued to do so for two and a half years. Despite the fact that the collaboration yielded positive results, it was *abruptly ended* by PMB.

It is widely known that the social services provided by non-profit organizations are the best solution to many pressing issues. Nonetheless, the collaboration was terminated when the municipality decided to stop outsourcing the service and to provide it through a local company instead. The PMB announced that it would offer *equivalent services*, but there was a year-long gap between the termination of the collaboration and the beginning of the newly launched services.

There was no explanation for the decision, other than that it was that the agreement with the NGO had been concluded for a limited period of time and would *no longer be renewed*. Furthermore, the department responsible for social services is now only able to cover the costs of counselling for victims but can no longer help to finance an emergency shelter. ANAIS representatives state that their main priority remains the wellbeing of abuse victims and that they bear no ill-will towards PMB, while being open to any future collaboration as long as it serves their stated objectives.

## General Council of the Municipality of Bucharest

Councilor Ana Ciceală made headlines when she sued PMB for illegally founding municipal companies, as the voting procedure did not follow the applicable legal provisions. She was *proven right* by a court of law, but that did not stop PMB from continuing to pour money into said companies – and it certainly did not put a stop to the *constant bullying* that opposition councilors faced at the hands of Deputy Mayor Bădulescu.

Early in her mandate, the current mayor proposed a system inspired by other capital cities (including Vienna, an example she frequently cites), where the municipality has its own holding companies that take care of certain issues instead of contracting private enterprises, a model which is supposed to lower the overall operating costs. Because the legal voting procedure was not followed when this proposal was passed, the opposition councilors sued the mayor's office and ultimately won. Councilor Ciceală remembers that, when the proposal was subjected to a vote, no budget was presented for these entities, just the minimal capital requirement, and that it took 18 months for the business plans to be submitted. Later on, the internal operating rules of these companies were changed to allow for even less transparency. Another questionable move was that their budgets were presented like those of an SA (Societate pe acțiuni, joint stock company), even though these companies do not have their own income, a prerequisite for being a SA, but rather get the vast majority of their budget from PMB and the remainder from other municipal companies. Their administrative boards were also filled with members from PSD and ALDE in a non-transparent manner. Ana Ciceală highlights the fact that the main objective behind this system, namely that of providing cheaper public services, has never been backed up by any evidence.

Speaking of the city's budget: there is little public dialog on this topic, which makes it hard to trace what subsidiary institution received what amount of money. Moreover, the file format of the available documents is not *open and machine readable*. Whenever budgetary amendments are proposed ("rectificare bugetară," which allow for funds to be moved, among other things), the councilors receive a non-editable proposal three to five days in advance and have to rely on expert support to "translate" the content for them. While the USR councilors hold meetings in order to come up with a strategy on each budgetary amendment, they have little chance to participate other than the final vote, because during meetings formally dedicated to voting, new amendments are proposed in a swift and confusing manner, using only the official codes for each budgetary item – while it is not hard to understand what they mean if you have the list of codes in front of you, it is hard to do so live. In the end, all amendments pass thanks to the PSD (pro-mayor) majority. This is even more detrimental as there may be one such budgetary amendment each month while the adjusted budget is only made available online months after the vote – which means that the latest version is almost never available to the public. Councilor Ciceală also mentions that for many years, methods have been in use that allow the initial budget to contain a large sum for investments, which is later moved to current expenditure while still being presented as investments for the image benefits this brings.

Consultations with CSOs are rare, and councilor Ciceală would not call this collaboration. One of the few areas where PMB previously invested in NGOs was the social sector, but this is no longer the case. The mayor of Bucharest lacks vision and thus changes things on the go; with a comfortable majority of councilors on her side, she can easily impose her vision and faces little questioning or criticism – and if she does, the critics are swiftly silenced, ridiculed and even sued for defamation.

## 1<sup>st</sup> District Administration

The 1<sup>st</sup> District, the *wealthiest* in Bucharest, covers the north-western part of the city; as is the case with all of Bucharest districts, it includes both wealthy and more disadvantaged areas. Deputy Mayor Daniela Popa responded on behalf of the district administration. The respondent shares responsibilities with the mayor and the public administrator (equivalent to a city manager), but she is mainly in charge of maintaining an open dialog with citizens, participating in public debates and communicating with civil society. She believes in a more transparent manner of policy-making that allows CSOs to get involved. In terms of collaborations, Daniela Popa states that initiatives come from both NGOs and from within the district administration. In line with one of the priorities of the current administration, there is an initiative to create more community centers, dedicated to citizens of all ages, on which it would like to collaborate with NGOs. She lists some of the successful collaborations that have been implemented during her time in office (since 2016) – starting with the closure of a waste disposal facility; the partnership with ANAIS in order to better help victims of domestic abuse; a project with Frontul Național pentru Dreptul la Locuire (National Front for the Right to Housing) on social housing and contributing to rent costs; and work with other NGOs to map all energy-sustainable buildings in the district. Daniela Popa also mentions that the district's cultural center is engaged in collaborations with many NGOs in the field, with excellent results. She takes pride in the fact that the current mayor agreed to continue projects that had proved effective, even if they were started under the previous administration.

Talking about professionalization, Daniela Popa states that it is important to shift the main burden from CSOs to public servants, since it is usually the CSOs that know more; she believes in the continuous education of public servants to better suit the needs of citizens. Furthermore, people working within the administrative apparatus have been resistant to change, but it is possible to challenge this. Daniela Popa says that sometimes this resistance does not even have a legal basis, but rather comes from “habits,” a certain way of doing things. Communicating with all parties involved has proved to be the most successful way of overcoming these issues. For instance, she was happy to see how involved public servants were in the participatory budgeting proposal.

Daniela Popa is thus certain that transparency is the main tool that local authorities have at their disposal when it comes to better collaborating with their citizens. Openness and continuous dialog can help to overcome preconceived ideas and to build stronger ties and partnerships. Last but not least, she believes that taking recommendations into account and listening to CSO actors is the only way to move forward.

## Conclusions

Among all of Romania's municipalities, Bucharest has the most opportunities when it comes to collaboration between CSOs and local authorities. Many of the issues present in other municipalities – such as a lack of active citizen groups, of professional NGOs and of diversity within the CSO scene – do not apply to Bucharest. In return, the main issue is a lack of transparency and of openness towards dialog on the part of the local authorities.

Since Bucharest consists of seven overlapping administrations, each with both individual and shared competences, it would be vital that all of them have a common approach when it comes to dialog and collaborations. This division makes approaching the district administrations a difficult endeavor for some NGOs, since it yields limited results while requiring a great deal of bureaucratic work.

A valid concern is that NGOs seem to be more reactive than proactive; nonetheless, under the current climate of very limited collaboration, effecting a change in paradigm is difficult. Ideally, proactive attitudes are built up in anticipation of openness and collaboration on the part of local authorities, attributes that the current administration of Bucharest lacks. This in turn makes CSOs more inclined to get involved in the delivery of services that should be provided by the state, instead of advocating for the state to implement appropriate solutions. While this results in a highly-skilled and professionalized civil sector, it creates unbalanced relations with both citizens and the state.

Promoting community-based solutions and educating citizens to help them understand where they stand could prove beneficial. Civic education efforts from CSOs and participatory budgeting by local authorities may help to inspire a sense of community through the citizen involvement that comes with it.

With a mayor who is more concerned about her image than the wellbeing of citizens, it is hard to imagine that critical voices will be heard. Since the change at the City Hall was cited as an issue, a possible solution could be to build bridges with public servants. CSOs would also benefit from more collaborations between them, in order to present themselves as a united group. Their concerns and proposals should be presented in an unassailable manner, starting with adherence to bureaucratic rules, the provision of realistic solutions and the involvement of experts.

Communication is another area that should be improved, both by the local authorities and by the CSO sector. Consequently, there should be greater focus on following up on initiatives than is currently the case.

Digitalization may be a useful tool, but at the end of the day it is all about political will – without a change in perspective on the part of the local authorities, efforts to introduce greater transparency through digital instruments, such as open budgets or voting platforms for participatory budgets, will not be able to accomplish their true potential.

